

Octavian-Dragomir Jora (Coord.), Marius-Cristian Neacșu, Cezar Teclean, *Rolul mecanismelor regionale de cooperare în contextul geopolitic actual. Oportunități și provocări pentru România* [The Role of Regional Cooperation Mechanisms in the Current Geopolitical Context. Opportunities and Challenges for Romania] (Bucharest: European Institute of Romania, 2024).

An important number of scholarly literature works address the question of regional cooperation across the world and in the Central and Eastern Europe. Regional cooperation has known a resurgence after the end of the Cold War especially in our region marked by both competition and cooperation.

It is also an area where we have an increase number of definitions of what regional cooperation is. Among such definitions we may mention one derived from the works of scholars such as Keohane and Axelrod presented by Bechev:

Regional cooperation is a type of a collective intergovernmental action that takes place within a geographically bounded setting, however vaguely defined or politically contestable. It denotes a process whereby three or more states adjust their behaviour in a coordinated way to achieve certain shared objectives.¹

As for the factors behind the regional cooperation we can count: *interdependence, external push and identity politics*.²

Regional cooperation, in principle, is a non-contested topic given the visibility of its advantages. For some authors, it strengthens 'the ability of countries to realize the benefits of globalization' by offering 'a middle path between complete self-reliance at the one end and complete openness on the other'. It offers a series of benefits such as:

¹ Dimitar Bechev, *Constructing South East Europe: The Politics of Balkan Regional Cooperation* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011) p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 14.

‘overcoming the small size of internal markets; providing access to larger markets; enhancing the capacity to meet new challenges; and last but not least removing non-border obstacles and reducing the cost of transactions’.³

The regional cooperation has always been an integral part of the Romanian diplomacy as it contributes to the development of the political dialogue and the solving of a series of political, economic, security and cultural problems while also been complementary to the European Union and NATO integration process.⁴

In that context we have seen a series of forays into mapping the regional cooperation mechanisms from a Romanian perspective such as the 2023 collaborative Report dedicated to the Three Seas Initiative titled ***Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit. Advancing the Common Agenda***. It was not an academic paper *per se* but rather a policy orientated one that brought together experts from the region on discussing the priorities of the Three Seas Initiative in the wake of the 2023 Bucharest Summit. The main ideas that emerged from the contributions related to the 3SI where those of: ‘promoting regional security and stability; consolidate the engagement with the EU; take the 3SI connectivity to the next stage and increase the national commitment to the 3SI’.⁵

The vastness and the importance of the subject made it imperative to have a dedicated study for the Romanian audience on the purpose. In that context, in 2023, the European Institute of Romania (EIR) selected a research team for drafting the study, in Romanian language only, titled ***The Role of Regional Cooperation Mechanisms in the Current Geopolitical Context. Opportunities and Challenges for Romania***. It was a study realized with the framework of the EIR *Strategy and Policy Studies (SPOS)* research program, in order to substantiate the decisions taken at national level in the field of European affairs. The study examines the opportunities and challenges for Romania, in the context of participation in a series of regional cooperation mechanisms. The research maps the mechanisms of

³ *Meeting the Challenges in an Era of Globalization by Strengthening Regional Development Cooperation*, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations, 2004, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ch2_0.pdf (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 January 2025).

⁴ *Regional Cooperation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, <https://mae.ro/en/taxonomy/term/560/1>.

⁵ Mihai Sebe (ed.), *Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit. Advancing the Common Agenda*, European Institute of Romania, 2023, <http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WP-46-Anticipating-the-2023-3SI-Bucharest-Summit.pdf>.

regional cooperation in which Romania is involved, offering at the same time a series of conceptual clarifications.

The authors Jora, Neacșu, and Teclean have succeeded in providing to the Romanian audience an insightful, in-depth, very well-researched and engaging study which masterfully combines conceptual analysis with data-based assessments of the factual in-the-field realities. Regional cooperation mechanisms necessarily imply a series of modulating factors which need to be managed: interdependence, external pressure, common identity, like-mindedness, friendshoring and trustworthiness (p. 18). Taking all this into account the authors provide us with a critical analysis of the global impact of geopolitical risks in the region, a detailed map of 13 regional cooperation mechanisms in which Romania is included, a case study on *The 3 Seas Initiative* and a series of comprehensive measures which should be implemented so that these regional cooperation structures will bring as many benefits for Romania as possible.

There are three major actors on the world stage at the moment: USA, Russia and China. Their core interests converge in Eurasia making the Black Sea the most sophisticated knot in terms of geopolitical and geostrategic significance (p. 35). Romania is at a critical point in this complex web of global geopolitics dynamics. Russia sees itself as a Eurasian power and therefore requires Ukraine as a bridge towards the European continent; the invasion of the Crimean Peninsula and subsequently of the entire country proves this point. At the same time, China is trying to exert influence in Eurasia through the Belt and Road Initiative, the project of the millennium. USA's response has been to develop a complex maritime geostrategy which involves blocking China's expansion through the Pacific and protecting Europe from Russian interference on the Atlantic side (p. 37).

The current geopolitical context (which may be coined as the *geopolitics of the big ones (actors)*) creates a series of intimate mechanisms, opportunities and challenges which determine regional cooperation (which can be termed as the *geopolitics of the little ones (actors)*) (p. 23). Smaller geopolitical actors unite in order to set boundaries to the *geopolitics of the big ones*, which in some cases can pose an existential threat—security and territorial integrity are the main factors which incentivize the *geopolitics of the little ones*; it's a mechanism which ensure their common survival (p. 34). Romania is no stranger to the existential threats which the *geopolitics of the big*

ones may represent: the Black Sea places it at the most active and geopolitically loaded periphery of the continent (p. 29) and the mouths of the Danube, 'the most political river in Europe' are a constant priority for both the European and the Euro Atlantic agendas (p. 30). In addition to this, Romania has Ukraine in the North which is a continental pivot between Russia and the Western world and Turkey in the South which is a continental pivot between the Islamic world, the Balkans and the Western world (p. 37). Recent crises (energy, migration, and the war of aggression against Ukraine) have helped to further incentivize regional associations.

On this topic the authors note that there have been two waves of Central-European regionalism: a) regionalism 1.0—in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR in order to help the countries with the process of European integration, and b) regionalism 2.0 which was triggered by the 2014 Crimean crisis (p. 42).

On this note the authors' segway into an in-depth analysis regarding the 13 regional cooperation formats in which Romania is a member (p. 44). They use the *structures-agents-processes* triad proposed by Buzan and Little (p. 45) and quantify the risks for Romania for each indicator. This reflects a hierarchical risks architecture which is characterized by a strong quantitative asymmetry (p. 72). Romania has problems regarding governance quality and efficiency, an overly bureaucratic fiscal system and corruption prevention but has an excellent security environment and high-quality economics. The high quality of its security environment provides Romania with the legitimacy and the authority necessary to make proposals and take initiative in matters pertaining to defence and security (p. 73).

A comprehensive case study is provided regarding *The Three Seas Initiative* which was created in 2014 following the Crimean crisis. In times of peace its aim is to standardize infrastructure and an integrated economic development model and in times of war its aim is to ensure territorial integrity (p. 27). The need for infrastructure development was never more obvious than during the Ukrainian cereal export crisis which proved that the NATO periphery was not prepared for an event of this magnitude.

External push is, in the authors' opinion, the most important factor in modelling regional cooperation and the 3SI is no exception. Placed in a geographical area ridden with challenges and opportunities alike, the North-South alignment placed in the Central-Eastern basin aims

to obtain cohesion and convergence with the European West. While institutionally compatible, the 3SI aims to optimize and develop and its main areas of interest are transport, energy and digital (p. 76) without neglecting security issues. The Warsaw-Bucharest axis is seen as the backbone of the Initiative, which wants to present itself as a united bloc for obtaining geopolitical influence. This is a crucial aspect necessary for ensuring geoeconomic advantages since the member countries are unable to mobilize the resources necessary to finance their projects and have attracted partners such as the USA, the European Commission and Germany. The Initiative is a local answer to the two-speed Europe dilemma in terms of overlapping crises and an exercise in geopolitical refinement (p. 80). While the *Three Seas Initiative* is an important construct, with an ability to correctly apply itself to on-the-field realities it does have to surpass a set of challenges comprised of limited homogeneity, limited experience, limited resources and limited options (pp. 95–98). Romania is an essential piece for any regional cooperation format but in order to ensure as many advantages as possible, there are certain steps which need to be taken.

On this note the authors offer a set of recommendations: a) geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic; b) public policy related; and c) pragmatic, regarding investment projects. As regards the *Three Seas Initiative* the authors concluded that:

7. The most vibrant format for regional cooperation for Romania is 3SI. This is primarily because it pragmatically covers areas where our country has significant gaps (transport infrastructure)—featuring on the ‘demand side’—and unique strengths (energy resources)—featuring on the ‘supply side’. The digital component serves as a neutral ground, oscillating between the mythology of a thriving IT&C sector and the stark reality of low technological penetration in society. Thus, 3SI should be nurtured as an *economic* outlet for *political* outcomes from other, relatively more silent, cooperative formats. [...]
9. The 3SI platform has the advantage, thanks to the existing Investment Fund (and those planned to be added), of having a *capitalist/entrepreneurial* financial aspect, more versatile than the alternative mobilization and *public/bureaucratic* management of financial resources. Open to diverse cultures of the capital(ist) world, the Initiative can act as a lever for necessary probusiness reforms, amplifying economic freedom at the expense of statist inertia. However, there is also the flip side, given the new ESG requirements, which may surpass the processing capacity in these societies.” (p. 17).

Well documented, the overall conclusions portion presents the main actors on the world stage, their interests and strategies and

a variety of projects which would have strategic value for the area. From human resources to banking investments, the authors have covered a wide range of topics, leaving no stone unturned.

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Author, co-author and coordinator of numerous publications, he has focused mainly on: European integration, European enlargement, regional cooperation, the impact and role that Romania has in the EU, European affairs; the history of the European idea; the impact of new technologies on politics and society, etc.

Recently, he has been very active within the Three Seas Initiative publishing works such as: *The Three Seas Initiative: A Romanian Perspective from Riga to Bucharest* and *Romania: Transforming the Three Seas Initiative into a Strategic Opportunity. A Short Overview*. Notably, Dr. Sebe collaborates with the Three Seas Initiative Research Center at ISP PAN on various projects. His contributions range from authoring analyses to helping organize study visits.