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Multifaceted Integration of Central and Eastern Europe as Part of the Three Seas Initiative and the B-9 Group

1. Introduction

Until 1990, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were in the sphere of influence of the USSR (three of them: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were even components of this superpower). These countries, regaining their sovereignty, quite quickly chose a pro-Western course in foreign policy and sought membership in the EU and NATO structures. An important reason for such decisions was the fear of military, political or economic threats from Russian Federation, successor of the USSR. For example, Poland at the turn of 1995/96 was shaken by the “Olin Affair,” when the incumbent Prime Minister, Józef Oleksy, who originates in post-communist circles, was accused of spying for Russia (Dudek, 2016, pp. 350–353). In turn, the Lithuanian parliament in April 2004 (only several days before accession to the EU), dismissed President Rolandas Paksas from his post, accused of close cooperation with Russian business and intelligence (Myers, 2004). Membership in the EU and NATO was supposed to increase the security of CEE countries and strengthen their protection from similar infiltration and other kind of threats.

However, the “old” EU and NATO countries did not always share CEE states’ concerns. They often perceived Russia as a reliable trading partner (e.g. a major supplier of energy resources) and even an occasional military ally (e.g. in the “war on terror” and, in the future, an ally against China). Russia’s exclusive rights in its “near abroad,”² the post-Soviet area especially in Central Asia and Southern Caucasus, were tacitly acknowledged, and even the military operations of this State did not raise broad protests. At the end of 2004, only strong international pressure which was started by Poland and Lithuania (EU members for only half a year) and then supported by other countries (m.in. the USA and Germany) made the EU engage in solving a serious political crisis in Ukraine (electoral fraud in favor of a pro-Russian presidential candidate triggered mass social protests – the so-called “orange revolution,” Turczyński, 2005, pp. 49–81). In 2008, the Russian aggression against Georgia and the occupation of



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² “Near abroad” is a concept of Russian diplomacy that was created in the mid-1990s. It assumes that countries that were previously part of the USSR (e.g. Ukraine) or were in the USSR’s sphere of influence (e.g. Poland) must take into account Russia’s “special interests” in their policies. In practice, this means limiting the sovereignty of these countries. It is also a claim against other countries (e.g. the US) to limit their activity in Russia’s “near abroad” (Safire, 1994; Moga, Alexeev, 2013, pp. 41–52; Czyż, 2023, p. 7).

a large part of Georgian territory did not cause a significant reaction from either the EU (on whose behalf French President Nicolas Sarkozy tried to end the war – to no avail) or NATO. While in 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act the Alliance promised Russia that it would not deploy its military infrastructure in the newly admitted countries, in 2005–2010 the EU accepted the laying of gas pipelines from Russia to Germany at the bottom of the Baltic Sea (although their operation deteriorated the security of Central European countries).³

Central and Eastern European countries repeatedly lobbied to strengthen the protection of their region. For example, in 2006–2008, Poland and the Czech Republic became involved in the USA project of the “anti-missile shield.” US installations on their territories which included an anti-ballistic missile launcher in Poland and a radar guiding these missiles in the Czech Republic, would mean the permanent presence of US forces, which was considered by these countries a significant increase of their military security. Similarly, the construction of “interconnectors,” i.e. oil and gas pipelines crossing state borders and facilitating the rapid transmission of energy resources, would increase regional resistance to energy blackmail.

Member States of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and the Bucharest Nine (B9)

	Date of joining NATO	Date of joining EU	Date of joining Three Seas Initiative	Date of joining Bucharest Nine
Austria		1 January 1995	29 September 2015	
Bulgaria	29 March 2004	1 January 2007	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Croatia	1 April 2009	1 July 2013	29 September 2015	
Czech Republic	12 March 1999	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Estonia	29 March 2004	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Greece	18 February 1952	1 January 1981	6 September 2023	
Hungary	12 March 1999	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Latvia	29 March 2004	1 May 2004	29 September 2015*	4 November 2015
Lithuania	29 March 2004	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Poland	12 March 1999	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Romania	29 March 2004	1 January 2007	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Slovakia	29 March 2004	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	4 November 2015
Slovenia	29 March 2004	1 May 2004	29 September 2015	

* The representative of Latvia did not attend the meeting on 29 September 2015, but is mentioned in the final declaration.

2. The circumstances of the creation of the Three Seas Initiative and the “Bucharest Nine”

The year 2014 brought a significant change in the international situation. In February, The people of Ukraine, who have been demonstrating en masse for three months

³ Already at the end of the USSR’s existence, the country’s elites assumed that military influence should be replaced by economic ones. The so-called “Falin-Kwiciński doctrine” of 1990 envisaged an increase in the export of energy resources (oil and natural gas) to the West. In this way, the countries of Western Europe would become dependent on the USSR and then Russia for raw materials. This dependence would prevent Western Europe from taking actions that are unfavourable to Russia (e.g. admitting the countries of the former ‘Eastern Bloc’ to the EU and NATO).

in favour of closer relations with the EU (the so-called “Euromaidan”) overthrew the pro-Russian president and decided to follow the pro-Western path of development. As a result of this event, in March Russia detached Crimea from Ukraine, announcing its annexation, and in April it launched a military intervention in eastern Ukraine. Russian actions were disguised as a “hybrid war” – the aggressor pretended to be a neutral observer, while providing military support to the “eastern Ukrainian separatists” (Bornio, 2019, pp. 204–216).

NATO’s reaction was to strengthen its presence in the countries of the “Eastern Flank” and to abandon the restrictions adopted in 1997⁴: military units of the “old NATO,” mainly the US, started to be gradually (and rather leisurely) deployed in the countries of the region. An earlier signal of the growing importance of the region’s countries for the security of the Pact was the deployment of elements of the Ballistic Missile Defense System in them. The first regional element of the Aegis Ashore system was established in the Deveselu base (southern Romania). After the Crimea Annexation in 2014, another regional component of the system was established in the Redzikowo base near Słupsk (Polish Baltic coast).

The Bucharest Nine (a group of Central and Eastern European countries, located on NATO’s “eastern flank,” deepening military cooperation among themselves and presenting a common position on the forum of the Pact) was unofficially inaugurated at the meeting of the leaders of Central European countries in Warsaw on July 22, 2014. The meeting was devoted to the ongoing East-Ukrainian conflict⁵ and the upcoming NATO summit in Newport on September 4–9, 2014 (Banasik, 2021, p. 28). The summit constituted a milestone in NATO’s adaptation policy. The NATO summit established “spearhead forces” – approx. 5,000. soldiers who could enter the fight in the countries of the “Eastern Flank” within several dozen hours. It was recognized that hybrid threats from Russia require rapid responses, even if they are not strong. It assumed that the aggressors, pretending to be local separatists, should already in the first phase of the conflict bear the risk of fighting not only with the attacked victim, but also with his allies.

Meanwhile, the eastern Ukrainian conflict was “frozen “ at the turn of 2014/2015.⁶ Russia recognized Crimea as part of its territory, it also provided support to the “eastern Ukrainian separatists.” At the same time, Ukraine was not powerful enough to regain the lost areas. On the part of the EU, Germany and France tried to take the lead for the solution of the conflict, which pushed other Member States (e.g. Poland or

⁴ In 1997, NATO first concluded an agreement with Russia (Founding Act on Mutual Relations, 1997) and then invited Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to join (Madrid, 8–9 July). Russia demanded, and NATO agreed, that no units or military bases from the “old NATO” countries be deployed in the newly admitted countries: “NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”

⁵ On July 17, 2014, a Malaysian Boeing 777 plane, flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was shot down over the Donbas with almost 300 people on board. The perpetrators were “Eastern Ukrainian separatists” using anti-aircraft missile launchers sent from Russia.

⁶ The so-called “Minsk Agreements” – agreements signed in the capital of Belarus on 5 September 2014 and 12 February 2015.

Great Britain) out of the negotiation format, and also disavowed the structures of the EU itself.⁷ This situation weakened the security of Central European countries, while Russia offered favourable economic cooperation to Western Europe: on 19 June 2015, a group of the leading energy companies of Russia and the EU signed an agreement on the construction of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline on the bottom of the Baltic Sea (it was supposed to supplement the Nord Stream I, which was operating from autumn 2011).⁸ This situation clearly suggested that the economic and political interests of Western Europe might differ from those of Central and Eastern Europe. Geopolitically speaking, the West is not endangered by Russian military aggression, and may be interested in economic cooperation carried out “over the heads” of the countries of the region (Wojtaszak, 2021, p. 47–48).

An additional factor that made CEE states aware of the difference in the perception of security was the migration crisis of autumn 2015. About 1.5 million migrants, most of whom declared themselves to be refugees from Syria, which has been engulfed in civil war since 2011, wanted to get to Western Europe (especially Germany) via Turkey, Greece and the Balkan states. At the beginning of September 2015, the German government decided to accept these migrants, despite the fear of a security breach in the Schengen area. However some of the Central and Eastern European countries through whose territories the migrants were to pass did not accept it and sealed their borders.

All these circumstances indicated that the perception of threats and the vision of security of Central and Eastern European countries are noticeably different from analogous concepts of Western Europe (Kuk, 2021, pp. 56–57). And this caused the need to create a regional forum where the voice of Central and Eastern European countries would be more strongly emphasized (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, pp. 51–56). This materialised in the fall of 2015. On September 25, the first meeting of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI – an international economic and political initiative bringing together initially 12, later 13 countries of the European Union located near the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas) was held in New York in the lobby of UN General Assembly, and on November 4 in Bucharest, the B9 format was officially inaugurated. A slightly narrower project is the Bucharest Nine, to which neither neutral Austria nor Croatia and Slovenia, located on the Adriatic Sea, belong.

It should be noted that since the very beginning both initiatives have enjoyed the support of the US. From the point of view of American diplomacy, it was worth helping a group of countries highly suspicious of Russia, and at the same time not accepting German-French dominance in the EU (Kuk, 2021, pp. 58–59). One should empha-

⁷ From June 6, 2014, the so-called the “Normandy Quartet” – negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France (the leaders of these countries met for the first time at the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Allied landings in Normandy). The decision to take over the negotiations by the “Quartet” was controversial (France and Germany made it on their own). The justification for this may be the fear of a ‘paralysis’ of the EU institutions in mid-2014, caused by the elections to the European Parliament on 22–25 May, and then by the appointment of key posts in the EU (the new European Commission began its work on 1 November).

⁸ 50% of the financing of the pipeline was provided by ENGIE SA (France), OMV AG (Austria), Royal Dutch Shell plc (United Kingdom), Uniper SE and Wintershall Dea GmbH (Germany). The rest of the costs were covered by Gazprom (Russia).

sise, that the political orientations of American administrations were less important in that matter. These initiatives were supported by the administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

It is also worth noting that the countries of the “old EU” distanced themselves from the Three Seas Initiative, as well as its institutions (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, pp. 83–85).⁹ The fact that the states of Central and Eastern Europe emphasized their own goals, as well as the veiled criticism of the states and institutions of the “old EU,” which were supposed to be guided by their own, and not pan-European interests, raised the question of whether the creation of a forum for the protection of Central and Eastern European interests would not lead to a confrontation within the EU and weakening it as a whole (Balcer, 2021). The problem was, for example, the direction of further evolution of the EU: the countries of the “old EU” supported deepening integration, up to federalization, while the countries of the “Three Seas Initiative” demanded rather slowing down integration and implementing it within the scope of the currently binding treaties (Koška, 2023).

3. The first years of cooperation (2015–2018)

The first official TSI summit was held in Dubrovnik on August 25–26, 2016, where the leaders of the involved states gathered. As the group was just defining its own identity, the final declaration adopted a very conciliatory attitude towards the EU: the revival of regional cooperation would take place “without creating parallel structures to the existing cooperation mechanisms” and must respect the “fundamental values and principles of the European Union” (Balcer, 2021).

At that time, cooperation within the B9 was also strengthened, taking place at various levels including presidential, and ministerial levels (foreign and defence ministers got involved). In September 2014, an agreement was concluded on the construction of a joint Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian brigade, based in Lublin; this brigade was combat-ready in 2017 (Banasik 2021, p. 32).¹⁰ B9’s activity focused on issues related to threats to NATO’s eastern flank, ways of limiting them, and seeking opportunities

⁹ It is worth noting the specific policy of Austria – a co-founding country of the TSI, which had not been part of the “Eastern Bloc” before, but had in its own history an interesting form of integration of Central Europe, which was Austria-Hungary (1867–1918). Within the framework of the TSI, Austria sees itself as a bridge between Western Europe and the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Vienna does not see the TSI as a way to reduce the dependence of EU members on imports of Russian oil and gas, as Austria plays an important role as an energy hub for Russian supplies to the European market. Within the framework of the TSI, Austria sees itself as a bridge between Western Europe and the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Vienna does not see the TSI as a way to reduce the dependence of EU members on imports of Russian oil and gas, as Austria plays an important role as an energy hub for Russian supplies to the European market. Austria saw the Nord Stream II gas pipeline, in the construction of which OMV is also involved, primarily as a “commercial project.” Even after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Austria was a reluctant country to criticise Moscow and to seek opportunities to maintain economic cooperation with it (see also: Tchakarova, Benko, 2021; *Austria niepotrzebna w Trójmorzu?*, 2022).

¹⁰ This brigade was created on the basis of the already existing Polish-Lithuanian battalion.

for cooperation between the countries of the region. An important element of these activities is also a joint assessment of the security situation in the region, including increasing regional defence and deterrence capabilities by expanding the presence of American troops on NATO's eastern flank (Wojtaszak, 2021, pp. 59–60).

A significant advantage for TSI was that the initiative has been supported by the USA. A very important signal was the participation of President Donald Trump in the TSI summit in July 6–7, 2017 in Warsaw. The co-hosts of the summit were the presidents of Poland Andrzej Duda and Croatian presidents Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The US President pointed out that thanks to the cooperation within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, the countries participating in this initiative would become stronger than ever before. According to him, the summit of the Three Seas Initiative had, among others, “launch a new future for an open market of cheap energy, which will bring greater security and prosperity to all our citizens” (*Szczyt Trójmorza z udziałem prezydenta USA*, 2017). The US president stressed that his country is also ready to help the countries of the Three Seas Initiative and meet their other needs for purchases of military equipment. He also said that with expanded trade and new infrastructure, a massive innovation system would be launched in the United States: “We invite all countries to work with us towards this goal and to develop innovative technologies that give the nations of the world the opportunity to become true custodians of their natural resources, enabling people to rise from poverty into a great and beautiful future” Trump said (*Szczyt Trójmorza z udziałem prezydenta USA*, 2017). Trump thought the EU was a geopolitical rival to the U.S. and saw the emergence of the TSI as an opportunity: a group of small and medium-sized countries that act together and have a slightly different vision of the EU than Germany or France could be useful for U.S. policy. Also, the tightening of military ties with these countries (bases in Deveselu in Romania and Redzikowo in Poland), or the sale of armaments to them, strengthened American influence both in the region and in the whole of Europe.

At the TSI summit in Warsaw in 2017, a decision was made to establish a Business Forum. The event accompanying the summit was the Global Forum – a meeting of government, business and media representatives as well as leading experts studying transatlantic relations. The strategic goal of the Three Seas Initiative has become the development of infrastructure in the transport, energy and digital dimensions within the EU, as well as with the Three Seas neighbours outside the EU, e.g. Ukraine (Balcer, 2021).

Poland invited the EU Commissioners for Transport and Regional Policy to the second TSI Summit in Warsaw. Nevertheless, they ignored the invitation. However, because the initiative was strongly supported by the USA – both the “old EU” countries and the EU structures themselves decided to get involved in it anyway. The next TSI summit, on September 17–18, 2018 in Bucharest, was attended by representatives of the Member States (as many as eight of them were represented at the highest level¹¹). In addition to them, the US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, the then head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, the Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Cretu (Wiśniewski, 2018), and German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas. The

¹¹ I.a. President of Romania Klaus Iohannis (Meeting Host) President of Poland Andrzej Duda, President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė, President of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović.

latter even suggested in his speech Germany's potential membership in Three Seas (Balcer, 2021). In this way, Germany sent clear signal that it saw interests in closer cooperation in the implementation of the Initiative's projects, and, by the way, wanted to have insight into the internal situation of TSI and balance the role of the United States there (Wiśniewski, 2018). Since 2018, Germany has had the status of a partner country, which is equivalent to the position of an observer (Koška, 2023). Germany's possible accession to the TSI would completely change this initiative. Currently, the TSI consists of two "medium-sized" and eleven "small" countries, and it was created precisely so that these countries could act together (also against the European powers). Germany's accession would certainly greatly strengthen the TSI – but at the same time, Germany would dominate the structure and the voice of the other members would lose its importance.

In July 2018, the Three Seas Regions Forum was inaugurated. Participants of the Bucharest summit adopted a joint declaration regarding the expansion of business and economic cooperation under the Initiative (*Joint Declaration of the Third...*, 2018). A declaration on the creation of the 3SI Network of Chambers of Commerce was signed and a letter of intent on the creation of the Three Seas Investment Fund was adopted. Readiness to join the Three Seas Fund has been expressed by state financial institutions of six countries: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, and ultimately the Fund is open to all TSI countries. Its statutory task is to obtain financial support for cross-border infrastructure projects involving at least three countries of the Initiative. It is assumed that the Fund will ultimately have the amount of EUR 5 billion, and its operation is planned for 30 years. The source of financing will be founding institutions and international capital institutions, in particular those focused on long-term investments. The Fund will therefore act as an "interface" for business, and its creators hope that the total amount of funds raised will reach EUR 100 billion, i.e. 20 times the initial capital. The goal set for the Fund is ambitious, and its success will depend on the ability to combine external financing with funds obtained, for example, under the cohesion policy or the European Investment Bank (Wiśniewski, 2018). The Fund is governed by a Board of Directors composed of representatives of the 3SI Member States.

At the summit in Bucharest, a list of 48 (later 49) TSI priority projects was approved. The value of these projects is nearly EUR 63 billion. The flagship, almost geopolitical, project of the "Three Seas" is "Via Carpatia" – a transport corridor, which is to run along the north-south axis from Tallinn, through Riga, Vilnius, eastern Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria – up to Thessaloniki (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, pp. 85–87). This project is also intended to revive the EU (and NATO) "eastern wall", as it has been noticed that despite the long-term membership of Central European countries in the EU, the construction of communication routes connecting them is slow, incomparably slower than on the east-west axis (Kuk, 2021, pp. 58–60). There are three main topics of the projects: transport, energy and digitalisation (see: *The List of Priority Interconnection Projects*, 2025).

The problem of Central and Eastern European countries was also the weakness of energy transmission networks and energy carriers. A dense electricity, oil and gas transmission network, built for many years, was characteristic of the area west of the

Oder River. A similar transmission network in Central Europe was much less frequent, which prevented fast energy supplies in the event of a sudden demand, and in practice facilitated Russia's blackmailing of the countries of the region and its energy supplies (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, pp. 85–87). After all, the initiators of the Three Seas Initiative were Poland and Croatia – countries that, for their own energy security, decided to supplement traditional gas supplies transported via gas pipelines by building terminals and tanks for regasification and storage. liquefied gas (Świnoujście and the Croatian island of Krk).

One should bear in mind the significance of the EU energy policy on that matter. After all, the Union emphasizes the diversification of energy sources, ensuring energy security through the cooperation of Member States and reducing the EU's dependence on external sources. Six of the EU's nine priority energy corridors concern electricity, gas or oil infrastructure in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe and the Baltic States (*Regulation (EU) No 347/2013...*, 2013). Thanks to the activities of the Three Seas Initiative, the implementation of these tasks is undertaken to a greater extent by the countries of the region, they feel more involved and responsible for their implementation (Koška, 2023).

Central and Eastern European countries were also active within the B9 grouping, the next summit of which was held on June 8, 2018 in Warsaw. The joint declaration of the leaders of the member States indicates that they will intensively strengthen their defence capabilities, strengthen stability outside the NATO area, and also support the "open door policy", i.e. encourage the admission of further members to NATO (*Joint Declaration of the Heads of State of the Bucharest Nine*, 2018). The declarations have basis in facts. In 2017, all members of the Alliance spent on average 3.85% more on defense than in 2014, while the increase in spending by the B9 countries amounted to 15% (*The Bucharest 9...*, 2018). The two biggest spenders among the B9, Poland and Romania, are investing in the most expensive and technologically advance defence systems. First is state-of-the art, medium range air- and missile-defence (AMD). Both countries chose the U.S. Patriot. While both programmes are in the early phases, by the mid-2020s, these two biggest defence spenders in the B9 will join the exclusive club of Allies with their own AMD assets) (*The Bucharest 9...*, 2018).

4. Cooperation in the face of crises (2019–2021)

On February 28, 2019, the B9 Summit took place in Kosice (Slovakia) (*Szczyt Bukaresztańskiej Dziewiątki w Koszycach*, 2019). The meeting was attended by NATO SG Jens Stoltenberg. The politicians discussed the security situation in the region, hybrid threats, and cybersecurity. "Russia's imperial ambitions" were considered a threat (Bodalska, 2019).

A significant test of the coherence of the TSI countries and their common perception of the direction in which the EU should go, was the coordination of their policies in mid-2019 regarding the filling of the most important positions in the EU. The president of the European Commission for the years 2019–2024 was neither Manfred Weber nominated in spring 2019, nor Frans Timmermans pushed through in mid-2019

by the powers of the “old EU,” but Ursula von der Layen, who was considered to have a better understanding of the interests of Central and Eastern European countries (Turczyński, 2021). During the efforts to fill posts in the EU, next TSI summit was also held (June 5–6, 2019 in the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana). The summit was also attended by the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of Germany, the US Secretary of Energy, as well as partners from the United Kingdom, Britain, the Balkan states, and the Eastern Partnership countries (first of all, Moldova and Ukraine; Belarus, which was also included in the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme, was not interested in it.). During the Summit, a declaration was adopted confirming the formal registration of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund, whose authorities included representatives of Polish, Romanian and Czech institutions.

The joint declaration of this summit set out three main objectives:

- stimulating economic development;
- strengthening the cohesion of the EU, including through the modernization of infrastructure in the region;
- enriching transatlantic ties (*Joint Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative*, 2019).

Among the “partner countries and institutions” participating in the Summit were: Germany, the United States and the European Commission.

On the occasion of the summit, a Business Forum was also held, attended by over 500 participants: representatives of European institutions, international financial institutions, think-tanks, academics, representatives of administration and business from countries that participate in TSI, as well as other EU Member States and from the USA. The aim of the Business Forum is to stimulate business initiatives and investments in the region, debate on the implementation of priority projects and identify potential growth and innovation factors in the area of the Three Seas Initiative (*Szczyt inicjatywy Trójmorza w Lublanie*, 2019).

In the face of the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the countries of the region were initially “out of the way”: the first, most deadly wave of early 2020 affected primarily Western Europe, while, for example, in Poland, the first case occurred only on March 4 (and on 12 March, the first death was recorded). Of course, in the following months, the epidemic claimed thousands of victims also in Central and Eastern European countries, but thanks to the drastic restrictions on human activity (freedom of movement, education and schooling, mass events) – the number of cases and deaths was “flattened” so that the health services of individual countries did not lose control of the situation.¹²

The pandemic significantly limited the possibilities of face-to-face meetings, also of a political nature – that’s why the next 3SI meeting was held in a hybrid way (October 19–20, 2020 in Tallinn) (*Wspólna deklaracja V szczytu Inicjatywy Trójmorza*, 2020). It was attended by the Vice-President of the European Commission, Margrethe Vestager.

¹² For example, as of June 30, 2020, the total number of COVID deaths in the United Kingdom was 56,000, in France 19,300, in Germany 9,300, and in Poland 1,400 (*Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases*, 2023).

At the summit in Tallinn, the list of 49 priority projects from Bucharest was extended by another 28 (worth over EUR 22 billion). Their total number reached 77 with a total value of over EUR 85 billion, and more than half of them concern transport infrastructure, nearly 1/3 of the energy sector and over 15% of the digital sector (Bornio, 2020; Balcer, 2021).

In Tallinn, the group of investors in the Three Seas Investment Fund significantly expanded: Poland and Romania were joined by: Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovenia and Croatia. It was indicated that the Three Seas Initiative will participate in the Blue Dot Network initiative launched in autumn 2019. BDN is a joint project of the United States, Japan and Australia that supports investments in high-quality infrastructure projects around the world. BDN tries to raise money from investors by certifying projects.

An important issue discussed at the end of 2020 was the preparation of the EU's "multi-annual financial framework," commonly referred to as the 2021–2027 budget. Of particular importance was the combination of this "framework" with the European Recovery Fund (NextGenerationEU), negotiated in mid-2020 and being a response to the pandemic. The countries of Central Europe strove for the shape of this budget to be favorable to them, because they were competing with the interests of both the rich countries of the "old EU" (payers to the EU budget who wanted to reduce their burdens) and the countries of Southern Europe, which demanded EU funds mainly for themselves.

2021 was next year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why the next summit in Bucharest, on May 10, 2021, was also partly remote (*Joint Declaration of the Heads of State Bucharest 9 Meeting*, 2021). The summit was attended by the new US president, Joseph Biden, who has been in office since January 2021. The first months of his rule indicated the possibility of changes in foreign policy – seeking an agreement with Russia, while reducing the importance of Central and Eastern European countries¹³. The talks in Bucharest were to dispel these fears – the joint declaration emphasized that: "The role of the United States of America for Europe's security is indispensable," and also indicated the main threat: "Russia's aggressive actions and military build-up in the immediate vicinity of NATO" (*Joint Declaration of the Heads of State Bucharest 9 Meeting*, 2021, pkt 3–4).

The next Three Seas Summit was held on July 8–9, 2021 in Sofia (the Three Seas Business Forum was also held along with it). The meeting was attended – as before – by representatives of the United States of America, the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Commission, and for the first time by the President of Greece. The joint declaration announced the redemption of NextGenerationEU (although it has not yet been launched, and, for example, Poland has not used it to this day) (*Joint*

¹³ In the first months of his presidency, Joe Biden tried to improve relations with the EU and Russia, as he considered China to be the main rival of the US (in such a situation, Russia and the EU should become America's allies). This was the purpose of the actions taken in mid-2021: the Biden-Putin meeting in Geneva on 16 June, as well as the withdrawal of sanctions against the construction of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline on 21 July. In mid-August, the pro-American government in Afghanistan was overthrown, revealing the weakness of the U.S. In such a situation, Central Europe lost its importance to the Americans.

Declaration of the Sixth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative, 2021). The importance of infrastructure development along the north-south axis was emphasized, as well as the readiness to obtain energy from hydrogen as the source that was considered the least harmful to the natural environment, while ensuring that the energy transition was fair (it did not impose any EU Member States of excessive charges). The number of Three Seas Priority Projects in 2021 has increased to 90.

It should be noted that in 2021 there were growing concerns about withdrawing support for the Three Seas Initiative and B9 from the US. J. Biden's administration signalled that the most important challenge for it is the competition with China, so European affairs are to lose importance. Central and Eastern European countries had reason to fear that Russia's assertive policy, combined with offers of economic cooperation made to Germany and other countries of the "old EU," would weaken their security (Ciepieliński, 2021).

5. Cooperation in the face of war

At the turn of 2021/2022, due to the threat of Russian aggression against Ukraine, additional consultations of the B9 leaders with the US President Joe Biden (December 9, 2021) and at the level of national security advisers with the US President's adviser Jake Sullivan (16 December 2021 and January 20, 2022) were held (*Nadzwyczajny Szczyt Dziewiątki Bukaresztańskiej NATO*, 2022).

The full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, prompted an immediate response from Central and Eastern European countries. They provided quick and generous aid to Ukraine, both in the form of arms supplies, making their territory available for assistance from Western countries, accepting a multi-million wave of Ukrainian refugees within their borders, or diplomatic pressure on other countries to help Ukraine (Frączyk, 2023).¹⁴ The extraordinary summit of the B9 group, devoted to aid for Ukraine, was held on February 25 in Warsaw. It was attended by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the participants of the summit also took part in the videoconference of the North Atlantic Council (*Spotkanie szefów państw i rządów NATO*, 2022). Russia (and Belarus cooperating with it)¹⁵ were strongly condemned, announcing full support for Ukraine, which was fighting for independence.

The next B9 summit was held in Bucharest on June 10, 2022 (*NATO Secretary General takes part in B9 Summit*, 2022). This meeting was attended (remotely) by NATO SG Jens Stoltenberg, as it was a preparation for the upcoming NATO summit in Madrid (June 29–30) (*Bucharest Nine Summit*, 2022). At that time, it was clear that

¹⁴ Poland provided particularly generous aid: in the first months of the war, it was about 300 tanks, 54 self-propelled howitzers, and many other pieces of equipment; In total, in the first year of the war, Polish aid to Ukraine amounted to EUR 3.56 billion, and to Ukrainians in Poland – EUR 8.36 billion. The total amount of Polish aid (EUR 11.92 billion) gave us the second place: behind the USA (EUR 73.18 billion) and just behind Germany (EUR 12.96 billion).

¹⁵ Belarus has allowed Russian troops to attack Ukraine from its territory – both ground forces and, for example, air and missile strikes. Previously, from mid-2021 onwards. Belarus has tried to destabilise the EU and NATO countries with which it bordered (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) by facilitating the crossing of their borders by illegal migrants from the Middle East.

the heroism of the Ukrainians, generous international support, and the inefficiency of the Russian military led to stopping the Russian invasion on the outskirts of Kiev and Kharkiv. The initial plan of the Russians, assuming the control of all of Ukraine, was limited to the seizure of Donbas and a land connection with Crimea.¹⁶ Unable to defeat Ukraine militarily, Russia has been trying to destroy the Ukrainian economy since mid-2022. In the summer, Ukrainian grain transports (the main export commodity) were attacked, and from autumn on, the Ukrainian energy system was attacked. A split emerged among the B9 countries at that time: Hungary distanced itself from helping Ukraine and from condemning Russia (Verseck, 2022).¹⁷

A support for Ukraine, which was defending itself against Russian aggression, became a key issue during the TSI summit in Riga on June 20–21, 2022 (*Wspólna deklaracja VII Szczytu Inicjatywy Trójmorza*, 2022). The meeting was also attended by representatives of the USA, Germany and the European Commission, and Ukraine as a special guest. Apart from arms supplies, the TSI countries tried to facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain (contrary to the Russian blockade of ports on the Black Sea). On the one hand, this was supposed to generate income for the Ukrainian budget, and on the other hand, to stave off hunger in the poor countries of Africa and Asia, which are important consumers of Ukrainian food. There were fears that part of the Russian plan was to cause famine in poorer countries, which could result in mass emigration their inhabitants to Europe and, consequently, destabilizing Europe and losing its ability to help Ukraine (Kośka, 2023). At the initiative of Poland, Ukraine was offered the status of a partner country of the Three Seas Initiative, which was sought by President Volodymyr Zelensky. Thanks to this status, Ukraine can participate in all projects of the Three Seas Initiative (*Joint Declaration of the Seventh Summit of the Three Seas Initiative*, 2022).¹⁸

Of other issues at the Summit, the following were noted: “Stressing the growing importance of the EU North-South connectivity, where 3SI has an important role to play in reinforcing resilient networks and cohesion of Europe” (*Joint Declaration of the Seventh Summit of the Three Seas Initiative*, 2022, preamble p. 5); “We encourage

¹⁶ In the first hours of the aggression against Ukraine, the Russians struck along the borders (Crimea, Donbas, the coast of the Sea of Azov), and at the same time (from the territory of Belarus) they attacked Kyiv (landing at the Hostomel airport). It was probably about seizing the seats of the Ukrainian government, removing President Zelensky (e.g. by assassination), and then handing over power to the former president Yanukovich, who was overthrown in 2014 (he was waiting for the development of the situation in Belarus). Yanukovich, at the price of restoring power, would accept territorial losses and recognize Ukraine's dependence on Russia (following the example of Belarus).

¹⁷ Hungary's policy towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine is cynical but effective. Blocking aid to Ukraine or weakening sanctions against Russia (in such votes, the EU requires unanimity) forces other countries to 'buy' Hungary's favour (for example, at the EU summit on 13–16 December 2023, Hungary agreed to €50 billion in aid for Ukraine, obtaining €10 billion for itself). Hungary justifies its policy by its economic problems (dependence on Russian energy resources), its reluctance to escalate the conflict (it fears that Western aid to Ukraine will prolong the war), and the difficulties that the Ukrainian government is causing to the Hungarian minority living there.

¹⁸ Point 3: “We welcome Ukraine as a special guest in this year's 3SI Summit and as a partner to the 3SI who from today begins the process of participating in the 3SI. We believe that the 3SI can be a platform for supporting Ukraine's recovery. We uphold our readiness to involve Ukraine in the implementation of the 3SI regional infrastructure projects. We support Ukraine's ambition towards EU accession.”

the governments of 3SI region countries to coordinate the implementation of their national recovery plans aiming at better security of energy supply and diversification, infrastructure connectivity and sustainability” (*Joint Declaration of the Seventh Summit of the Three Seas Initiative*, 2022, conclusions p. 7).

After seven years of cooperation the TSI made already several support structures operating around the grouping (conclusions, p. 12–14): 3SI Business Forum, 3SI Parliamentary Forum (II meeting 20–21 Juni), 3SI Civil Society Forum (I meeting 21 May in Riga).

At the end of 2022, Ukraine tried to take the lead on the front, but its problem was the huge advantage of the Russians in heavy equipment, especially in the number of tanks. To balance the forces, the countries supporting Ukraine, decided to equip it with modern, western tanks (the post-communist equipment was largely worn out). The most popular tank in European armies was the German “Leopard,” so the possibility of equipping Ukraine with such tanks depended on the consent of Germany as the manufacturer and service provider. At the end of January 2023, under the pressure of the B9 countries, Germany agreed, and the “collection” among the interested countries allowed to transfer to Ukraine about 100–120 “Leopard” tanks.¹⁹

On February 22, 2023, one year after the outbreak of large-scale war in Ukraine, the B9 countries organized a summit in Warsaw. The meeting was also attended by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, as well as US President Joe Biden, who just before the summit, on February 20, went on an unexpected visit to Kiev, where he met with Volodymyr Zelenski (Wilk, Żochowski, Nieczypor, 2023). Strengthening the “eastern flank of NATO” and the deployment of further units of the “old NATO,” including American ones, in the countries of the region were among the declared outcomes of the meeting. During the meeting, a joint declaration was made by the countries of NATO’s eastern flank: the countries agreed to support each other in the event of any threat, condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine and supported strengthening the Alliance’s presence in the region (Kostrzewa, 2023).

The B9 group further intensified its work. On March 30–31, 2023, the MFA of contributing countries met in Łódź (Kostrzewa, 2023). In turn, on June 6, 2023, a meeting of the leaders of the group’s countries was held in Bratislava, preparing a common position for the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius (July 11–12, 2023). The participants of the summit reaffirmed commitment to increase in investment in defence and deterrence – to a minimum of 2% of their countries’ GDP. In addition, the leaders announced joint efforts to support Ukraine at the Vilnius NATO Summit. They also announced an increase in NATO’s presence on the eastern flank, not only in terms of the physical presence of land forces brigades, but also the expansion of the existing infrastructure. Integrated air and missile defence was considered particularly important (Teluk, 2023).

On September 6–7, 2023, another Three Seas Initiative summit and business forum was held in Bucharest. At this summit, it was decided to admit Greece to the TSI as the

¹⁹ At the end of 2023 Western-made tanks were supplied by: Germany – 18, Poland – 14, Spain – 10, Sweden – 10, Canada – 8, Norway – 8, Portugal – 3, Netherlands together with Denmark – 30. These were “Leopard” machines (various models), in addition, the United Kingdom provided 14 “Challenger” tanks, and the USA 31 “Abrams” tanks (*Deliveries of major categories of military equipment to Ukraine*, 2023).

thirteenth country participating in the initiative. Moldova, on the other hand, is the second country after Ukraine to be granted the status of a participating partner. The establishment of the Second Three Seas Initiative Fund, which is to focus on green-oriented infrastructure, has been announced. Next to it, the TSI Initiative Innovation Fund is to be established. The summit also announced an update of the so-called list of priority projects of regional importance (*Postanowienia ósmego szczytu Inicjatywy Trójmorza w Bukareszcie*, 2023).

Summary

The Three Seas Initiative, which covered twelve EU members located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas (Greece, the thirteenth and youngest member of the Group, lies on the Aegean Sea), has a significant political, demographic and economic potential. Member states account almost 50% of EU members, while their territory covers approx. 30% of the Union's territory, and the TSI's population is about 25% of the entire EU. Total initiative's GDP equals 25% of the EU's GDP, measured in purchasing power parity (Balcer, 2021). The Three Seas Initiative is a relatively new local geopolitical project, which so far has been well integrated into the EU priorities for the coming years and contributes to strengthening the Union as a whole. It is an arena where 13 countries, mainly relatively young members of the Union, can talk about matters important to them and build a common front to lobby for joint, cross-border projects. From the economical perspective, the Three Seas Initiative focuses primarily on the development of transport, energy and digital infrastructure, and in the area of politics – cooperation for regional security (of course, the previously mentioned areas of activity are also closely related to security). Since the very beginning the TSI has been supported by the United States, then the European Union began to perceive the Three Seas Initiative as a partner worth pursuing. The growing importance of TSIs on the EU forum is evidenced by the growing number of EU-funded investments on the north-south axis (roads, railways, transmission networks, e.g. "Via Carpathia"). This direction is of paramount importance for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, while before 2015 East-West connections were considered more important. Another proof of the importance of the Group is the speed and size of the assistance that the countries of our region provided to Ukraine during the Russian aggression, as well as how they were able to persuade others European countries to support Ukraine (the "Leopard coalition").

On the other hand, the countries of NATO's "eastern flank," grouped in the "Bucharest Nine" are increasingly effectively coordinating their security policies. At the B9 Summit in Warsaw in 2018, the Heads of State adopted a joint declaration in which they reiterated their commitment to continue meetings within the Bucharest Nine, a platform for consultation and dialogue, leading to the agreement of common positions and further strengthening of Euro-Atlantic security. At that time, leaders also underlined that enhancing the readiness and responsiveness of NATO forces, as well as military mobility within Alliance territory, is "essential in the context of deterrence and defense on NATO's eastern flank." The practical effect of these declarations is increasing defence spending. In the years 2014–2021, Polish's spending increased from USD

10.1 billion to USD 15.4 billion, Hungary from USD 1.2 billion to USD 3.1 billion, and Bulgaria from USD 0.75 billion to USD 1.3 billion.²⁰

Successive crises that affected Europe made the countries of the region more and more clearly articulate their interests and specificity (Bajda, 2022). The importance of TSI and B9 clearly increased after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, when it turned out how strong the support of the countries of our region for the attacked state is, and how ready the United States is to support for security in Central and Eastern Europe. It is worth noting that the TSI and B9 projects enjoy growing support from leading politicians in the Western world (e.g. successive US presidents: B. Obama, D. Trump and J. Biden or successive German chancellors: A. Merkel and O. Scholz).

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²⁰ This was a faster growth than in Western European countries: at the same time, defence spending in Germany increased from 46.2 to 63.3 billion, in France from 52 to 57 billion, and in Italy from 24.5 to 32.7 billion USD (SIPRI, 2022).

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Summary

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been strengthening cooperation in their region for several years. These countries share a fear of Russian policy, as well as a desire for energy independence. They also want to gain greater influence in the structures of the EU and NATO. Since 2015, the Three Seas Initiative (associating countries lying between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas) and the Bucharest Nine (associating the countries of NATO's eastern flank) have been operating. These structures have gained significant importance after Russia launched its aggression against Ukraine, as their member states have provided significant assistance to Ukraine and facilitated its provision by the US. In the near future, the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine may become key structures of European security as well as strengthen economic integration in the region.

Key words: security, energy, Central Europe, Three Seas Initiative, Bucharest Nine

Wielopłaszczyznowa integracja Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w ramach Inicjatywy Trójmorza i grupy B-9

Streszczenie

Kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej od kilku lat zacieśniają współpracę w swoim regionie. Łączy je obawa przed polityką Rosji, a także pragnienie niezależności energetycznej. Chcą również uzyskać większe wpływy w strukturach UE i NATO. Od 2015 roku funkcjonuje Inicjatywa Trójmorza (zrzeszająca państwa leżące między Adriatykiem, Morzem Bałtyckim i Morzem Czarnym) oraz Bukaresztańska Dziewiątka (zrzeszająca państwa wschodniej flanki NATO). Struktury te zyskały na znaczeniu po rozpoczęciu przez Rosję agresji na Ukrainę, ponieważ państwa członkowskie udzieliły Ukrainie znaczącej pomocy i umożliwiły jej udzielenie przez Stany Zjednoczone. W niedalekiej przyszłości Inicjatywa Trójmorza i Bukaresztańska Dziewiątka mogą stać się kluczowymi strukturami bezpieczeństwa europejskiego, a także wzmocnić integrację gospodarczą w regionie.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo, energia, Europa Środkowa, Inicjatywa Trójmorza, Bukaresztańska Dziewiątka

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