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The Three Seas Initiative Between the First and Second Decades: Political Context in Poland

By Adam Chmielecki

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was born in autumn 2015, as a result of a meeting between the presidents of Poland and Croatia, Andrzej Duda and Kolinda Grabar -Kitarović on the sidelines of the United Nations summit in New York, under the favorable eye of Donald Trump, then serving his first term as President of the United States of America. It began its activities in earnest and formally during the first summit in Dubrovnik in August 2016. Ten years later, history is coming full circle – as Dubrovnik hosts the annual summit in April 2026, prepared by the Croatian presidency.

Success of the first decade

3SI is one of the most active and developing political formats to emerge in the first quarter of the 21st century. The structural development of the Three Seas Initiative can be considered its greatest success so far. At a time when several formats were fading away, the 3SI not only organized regular annual summits, but also expanded to include Greece (full membership

in 2023) and associated countries, i.e. those which, due to their non-membership of the European Union, cannot be members of the 3SI (Ukraine and Moldova since 2017, Albania and Montenegro since 2025). In addition, the Initiative's strategic partners are the United States (since 2016), Japan (since 2024), the European Commission and Germany (since 2018), and, from the 10th anniversary summit in Warsaw in 2025, also Turkey and Spain. The very set of strategic partners – key players in European and global politics – shows how attractive a political format the Three Seas Initiative is. It is the only format that represents the growing potential of the entire Central European region and is its subjective emanation. Until now, integration in Europe has mainly taken place through the accession of Central European countries to Western formats.

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The current 13 member states of the 3SI (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) represent a market of 121 million inhabitants or 26% of the EU, while also accounting for 30% of the EU's territory and 17% of its GDP (EUR 2.5 trillion), with the prospect of cumulative GDP growth of up to 35% by 2030. Although, from the point of view of global politics and economics, this is not the highest potential, it is nevertheless sufficient,

as we can see, to encourage even global or regional powers to cooperate. The importance and significance of the 3SI is also underlined by the aspirations of Eastern European and Western Balkan countries to join it, aspiring to full integration with the political and military structures of the West. They often treat joining the 3SI as an associate member as a preliminary stage of full integration, a kind of certification of their democratic system and the level of reform achieved. Incidentally, this also refutes criticism of the 3SI, mainly from Western European circles, that the initiative aims to break up the EU. In fact, the Three Seas Initiative is an example of regional cooperation that emphasizes the principle of subsidiarity, which is still in force in the EU. It is true, however, that it is a project aimed at increasing the autonomy of Central European countries (most of which belong to the so-called new EU) and the entire region, both within the EU (dominated so far by the largest countries of the so-called old EU) and in the broader context of international relations. In this sense, the aspirations of the 3SI area support the thesis that the current model of cooperation in Europe – in a linear arrangement between the West and the East – is becoming exhausted and is no longer effective, not to mention fair.

Three Seas Initiative is an example of regional cooperation that emphasizes the principle of subsidiarity.



By the end of the first decade of the 3SI, member states and associated countries had submitted

143 priority economic and business projects (the most from Croatia, Poland and Hungary), mainly concerning energy, infrastructure and digitization, for a total amount of nearly EUR 200 billion. Among them, the most important are the North-South transport and gas corridors connecting the Polish Baltic coast with the coasts of Croatia and Greece. The challenge for the coming decade will therefore be to complete the most important infrastructure and energy projects (Rail Baltica, Via Carpatia, gas interconnectors, LNG connections) and to ensure their protection.

In the footsteps of President Lech Kaczyński

The 3SI has demonstrated – and this is another of its successes – that in many contexts, Europe and the world need the Old Continent to develop along a North-South axis, from the Nordic countries to Greece and Turkey, with Central Europe, roughly corresponding to the 3SI, as the keystone of this belt in the heart of Eurasia. Interestingly, this was already mentioned in 2006, 20 years ago (and 10 years before the Initiative was established), by the then President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, who was the first politician after the fall of communism in the region to raise the issue of deeper cooperation and ‘gaining independence’ of Central European countries. Lech Kaczyński was also the first to raise the issue of energy security (including the diversification of energy sources and their supply) as one of the most important elements of national security, which is now widely recognized as the basis for strategic thinking about the security of individual countries and regions. This approach

also prevails in many member states of the 3SI. A symbolic acknowledgement of President Kaczyński is the naming of the Polish gas port in Świnoujście after him.

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The success of the 3SI over the past decade, although far from exhausting the potential for cooperation, is reflected in the accumulated resources and projects implemented. Let us recall that the Initiative is based on cooperation in the areas of energy, transport and digital communication. These are key to strategic economic cooperation and civilizational development in the region, but in the current geopolitical situation, after Russia’s brutal attack on Ukraine and the realities of hybrid warfare, all these issues can be reduced to an additional common denominator – security (energy, information, military). The fact that many, if not most, of the infrastructure projects carried out in the Three Seas area are dual-use only increases the possibilities of their implementation. At the end of his presidency, Andrzej Duda published extensive memoirs entitled “To ja” (“It’s Me”). He devoted one chapter to the 3SI, summarizing among others the security context: “The cooperation between the Three Seas countries proved its worth at the moment of Europe’s greatest trial since World War II – Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine”. President Duda mentioned road, rail and air investments made it possible to

cope with the logistics of war: “We have obtained clear evidence that each of these investments was of strategic importance from the point of view of security policy”. It is difficult to disagree with this opinion.

Different approaches

So, we already know the strengths and opportunities of this project. But what about the threats? One of them is the partial ideologization of cooperation within the 3SI, understood in such a way that politicians representing center-right or right-wing (conservative) views are more inclined to such cooperation. This is very well illustrated by the example of Poland. Cooperation between Central European countries was important, even crucial, for President Duda and successive Law and Justice (PiS) governments in Poland between 2015 and 2023. After the liberal-left coalition took power, the government in Warsaw changed its approach by 180 degrees. Among other things, the position of plenipotentiary for the 3SI (with the rank of deputy minister) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was abolished and the state-run Three Seas research center established several years ago was also closed down. Instead, Donald Tusk’s government, like most liberal and left-wing cabinets in Europe, is focusing on cooperation with Germany and France and supporting mainstream centralization processes in the EU. In the government’s Strategy for Polish Foreign Policy for 2026–2030, announced in 2026, the 3SI is mentioned only once, at the end of the list of political formats in Europe of interest to Warsaw (after the Weimar Triangle, the Nordic-Baltic Eight, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Bucharest Nine and the Visegrad Group).

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The Polish Sejm has a Parliamentary Group on the Three Seas Initiative. It comprises 33 MPs, including 32 from the current conservative opposition and just one from the governing coalition. The group is chaired by Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk, a former foreign minister in Mateusz Morawiecki’s last government. During the 3SI Parliamentary Summit in Zagreb, Szykowski vel Sęk called for the establishment of similar Three Seas groups in the parliaments of the other 3SI countries. The 3SI in Poland is promoted by the Lubelskie and Podkarpackie provinces (e.g. within the framework of the Three Seas Region Forum, the Three Seas Region Network and the Three Seas University Network), which, firstly, can gain the most from this cooperation and, secondly, are governed by conservative politicians. In May, Lublin will host the 6th Three Seas Local Government Congress, including the Economic Forum and the Security Forum. This is in line with the priorities of the Croatian Presidency of the 3SI. Similarly, most of the scientific initiatives and think tanks dealing with the Three Seas issue in Poland were inspired by conservative circles, e.g. Trimarium, Europa Karpat (Europe of the Carpathians), Instytut Międzymorza (Intermarium Institute). This stems from their skepticism towards the excessive centralization of European integration processes, while at the same time adhering to the classic values and institutions of Europe (family, nation, sovereign state) perceiving increased cooperation between Central European countries as an element of Polish security and *raison d’état*, and seeking allies for a political program built on these ideals.

A team of experts led by former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently published a policy report entitled “Economic NATO. Europe of Strategic Partnerships”, in which it proposes a shift away from EU centralization towards voluntary, deeper cooperation between groups of EU member states in selected areas. It sees the Intermarium/3SI as one such group, with defense and investment in energy transmission infrastructure as its areas of cooperation. It can therefore be assumed that if the right wing manages to regain power in Poland after the 2027 elections, the new Polish government will certainly intensify cooperation with its partners in CEE. The conservative ECR is also the only group in the European Parliament that is more interested in the 3SI. The ECR Working Group on the Three Seas Initiative includes among others MEPs from Poland (PiS) and Stephen Nikola Bartulica from Croatia (DOMiNO). Therefore, the goal should be to persuade political and social elites, including those with other ideological views, to cooperate within the Three Seas Initiative.

Of course, the above principle (as with everything in politics) concerning conservative politicians is not a rigid rule. Anyway, the example of Poland shows that the challenge lies in persuading the socio-political elites of CEE to get involved in 3SI, regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum. Another weakness of the 3SI is the political vagueness of its format. It is supposed to be a presidential format, with annual summits attended primarily by heads of state (less interested countries are represented by lower-level officials). However, in many countries in the region with a parliamentary-cabinet system, it is the governments that have the real tools to conduct policy. It is also the prime ministers who influence the Three Seas

Fund through their national banks. Presidents can create a generally good or bad atmosphere for cooperation, set directions for development and patronize them. In this context, the first Parliamentary Summit of the Three Seas Initiative in Zagreb in March 2026 is a positive step towards greater institutionalization of the Initiative.



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From this point of view, it would be also useful to create a cooperation body at the government level and to establish a permanent secretariat – an office or structure that would organize day-to-day cooperation and bring together all Three Seas stakeholders. The offices of such a secretariat could be established in Warsaw, Zagreb, Brussels and Washington. At the same time, it seems that there is currently neither the political climate nor the need in Europe to transform the 3SI into a formal international organization, although this should not be ruled out in the future. The idea of a permanent office for the 3SI was publicly announced in 2025, independently of each other, by the incumbent President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, and the former President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who was a special guest at the 10th anniversary summit in Warsaw. It is worth involving both of these globally recognized politicians in this process and making them ambassadors of the 3SI around the world. The former Polish president has already established a foundation “Central European 3Seas Institute – Andrzej Duda Foundation”.

The Polish leadership

If we look at the 3SI as a key element of the North-South axis, there should be no breach in this wall in any country. This is required by geopolitics and the simple practice and logistics of cooperation. However, there are countries that are absolutely crucial to the success of this format. First of all, there are United States, Croatia and Poland, as the initiators of the project. The two Three Seas summits in Warsaw in 2017 and 2025 were milestones for this initiative, which today would be difficult to imagine without the personal ten-year commitment of President Duda. In Poland, the 3SI is widely recognized as one of the three greatest successes of President Duda's presidency, alongside the expansion of NATO (including US) forces in Poland and numerous pro-social projects carried out in cooperation with the Solidarity trade union.

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It is also about Poland's by far the greatest potential in the region in every respect – in terms of population, territory, strategic location and economic strength. In 2025, Poland joined the G20 in terms of numbers – which is to be confirmed at this year's summit of G20. Its GDP, the sixth largest in Europe, is greater than the combined GDP of the next eight CEE countries. Moreover, Poland is probably the only Three Seas

country that combines and understands the different historical and geopolitical experiences and specificities of the nations of this part of Europe – the Baltic states, the countries under Soviet occupation in the 20th century, the nations of the Habsburg monarchy of Austria-Hungary, and the countries of southeastern Europe (perhaps least of all here, but after all, Polish political and cultural impact historically stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea). The first decisions and events involving President Karol Nawrocki show that he will focus on cooperation between Central European countries in various formats. After meeting with President Trump in September 2025, President Nawrocki announced that Poland would be an energy hub for energy cooperation between the US and the whole of Central Europe.

In his lecture at Charles University in Prague during his official visit to the Czech Republic in November 2025, President Nawrocki outlined the international program of his presidency, which could be an attractive political offer for all Central European countries. This vision assumes cooperation and autonomy for Central Europe, on the assumption that the EU is its 'natural environment', but on the basis of reliable, independent cooperation, not domination. Nawrocki outlined specific frameworks for cooperation (NATO, the EU, the US) with regard to 3SI as well. In January 2026, during his first meeting with the Diplomatic Corps accredited in Poland, President Nawrocki outlined his vision of Poland as one of the leaders in Europe, given Poland's potential, its successful development over the last 35 years and its very good relations with the US. Nawrocki emphasized his ambition to represent the other Central European countries. He said that the 3SI countries could be a factor for development and rationality in

the EU, but also become important economic partners for all countries outside Europe. He invited countries to cooperate with the 3SI, pointing out that this year's summit in Croatia could be a good opportunity for this.

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What's more significant, during the recent Economic Forum in Davos, President Nawrocki gave the opening lecture in the discussion panel entitled 'Three Seas Initiative: geostrategic business opportunities – a bridge to the future – from the Adriatic, the Baltic, the Black Sea to Asia'. He emphasized that "Three Seas region is the fastest-growing part of Europe" and "it is no longer the European Union's eastern periphery. It is now the new frontier of creativity, capability and prosperity". Nawrocki marked the strategic nature of 3SI and its transatlantic dimension. He underlined the role of cooperation between the Three Seas region and Asia, mentioning South Korea, the Persian Gulf and Japan. President Duda was also in Davos, who had already discussed 3SI cooperation with Asian countries in 2025 during the World Governments Summit in Dubai. It is therefore clear that President Nawrocki will continue cooperation in CEE in line with the policies of his predecessors, presidents Kaczyński and Duda.

What next?

It is difficult to expect fireworks in the next decade of the 3SI. Both the individual countries in the region and the USA, which can act as an external catalyst for cooperation in the region, will have to divide their attention and energies among many different geopolitical challenges. However, success is usually not determined by spectacular actions, but by daily and systematic work. And this is what should be expected from responsible political leaders in the Three Seas area. A painstaking search for the greatest common denominator among the 13 member states, building bonds of trust and cooperation despite the awareness of divergent interests (fortunately, most often at the tactical level rather than strategic differences) on various issues, inspiring and organizing contacts and cooperation not only in the political sphere, but also in the economic, cultural, academic, social and – often forgotten – trade union (employee) spheres. We still have a lot of catching up to do from the days when everyone in Central Europe focused on cooperation with Germany, resulting in a kind of star-shaped arrangement around Berlin – the 'arms' made up of individual countries had good relations with the German center, but there were no connections between the individual arms.

We must also be realistic about the fact that Central Europe has several formats for cooperation – for example, the V4 or B9 organizing NATO's eastern flank, and several smaller formats in the Mediterranean region. Regardless of the format in which it is implemented, close cooperation between countries and nations in Central Europe must continue for the sake of their development

and security, not only in terms of energy. The 3SI has a major role to play here.

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