

AN ATTEMPT TO SYSTEMATICALLY REVISIT THE PROCESS OF CONCEPTUALIZATION AND POLITICAL MATURATION OF THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE (3SI)

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Abstract. *The main purpose of the study is to provide an informed and contextually relevant view of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which adds to the geographical and thematic cooperation formats already in place in the European Union (EU). This work tests the Initiative's relevance and examines how it can contribute to the consolidation of the Eastern flank of the European Union, thereby strengthening the resilience in this part of Europe, which has been seriously shaken by the impact and consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2022. The paper reflects on the role of the 3SI in the aftermath of the war on Ukraine and draws preliminary conclusions about the growth potential of the Initiative in the near future, both in political and geopolitical (integration of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) and in economic terms. The 3SI should not miss the momentum once the reconstruction of Ukraine effectively begins, and it should contribute substantially to the process of political and economic integration of the Eastern neighbourhood.*

Keywords: *Three Seas Initiative (3SI), European Union, Intermarium, geopolitics, Russian aggression in the Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, cohesion, interconnectivity.*

1. Introduction – Topic Selection, Theoretical-Methodological Approach, Data Sources

The purpose of this paper is to provide an informed description of the emergence and establishment of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI/The Initiative), to offer a systematic approach for tracing the milestones of the Initiative's conceptualisation and maturation process and, finally, to reflect on its future potential against the backdrop of a fundamentally changed geopolitical environment resulting from the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine.

As an introduction to the history and origins of the Initiative, the paper revisits the Intermarium project. It then outlines the most important steps in shaping the idea for the Three Seas Initiative and elaborates on the specific relevance of each chronologically introduced milestone in the conceptualisation process of the 3SI. It also discusses the main outcomes of each stage of its development thus far and the roles of key actors whose contributions were instrumental in defining the project's goals.

The Three Seas Initiative supplements to the geographical and thematic cooperation formats already in place in the European Union (EU). Described as form of

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“minilateralism” or a minilateral format, citing Lang and Von Ondarza (2018: p. 1), the Three Seas Initiative is examined in this work for its relevance and its potential contribution to the consolidation of the Eastern flank of the EU, thereby strengthening the resilience in this part of the continent, which has been severely shaken by the impact and consequences of the war that Russia initiated on Ukraine since 2022. In addressing the research question posed above, additional sub-questions are considered: Why a “minilateralism” involving a group of Member States from this part of Europe? What are the benefits for the members, for the partner states of the Initiative (starting with the U.S. as one of the most prominent supporting partners of the format), and for the broader European integration project? What are the prospects for the 3SI in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine? These questions are applied while analyzing the various stages of the 3SI’s development process.

Due to the formal limitations of this paper, only materials and documents of particular relevance to interpreting the various stages of the Three Seas Initiative's development have been selected from publicly available sources. These documents include official statements, declarations, and decisions adopted at the highest political level during the 9 Summits of the I3S held so far (2016 – Dubrovnik, 2017 – Warsaw, 2018 – Bucharest, 2019 – Ljubljana, 2020 – Tallinn¹, 2021 – Sofia, 2022 – Riga, 2023 – Bucharest, 2024 – Vilnius). In addition to these sources, accompanying documents such as the annexes to Summit declarations and the List of the priority interconnection projects adopted in 2018 (Three Seas Initiative Summit Slovenia, 5-6 June 2019, Priority Interconnection Projects. 2019 Status Report) have also been considered in the analysis. The collection of official data is supplemented by press releases and interviews with relevant stakeholders, offering valuable insights into the attitudes and priorities of the respective national representatives toward the 3SI.

Clearly, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has created a new geopolitical reality, which has undoubtedly influenced the Initiative. This paper argues that the war in Ukraine has marked a new phase in the 3SI’s affirmation process, providing a platform of high visibility for showcasing its strong geopolitical character and the relevance of a broad range of issues emphasized by 3SI projects, such as energy security and diversification of sources, resource security, the need for a more interconnected and digitalized regional network in terms of transport and energy infrastructures, resilience, and countering cyber threats. The Russian aggression in Ukraine could be seen as a validation of the concerns voiced by some Member States when advocating for a geopolitical format, thereby creating an opportunity for resilience-building decisions and measures. These developments have resulted in the granting of special status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova within the 3SI. In light of both the constraints on action and the opportunities that have arisen, this paper offers some preliminary conclusions regarding the project’s relevance and potential impact in the era of a "geopolitical Union." (Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission: “The EU has matured into a geopolitical union,” State of the Union speech, 2023)

¹ Virtual Summit due to the Covid 19 - context

2. The Relationship between Intermarium and the Three Seas Initiative

During the document analysis, attention was paid to the origins of the Initiative and the similarities between Intermarium and the Three Seas Initiative. A considerable amount of academic research on the origins and aims of Intermarium suggests that the guiding principle behind the Intermarium project is essentially one of the key regional narratives that have been periodically relaunched in various forms over time, as argued by several scholars, such as Bartoszewicz (2021), Crețu and Ardeleanu (2018), Friedman (2017), and Tomaszewska and Starzyk (2017). In fact, Bartoszewicz (2021) argues, in an analysis conducted through the "optics of critical geopolitics," that Intermarium is an attempt to break away from everything preventing the region "between Berlin and Moscow" from being a subject, rather than an object, of political affairs. (Bartoszewicz, 2021: p.1)² Laruelle and Rivera (2019), in their work *Imagined Geographies of Central and Eastern Europe: The Concept of Intermarium*, emphasize that the idea of a major regional project between Germany and Russia is a recurring concept, with numerous manifestations in recent history. Their introductory remarks set the historical context as follows: "Like the proverbial cat, some concepts have several lives. Or, like the mythological phoenix, they can be reborn from the ashes. This is certainly the case with Intermarium, a geopolitical concept that envisaged an alliance of countries stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea, serving as a third power bloc between Germany and Russia. Intermarium belongs to a long genealogy of geopolitical concepts seeking and promoting Central and Eastern European unity: sandwiched between a *Mitteleuropa* under German leadership in the nineteenth century and a *Near Abroad* under Moscow's supervision after 1991, the 'middle of Europe' or the 'land between the seas' has been searching for historical models in everything from the Jagiellonian dynasty and the Polish-Lithuanian *Rzeczpospolita* to the Austro-Hungarian Empire". (Laruelle and Rivera, 2019: p. 3) Mainstream literature on Intermarium suggests that, in the given historical context, the Polish Intermarium was intended both as a counterweight to the Russian threat and as a potential tool for Poland's regional ambitions. The idea of a regional security alliance in Central and Eastern Europe is, therefore, not new; it was promoted by Polish President Józef Piłsudski in the 1920s. His vision was to establish a confederation of states that would guarantee the independence of former communist states in Eastern Europe, located between the superpowers of Germany and Russia, while ensuring greater stability in the region (Kostiantyn and Umland, 2017).

The Three Seas Initiative can be defined and contextualized in the present as a rebirth of the Intermarium idea, embodied in the form of a "minilateralism" format within the EU. Its aim is to create a cohesive and convergent regional area. However, the underlying philosophy of the Three Seas Initiative differs from that of Intermarium in one crucial aspect: the 3SI is not primarily and exclusively defined as a security project. Rather, it focuses on economic convergence, which aims to foster better connectivity in key sectors such as energy, transport infrastructure, and digital communication, thereby contributing to the overall security environment. The outcome of the first 3SI Summit, the Dubrovnik Statement, stipulates: "(...) The Three Seas Initiative as an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the states involved in energy, transportation, digital communication, and economic sectors in Central and Eastern

² See also A. Tycner (2020)

Europe; (...) The Three Seas Initiative is open to partnerships on specific projects with interested state or business actors from around the world who are committed to the fundamental values and principles of the European Union." (The Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative, 25th August 2016).

Although the concept behind the Three Seas Initiative undoubtedly includes a security component, it is not the sole focus of the new format. In fact, security is just one of the important themes under consideration, all of which are linked in one way or another to the broader goal of strengthening interconnectivity and ensuring a secure regional context. The concept of a security dimension emerged before February 24, 2022, so there is no direct correlation or causal relationship with the war in Ukraine that needs to be emphasized. This development occurred almost naturally as a result of regional consolidation efforts in areas such as political cooperation, infrastructure networking and interconnectivity, environmental protection, and digitalization.

An important argument stressed by D. Popescu, president of the Association Black Sea House Romania³, relates to the fact that by prioritizing the economic and infrastructural consolidation of the region, the Three Seas Initiative has achieved an important paradigm shift from the Intermarium and its numerous relaunches over the past decades. While the Intermarium project was primarily a defensive concept, conceived in a historical context as a response to potential threat scenarios, the Three Seas Initiative reinterprets this legacy. It frames the discourse on the Initiative as an ambitious convergence project, signalling power and an emerging, geopolitically expansive regional strength. (Popescu, 2017)

3. Short History and Main Features of the Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative was launched in 2015 at the initiative of the Croatian and Polish presidents, Mrs. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Mr. Andrzej Duda. The 3SI brings together 13 Central and Eastern European member states of the European Union: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. With the exception of Austria and the most recent member, Greece, which joined as the 13th member state, all other participants belong to the "club" of the "new" EU Member States that completed the process of European integration after 2004. Polish President Andrzej Duda has been a strong advocate for the 3SI, emphasizing to the Polish news agency PAP that the Initiative represents a strategic response to regional challenges. (PAP, 2021)

The 3SI can be framed as one of the "new minilateralisms" (Lang and Ondarza, 2018: p. 1) that have emerged within the European Union, possessing a well-defined regional focus. In terms of its institutional architecture, the 3SI remains relatively informal; it operates as a loose forum at the highest political level (Heads of State) with a strong geopolitical focus. The participating small and medium-sized Member States of the European Union, listed above, are geographically situated between the Baltic Sea, Adriatic Sea, and Black Sea. The Initiative prioritizes practical cooperation, particularly

³ The Black Sea House Association (BSH), a non-governmental and nonprofit organization was established in 2017, in Constanta (RO) and is a think tank for political analysis and prediction in the Wider Black Sea area. According to the official website (casamariinegre.ro), the objective of the BSH is to provide strategic insight and policy solutions for decisionmakers in the region to strengthen trust and maintain security and stability. BSH was founded and is led by dr. Dorin Popescu, a former Romanian diplomat.

in project-related areas such as energy, infrastructure, and digital communication, which underscores its economic focus. According to the official 3SI website (Three Seas Summit, The Three Seas story), the participating countries represent nearly one-third of the EU's population, yet their average GDP per capita is just 78% of the EU average. From 2015-2019, the average economic growth in the 12 countries was 3.5%, compared to 2.1% in the EU. The website of the 2022 Riga Summit notes a projected GDP growth rate of 3.2% and highlights an infrastructure deficit exceeding €500 billion, emphasizing the region's economic potential. (Tchakarova and Benko, 2022: pp.17-19; Lang, 2021: p. 1) Recognizing the need to close these gaps, the Initiative aims to enhance the region's economic relevance by supporting convergence through targeted investment projects, bolstered by an Investment Fund and a growing number of international and private financial partners.

The majority of 3SI participants are post-communist countries that have undergone significant structural transformations and reforms during both their pre- and post-EU accession phases. These countries, which are still in the process of completing this transformation, must accelerate and finalize their transitions to bridge their development gaps compared to other EU Member States. This requires overcoming complex social and economic challenges.

The 3SI is not a homogeneous group of interests but rather a coalition of states with distinct and, at times, divergent national interests and foreign policy objectives. What unites these countries and motivates their participation in a regional format is not only the shared memory of the communist era and the common challenges of the transformation process but also their shared aspiration to achieve the level of development and prosperity enjoyed by their Western European counterparts. They are committed to implementing fundamental reforms and ensuring security, peace, and stability.

4. A Systemized Approach to the Development of the Three Seas Initiative (2016-2024)

The process of concept development and the political maturation of the 3SI can be examined through four major phases:

a. The first two summits in Dubrovnik (2016) and Warsaw (2017) mark the initial phase of the emergence and formalization of the concept, with efforts focused on conceptualizing and operationalizing the Initiative. The *Warsaw Joint Declaration of the Presidents* established a Business Forum to accompany the annual summits, with the first edition organized by Romania in Bucharest (2018);

b. The *Bucharest Summit* (2018) initiated the phase of consolidation and materialization, which was further strengthened at the Ljubljana Summit (2019). The virtual Tallinn Summit (2020) added a digital dimension, marking the start of the 3SI's digital era alongside its institutional consolidation. Business Forums also became a regular component of the summits;

c. The summits in Riga (2022), Bucharest (2023), and Vilnius (2024) took place against the backdrop of the unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. As an expression of solidarity, Ukraine (2022) and subsequently the Republic of Moldova (2023) were invited to join the 3SI process as associate partners. Greece joined as the 13th member state, adding territorial flexibility to the Initiative.

4.1. The First Phase: Creation and Conceptualization of the Three Seas Initiative - Summits in Dubrovnik (2016) and Warsaw (2017)

The Three Seas Initiative was formalized during the first summit, held in Dubrovnik at the invitation of the Croatian President from August 25th to 26th, 2016. Preparatory to this event, a kickoff meeting was convened on September 29th, 2015, in New York, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

The *Dubrovnik Summit* adopted the first official document of the 3SI in the form of a *Joint Summit Declaration* (Three Seas Initiative, The Joint Declaration on the Three Seas Initiative – The Dubrovnik Statement, 2016). This document set out the conceptual framework for cooperation, emphasizing the strengthening of regional networking as a core objective. It also underscored the inclusiveness of the format, aiming to avoid duplication of efforts with existing initiatives. The projects under the 3SI were intended to enhance regional economic development and, consequently, contribute to the overall consolidation of the European Union. By promoting joint ventures in energy, transport infrastructure, digital communication, and economic cooperation, Central and Eastern Europe aimed to improve its security, stability, and competitiveness. At the same time, the Initiative sought to bolster resilience at the EU level, as articulated in the Dubrovnik Joint Statement: "Convinced that by expanding the existing cooperation in energy, transportation, digital communication, and economic sectors, Central and Eastern Europe will become more secure, safe, and competitive, thus contributing to making the European Union more resilient as a whole." In addition to collaboration with the EU, the Declaration stressed the importance of transatlantic cooperation, highlighting the relevance of the transatlantic link for Central and Eastern European participants. The summit also agreed on completing the long-planned *Via Carpathia* motorway, connecting the Baltic States to Thessaloniki in the Aegean Sea. It also pushed forward a key energy project: the establishment of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Poland (Świnoujście) and Croatia (Krk Island), enabling the import of American LNG. This decision reflected, even as early as 2016, concerns among Central and Eastern European countries about growing EU dependence on Russian energy supplies. These concerns were validated by 2022 when energy independence from Russia became one of the most pressing challenges for European countries.

The process of shaping and conceptualizing the 3SI gained momentum leading up to the *Warsaw Summit* (July 6th, 2017). In terms of both content and participation, this summit represented a milestone in affirming the Three Seas Initiative. The meeting reinforced the transatlantic character of the Initiative and demonstrated its complementarity and mutual reinforcement with the EU. The strong transatlantic dimension was already evident at the Dubrovnik Summit, where U.S. representative General James L. Jones, former National Security Advisor to President Barack Obama, emphasized that the 3SI should play a significant role in the development of the EU, particularly in consolidating its security. Jones pointed out the Initiative's potential to counter Russia's geopolitical dominance ambitions, driven by its energy policies, through a series of North-West investment projects aimed at boosting regional interconnectivity (Remarks by General James L. Jones Jr. at the Dubrovnik Three-Seas-Initiative-Presidential-Roundtable, 2016). The U.S. commitment to actively support the Initiative was highlighted at the *Warsaw Summit*, where President Donald Trump attended in person. He called for stronger partnerships with the 12 participating EU Member States and announced U.S. support for the diversification of their energy sources. Acknowledging the security dimension of the 3SI and the rising risks of Russian

influence, Trump stressed that the U.S. would never use energy as a coercive tool, reiterating support for free-market principles (President Donald Trump's remarks at the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Poland, July 7th, 2017, Warsaw). Trump's speech was significant because it reconfirmed the transatlantic dimension of the Initiative, underpinned by pragmatic elements like cooperation on energy security. Furthermore, his presence elevated the international visibility of the 3SI, an opportunity that was effectively leveraged to enhance the Initiative's attractiveness within the EU and in alignment with Brussels' political agenda. Although the 3SI initially addressed regional security concerns only to a limited extent, there is a clear link between expanding U.S. involvement in the natural gas market and bolstering energy security in the region (Górka, 2018: p. 60). One of the most important objectives of the Initiative is to achieve greater energy independence from Russian oil exports, thereby reducing Moscow's ability to use energy supply as a geopolitical tool to exert pressure on its neighbors. The Warsaw Summit Joint Declaration (3SI Research Center. Declarations - Project the Three Seas Initiative Research Center) encapsulated these priorities under the motto "3C – Connectivity, Commerciality, Complementarity." It outlined principles for implementing 3SI projects, while also encouraging the active involvement of national governments, businesses, and NGOs. The Initiative continued to function as a flexible forum at the highest level of representation.

4.2. The Second Phase: Implementation and Materialization of the 3SI Objectives – Summits in Bucharest (2018), Ljubljana (2019), Tallinn (2020) and Sofia (2021)

The third summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), held in Bucharest in 2018, marked the transition from the conceptualization phase to a period focused on implementation and tangible results. This summit aimed to demonstrate that the 3SI was not merely a political forum but a practical framework with the capacity and tools to achieve its objectives.

For Romania, hosting the 2018 summit provided a platform to project itself as a committed pro-European and transatlantic member state, just a year before it took over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union (January 1, 2019). Romania's focus on highlighting the complementary nature of the 3SI reflected its desire to avoid associations with ideas such as a "multi-speed Europe" or exclusive groupings that might fragment the EU. Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis emphasized the importance of the 3SI aligning with broader EU goals, stating: "We do not want to develop initiatives that separate us from the rest of the European Union. We want to develop initiatives that help our own countries, but which fit perfectly into the European Union's broader objectives [...] we want to be part of projects that develop Romanian infrastructure and contribute to and benefit from energy security." (Presedintele Iohannis: Summitul Initiativei Celor Trei Mari se va desfasura in 2018 in Romania)

The **Bucharest Summit** was an opportunity to show the effectiveness of the Initiative by translating ambitious political statements into actionable plans and projects. Among the achievements was the compilation of a list of strategically relevant projects in transportation, energy, and digitalization. The summit also hosted the first 3SI Business Forum, as agreed upon in Warsaw, which saw a message of support from the U.S. president. High-level political participation continued, with U.S. Energy Secretary Rick Perry representing the U.S. administration, demonstrating continued transatlantic support for the Initiative.

Although Germany initially viewed the 3SI with skepticism—concerned that it might counterbalance the Franco-German axis within the EU—its Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, attended the Bucharest Summit. He signaled a shift in Germany’s stance, stating: “We will talk to the eastern Member States about how we can move the European Union forward together—on energy issues, on infrastructure, and also on relations with our neighbours” (Zeit, September 17, 2018). The participation of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, further emphasized the EU’s engagement with the 3SI, advocating for collaboration between East and West in the EU. The **Ljubljana Summit** (2019) built upon the Bucharest outcomes, accelerating the materialization of 3SI objectives. Politically, the summit emphasized the importance of integrating the 3SI into the broader EU institutional framework, reaffirming the member states’ commitment to a strong and cohesive Union. The summit also strengthened the transatlantic link and opened the Initiative to potential participation from non-EU countries, such as the Western Balkan states and Ukraine. Key tangible results included the organization of the second Business Forum, the creation of a network of 3SI member states’ chambers of commerce, the establishment of an investment fund for financing priority interconnection projects, and the decision to publish annual progress reports.

The **Tallinn Summit** (2020) and **Sofia Summit** (2021) took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, marking the first major crisis faced by both the 3SI and the EU since the financial crises of the previous decade. This period, however, acted as a catalyst for progress, particularly in digitalization, with the Tallinn Summit held virtually. Given the pandemic’s significant economic impact on the 3SI countries, the Sofia Summit in 2021 focused on strengthening economic networks, boosting interconnectivity projects, and attracting investments to the region.

4.3. The Three Seas Initiative in the Context of the Russian Aggression on Ukraine: Summits in Riga (2022), Bucharest (2023) and Vilnius (2024)

The Russian aggression in Ukraine marked a pivotal moment for the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), accelerating its development and redefining its objectives in the face of a fundamentally changed security landscape in the EU’s immediate neighborhood. Paradoxically, the invasion spurred a proactive momentum for advancing projects and strengthening regional cooperation. In response to the evolving geopolitical context, the 3SI expanded its influence, showing solidarity by granting Ukraine (2022) and the Republic of Moldova (2023) associate partner status. This new form of status allowed for strengthening cooperation with the two countries in a series of infrastructure projects without formal decision-making power (Wojcik, 2024), as full membership is reserved for EU Member States under the 3SI statute.

It was the second Bucharest Summit (2023) which formalised the invitation of the Republic of Moldova and the first-ever enlargement of this format, with Greece becoming the 13th Member State of the EU to join the 3SI, and therefore proving its territorial elasticity. Wojcik (2024) correctly notes that following this summit, the US announced a €300 million contribution to the 3SI-Investment Fund (3SIIF) and that the list of 3SI flagship investment has been doubled in comparison to 2018, which now includes over 100 infrastructure projects. Wojcik also emphasizes that one of the most important results of the Bucharest Summit was the creation of a new financial instrument within the format, the 3SI Innovation Fund, intended to fund environmentally friendly infrastructure, renewable energy, and digital investments. (Wojcik, 2024)

From Bucharest 2018 to Bucharest 2023 – Romania’s Vision for the 3SI

Having organized two of the nine Summits of the 3SI to date, Romania seized the opportunity of both high-level events to put its visions regarding the 3SI’s role in the region and in the EU into the spotlight. The process from Bucharest 2018 to Bucharest 2023 demonstrated that the 3SI has grown into a mature policy platform meant to address the major development gaps within the EU, specifically between East and West, and North and South. Senior Romanian officials view the 3SI as a catalyst for consolidated resilience in Europe and a vector for increasing the economic security of the EU, especially in times of geostrategic and geo-economic turbulences. (Embassy of Romania to Austria official website, H.E. Ambassador Emil Hurezeanu’s remarks on the objectives of the 3SI Summit 2023 in Bucharest in a debate at the premises of the Embassy, 2023). As highlighted in the public statements and remarks of various Romanian representatives, while the main objective of the Initiative is to improve infrastructure, energy and digital connectivity between participating countries, it also has significant geopolitical implications. In addition, the 3SI can contribute to social stability and political resilience in the participating countries by supporting economic development and creating jobs. The Initiative is considered an important tool in addressing some of the economic and social challenges that can lead to instability and insecurity. Last but not least, Bucharest sees the 3SI as an additional European platform for promoting *cohesion*, a principle which has been guiding as leitmotiv work of the first Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2019. Romania used the second Summit in 2023 to boost the engagement for the Investment Fund and, parallelly, to emphasize the significant transatlantic support the 3SI enjoys.

5. Conclusion

The Geopolitical Argument

Friedman (2017) argues that the emergence of this regional initiative was inevitable in the context of Russia’s resurgence as a regional superpower. According to the author, the Intermarium/3SI⁴ is only an idea, an instrument for regional cooperation. It is not an alliance at present, but was conceived as such, a fact that brings with it certain problems and challenges. Among the challenges of developing multinational institutions, Friedman mentions the factors of time, money and political will. In such *minilateralisms*, Lang and Von Ondarza (2018) argues that the geopolitical dimension is simply indispensable. The geopolitical dimension is part of the core idea of the project *per se*, which makes the 3SI a valuable approach at a time when the EU acts as a geopolitical Union, as mentioned in the State of the Union speech of the (re)elected president of the European Commission.

Internal Challenges

The most important challenge lies in managing conflicting or competing political goals among the Member States and preventing the compromise of loyalty and solidarity for specific benefits and self-interests, such as Hungary’s position between the EU and Russia. In order to preserve the 3SI’s viability and functionality, members should avoid attempts to use the format instrumentally in order to claim regional leadership roles. Nevertheless, geopolitical considerations also play a role for some of its members, Lang and Von Ondarza (2018: p. 4) rightly conclude.

⁴ The Three Seas Initiative as a concept is sometimes referred to by the author as Intermarium.

Furthermore, another problematic issue is the concern that it might become problematic for some capital cities to associate themselves with Member States that have a particularly critical attitude towards the EU. Some scholars also warned about the possibility of a counter-movement along the Berlin-Paris axis that could hinder positive developments within the 3SI. None of these was the case, and so far, nothing has succeeded in bringing the 3SI to failure, which means that the *cohesion* within the format and the *pragmatic approach* have prevailed.

The necessary funds for implementing the projects are critical, as is typical for most of the newly initiated intra-EU-formats. For the first time, in 2023, the Business Forum of the 3SI was attended, in addition to the representatives of the governments and the business sector, by the representatives of the major financial institutions and investment funds, parliaments, and representatives of civil society, further underscoring the cohesion between the different levels in achieving their shared common goals.

Outlook and Perspectives: The Reconstruction of Ukraine After the End of the Russian Aggression

Based on the shared values and interests of the 3SI member states and their associate partners, as well as the interest in the initiative from countries such as the UK, Japan, the UAE, and South Korea, it can be stated that the 3SI is now ready for further growth and consolidation.

In its nearly decade-long course, the Initiative has managed to achieve a number of conceptual and pragmatic steps and, thanks to the high-profile support of the US in the early years of its existence, was also able to attract international attention. The interest of the aforementioned third countries confirms the potential of the 3SI; a major issue in this regard is the role the Initiative might play after the war in the process of reconstructing Ukraine.

Against the backdrop of arguments claiming that the existence of the Initiative is inertia and that the 3SI lacks funds for the common projects – thereby weakening its relevance⁵ – one argument of this paper is that *it is the war in Ukraine and the prospects of the country's reconstruction that create the next momentum* for the 3SI. (The first important momentum of the Initiative was provided by the challenge of creating synergies to use EU and other funds in order to increase the region's interconnectivity and reduce development gaps.)

Joining forces to aid in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine as a facilitator network/platform is a significant undertaking; yet it also presents a challenging opportunity to strengthen the region's standing and establish visibility as a geopolitical actor.

According to Friedman, the Intermarium (which, in his usage, is the 3SI, as previously stated) sets the stage of a more integrated economic drive. It will be within the EU, but it will operate differently from the EU – more entrepreneurially, resembling the United States. This could create stress within the EU, which does not need any additional strain. (Friedman 2017)

Creating synergies and emphasizing complementarity with EU projects is seen as necessary condition ahead of this monumental task. The good news in this regard is the simultaneous decisions to grant Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova the status of associate partners of the 3SI, as well as the opening of negotiation talks with the European Union.

⁵ For a collection of further scholar's views to be consulted: Emerging-europe.com

Cited in the analysis “Can the Three Seas Initiative Be Saved from the Irrelevance?” (Emerging Europe, 2023), Istrate⁶ argues that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has created an opportunity for the 3SI to place itself at the forefront of reconstruction efforts. Ukraine — designated a ‘participating partner’ of the Initiative at its 2022 summit in Riga, with full membership being the privilege of EU Member States — could offer the 3SI a path towards relevance. Improved infrastructure links will be key to the country’s integration with its western neighbours—not to mention its future security. The Initiative’s overall goal of securing investment in cross-border transport, energy, and infrastructure projects to finally close the regional development gap is exactly what Central and Eastern Europe needs in the wake of Russia’s ongoing war, says Istrate. This assessment is shared within the same analysis by Hartwell⁷: “The 3SI might have a role in terms of being on the front lines of Ukraine’s reconstruction and bringing Ukraine into better connectivity with the eastern frontier of the EU, but that really cannot begin until the war is over.” The conclusion of the author is that helping Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova would be the biggest contribution the 3SI can make once the war in Ukraine is over. (Ibidem)

In conclusion, the reconstruction of Ukraine as a near-future task is the best proof of the dual character of the 3SI, being both *geopolitical and economical*. K. Lang argues that, in this respect, the Three Seas Initiative is an economic and infrastructural cooperation framework with a pragmatic self-image, into which influential participants simultaneously project geopolitical aspirations. (Lang, 2021: p. 2) This aligns with and reinforces the Romanian approach, with Bucharest believing in the potential of the 3SI to support the reconstruction of Ukraine in due course⁸. Given its geopolitical position at the frontline of the joint EU efforts to support Ukraine, Romania can rightly claim a role in the architecture of the reconstruction efforts. This is consistent with the conclusions formulated by Mihai Sebe (2022) regarding the potential of the Initiative, stating that the 3SI has immense potential in the region, given its characteristics of singular integration initiative. The author also emphasizes the growth potential of the Initiative not only in economical but specifically in political terms, mentioning that the 3SI started as an infrastructure completion-based project and is now a project based on solidarity and cohesion. (Sebe, 2022: pp.151-153) The external shock of the Russian aggression in Ukraine can be seen as one major factor enabling the 3SI to start realizing its vast geopolitical and economical potential.

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⁶ Dominik Istrate, senior analyst for Central and Eastern Europe at Aretera Public Affairs

⁷ Christopher Hartwell, professor of international business policy at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences School of Management and Law

⁸ The Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis wrote on the X platform: "I had a substantive discussion with the Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenski in Vilnius on the margins of the Three Seas Initiative Summit. We reiterated our strong support for Ukraine in all relevant areas and our determination to strengthen regional connectivity, sustainable cross-border cooperation and energy security."

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