



## THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE AS A NEW MODEL OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE: A POLISH PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract:

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a new Polish-Croatian initiative of regional cooperation in Central Europe, launched in 2016. The goal of TSI was from the beginning cooperation in the areas of: energy, logistics and transport as well as digital cooperation. The aim of the article was to present the conditions of cooperation under TSI, to evaluate the activities of the TSI investment fund, the CEEplus stock index and selected projects implemented under the TSI. Opportunities and challenges currently facing TSI are presented, including the new EU budget, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the region's economy and the influence of external actors. TSI became part of the tradition of Polish political activity in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. From 2018, the Initiative moved from the concept phase to the implementation phase. The concrete “success story” will determine the effectiveness of TSI cooperation

**Keywords:** Three Seas Initiative, Central Europe, Polish Foreign Policy, Geopolitics.

*Título en Castellano: La Iniciativa de los Tres Mares como nuevo modelo de cooperación regional en Europa Central: Una perspectiva polaca*

### Resumen:

*La Iniciativa de los Tres Mares (ITM) es una nueva iniciativa polaco-croata de cooperación regional en Europa Central, puesta en marcha en 2016. El objetivo de la ITM fue desde el principio la cooperación en las áreas de: energía, logística y transporte, así como la cooperación digital. Su objetivo era presentar las condiciones de cooperación en el marco de la ITM, evaluar las actividades del fondo de inversiones de la ITM, el índice bursátil CEEplus y determinados proyectos ejecutados en el marco de la ITM. Se presentan las oportunidades y los retos a los que se enfrenta actualmente la IAC, entre ellos el nuevo presupuesto de la UE, la pandemia de COVID-19 y sus repercusiones en la economía de la región y la influencia de los agentes externos. La ITM pasó a formar parte de la tradición de la actividad política polaca en la región de Europa Central y Oriental. A partir de 2018, la Iniciativa pasó de la fase de concepto a la de ejecución. La "historia de su éxito" determinará la eficacia de la cooperación en la ITM.*

**Palabras Clave:** *Iniciativa de los Tres Mares, Europa Central, política exterior de Polonia, geopolítica.*

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-101>



## 1. Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a flexible political platform at presidential level launched in 2016 in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The TSI was introduced to Poland's foreign policy in May 2015 once Andrzej Duda won the presidential election. Since then, a slow increase in the importance of regional cooperation in Poland's foreign policy has been observed.<sup>2</sup> The leading role in the creation and promotion of the TSI is played by two political figures: The president of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, along with his political and expert support, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Three Seas Initiative envisages activating Polish policy towards the countries of the region, whose borders are defined by the coasts of the three seas: Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas, in order to consolidate them economically. This concept is not intended to create a formal organizational framework in competition with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Despite being sometimes combined with the idea of Intermarium, the TSI differs fundamentally from the concept forged by Polish diplomacy in the interwar period and in the political thought of the anti-communist opposition. The organization's goal is to cooperate on the following levels: energy, logistics and transport, and information and telecommunications in Central Europe. The TSI is still a project *in statu nascendi*. In 2019, on Poland's initiative, Polish Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and the Romanian EximBank signed the founding act of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund in Luxembourg. The fund is to focus on projects for the improvement and development of transport, energy and digital infrastructure in the TSI region.

The aim of this article is to present the conditions for cooperation under the TSI, evaluate the activities of the TSI Investment Fund, CEEplus stock index and selected projects implemented under the TSI. The opportunities and challenges TSI will face in the near future will be presented, including the new EU budget, the attitude of EU institutions to TSI, the different approaches of individual countries to the Initiative, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the region's economy and the influence of external actors.

## 2. The genesis of regional cooperation in Central Europe

The regional policy implemented since 2015 by the Polish authorities is rooted in the long tradition of Polish political activity in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Its origins date back to the period of the first Polish-Lithuanian Union, and then the functioning of the Jagiellonian bloc at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, including the Kingdom of Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Czech Kingdom. It also includes political initiatives undertaken during the several dozen years of the splendor of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which include: The Polish-Swedish personal union,

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<sup>2</sup> On the subject of the TSI in Polish literature, see: *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, vol. 17, n° 3 (2019) (several papers in the issue); Kowal, Paweł; Orzelska-Stączek, Agnieszka (2019): *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie, East of the West Wschód Zachodu*, n° 3, Warszawa, PAN; Zbaraszewska, Anna; Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, Bartosz (eds.) (2019): *Inicjatywa Trójmorza w wymiarze historycznym, geopolitycznym i gospodarczym*, Poznań, WSPiA; Gizicki, Wojciech; Łoś, Piotr: "Geopolityka Trójmorza", *Przestrzeń Społeczna*, vol. 1, n° 17 (2019), pp. 123-137; Ukielski, Paweł: "Inicjatywa Trójmorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej", *Studia Europejskie*, No. 2 (2018), pp. 45-58; Stępniewski, Tomasz: "Inicjatywa Trójmorza: uwarunkowania geopolityczne i nowy model regionalnej współpracy", *Studia Europejskie*, n° 2 (2018), pp. 33-43; Gniazdowski, Mateusz: "Trójmorze – nowy instrument w polskiej polityce zagranicznej", *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, No. 4 (2017), pp. 79-82; *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, n° 2 (2017) (several papers in the Three Seas Initiative section); Tomaszewska, Natalia; Starzyk Adam: "Conception of Intermarium in Polish Foreign Policy in XXI Century", *Torun International Studies*, n° 1 (2017), pp. 15-28; Sienkiewicz, Marcin: "Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski w 2015 r.", *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, vol. 1, n° 4 (2016), pp. 139-151; Ukielski, Paweł: "Mapa Trójmorza. Przegląd punktów wspólnych i rozbieżności w polityce 12 państw regionu", *Raport Centrum Analiz Klubu Jagiellońskiego*, n° 3 (2016).



expansion towards the Danube and the Black Sea (short-term subordination of Moldova and Wallachia) or war plans forced by King Władysław IV with the Ottoman Empire, and the liberation of the Balkans from Turkish authorities. The idea of Poland as a strong state, organizing the areas of former Jagiellonian monarchies, returned in the 20th century. Its most prominent representatives were, among others, Adolf Bocheński, who laid out his concept in the book entitled “Between Germany and Russia” published in 1937, and Józef Piłsudski, who made an unsuccessful political and military attempt to implement the federation concept, involving states and nations located between Poland and Russia. In the interwar period, many other integration projects were also proposed: the proposal of the Central European federation of the Slovak politician Milan Hodža, the Europe Intermarium of the Czechoslovak president Tomáš Masaryk, the French proposal of the Danube federation, the Balkan Entente, the Baltic Entente, the Little Entente, the Austrian concept of Inter-Europe or the Hungarian concept of federation of Emil Hantos.

In the years 1939-1943, Polish and Czechoslovakian governments in exile made an unsuccessful attempt to establish a Polish-Czechoslovak federation and during the period of communist in Poland, this concept was revived in the activities of some opposition organizations. The postulate of future cooperation of Central and Eastern European countries was considered in, among others, the Ideological Declaration of the Young Poland Movement of 1979 and was also present in the views expressed by the Confederation of Independent Poland established in the same year.<sup>3</sup>

The TSI is not the first project that has aimed to integrate the states of Central Europe after 1989. As the Soviet Union’s grip over its European satellites lessened and the structures of global bipolarity diminished, the idea emerged to create an organization that would bond Central European states with the structures of Western Europe. Initially named the Fourlateral Initiative (reflecting the participation of Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia), it was first launched in November 1989. However, due to the rapid geopolitical changes brought about by the collapse of communism and dissolution of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, this body was soon enlarged. Renamed the Central European Initiative (CEI) in 1992, by 1996 it encompassed 16 members, the majority of them post-communist states. As of 2020, 18 states, 10 of which are also EU members, belong to this regional organization (Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Croatia, Czechia, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Italy). It should be emphasised that the geographic remit of the CEI, which covers most of East-Central and Southeast Europe, differs from that of the TSI, which focuses solely on the EU member states of Central Europe.

The Visegrad Group (V4), a quasi-institutionalized mechanism of regional cooperation, constitutes another initiative that impacts geopolitical relations in Central Europe. This organisation – initially called the Visegrad Triangle before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia – was established in accordance with the Visegrad Declaration signed in February 1991 by the president of Poland (Lech Wałęsa), the president of Czechoslovakia (Václav Havel), and the Prime Minister of Hungary (József Antall). The first V4 summits agreed that the member states would consult and coordinate each other's activities and that they would support each other internationally. The main assumptions were joint integration with Europe and the Atlantic zone in order not to generate new divisions after the fall of the Eastern Bloc. This resulted in some other assumptions declared at the meeting, e.g. respect for human rights, building parliamentary

<sup>3</sup> Sienkiewicz, Marcin: "Koncepcja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski w 2015 r.", *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, vol. 1, n° 4 (2016), pp. 140-141; Indraszczyk, Arkadiusz: "Historyczne inicjatywy integracji Europy Środkowej pomiędzy trzema morzami: Bałtyckim, Adriatyckim i Czarnym", in Zbaraszewska, Anna; Dziewiałowski-Gintowt, Bartosz (eds.) (2019): *Inicjatywa Trójmorza w wymiarze historycznym, geopolitycznym i gospodarczym*, Poznań, WSPiA, pp. 18-35.



democracy, eliminating economic and administrative remains of the previous system. Cooperation within the Group, and especially regional integration, suffered from different priorities of individual states, seeking above all integration with the Union (especially pronounced in the case of the Czechia). A symbolic reactivation of the V4 took place at the meeting in 1999. The mechanism of future meetings of prime ministers was then established. A year later, the International Visegrad Fund was established in Bratislava. Since then, within the Group, the number of meetings of politicians from the highest levels of power of these states has increased significantly, and not only the common foreign policy outside, but also mutual relations between these countries were discussed, as they represented a very similar level of social-economic development.<sup>4</sup>

Nowadays, the idea of Intermarium returned during the first government co-created by Law and Justice in 2005–2007 and during the presidency of Lech Kaczyński, which ended with his tragic death on April 10, 2010. At that time, Poland's foreign policy focused on building international relations on the North-South line, supporting Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations, and increased activity in the post-Soviet area. At the same time, these actions were accompanied by the desire to strengthen relations with the US, ruled by the administration of president Georg W. Bush. The US were to support the implementation of Polish plans for Central Europe, which to a large extent were to include the development of energy cooperation in the form of infrastructure projects enabling the diversification of hydrocarbon supplies to Poland. This policy was weakened after the Law and Justice lost elections and the dismissal of Jarosław Kaczyński's government, and then quenched after the death of president L. Kaczyński.<sup>5</sup>

The presidents of Poland and Croatia, Andrzej Duda and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, are considered the authors of the renewed Intermarium initiative. They both took their offices as heads of state in 2015, winning the elections as candidates for center-right groups. They held preliminary talks on regional cooperation on the occasion of the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2015. Formally, the TSI was inaugurated at the First Summit of the Three Seas Initiative on August 25-26, 2016, during the forum entitled Strengthening Europe: Connecting North and South, in Dubrovnik, Croatia. On August 25, a Joint Declaration on the Three Seas Initiative of 2016, colloquially called the Dubrovnik Declaration, was adopted there. The meeting was attended by the representatives of 12 states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) (map 1). The diplomatic rank of the Dubrovnik Summit was raised by the presence of the representatives of the United States, China and Turkey. In the Dubrovnik Declaration, the TSI was defined as an "informal cooperation platform". No formal structures were mentioned. The founding document highlights two main objectives of the TSI: striving to develop economic cooperation and strengthening the EU as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Soroka, George; Stepiński, Tomasz: "The Three Seas Initiative: Geopolitical Determinants and Polish Interests", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, vol. 17, n° 3 (2019), pp. 16-18.

<sup>5</sup> Sienkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>6</sup> Kowal, Paweł; Orzelska-Stączek, Agnieszka (2019): *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*, East of the West Wschód Zachodu, n° 3, Warszawa, PAN, pp. 56-57.

**Map 1: The Three Seas Initiative**

Source: *The Three Seas Initiative*, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11547.pdf>

### **3. Conditions of cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative**

The development of cooperation and consolidation of TSI states is primarily justified by the need to meet the challenges and threats arising from the international environment of Poland. These problems are mainly seen in the unfavorable evolution of EU decision-making processes and Russia's aggressive policy. According to the representatives of Polish authorities, the EU has found itself in a very serious crisis, which undermines its international credibility and internal coherence. According to the Polish authorities, the crisis of the Union manifests itself in departing from the basic ideas that underpin the integration process, i.e. from the principle of maintaining equality and sovereignty of states. This is demonstrated by the practice of the decision-making process within the European institutions in which some member states participate. It is a way to solve the problem of influx of refugees/migrants from Asia and Africa to the EU. The mandatory quota system forced by Germany was unacceptable for the Polish government. In this regard, it got the support from other states of the Visegrad Group. In the opinion of the representatives of the Polish authorities in the EU, trends unfavorable to Poland's



interests are present. They consist in a tendency to bypass the opinions and positions of member states from Central Europe by EU institutions or the economically strongest states of Western Europe (Germany, France). There is therefore a serious risk of Poland's political marginalization and neutralization of its participation in the EU decision-making process. The concept of the "two-speed union" is clearly rejected by the political leadership of the government camp in Poland. The anxiety of Poland and its partners in Central Europe was also caused by the decision of Great Britain (UK) to leave the EU. The possibility of upsetting the internal balance in the EU and the appearance of adverse changes in the way it operates is an important question of concern. In the opinion of the ruling party's politicians, the absence of the UK will contribute to an increase in Germany's political position within the EU and to deepen the disproportion between the German economy and the economies of other states.<sup>7</sup>

The neo-imperial policy of the Russian Federation was another important factor for Poland and other Central European states to cooperate under the TSI. The country's geographical proximity, combined with its military potential and its increasingly aggressive policy towards its neighbors, created geopolitical pressures on Central European states, caused anxiety, and created a number of real challenges and threats. These concerns also manifest themselves through the intensification of Russian military activity near Polish borders. This is due, *inter alia*, to a large-scale cyclical Russian-Belarusian military maneuvers "Zapad" or repetitive incidents involving Russian warplanes over the Baltic Sea. The pressure also has a psychological dimension. It is sought to break the political unity of Western countries in this way and to eliminate assertive attitudes towards Russia.<sup>8</sup> The beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in 2014 is considered the beginning of a new Cold War, in which the main axis of competition is determined by the relations between Washington and Moscow. Russia has clearly returned to expansionist politics, destroying its current security architecture. This was another challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community, which was struggling with its own problems, such as the crisis in the EU and tensions within NATO. Strengthening Russian-German cooperation in the energy sector was another issue contributing to new collaboration format, as evidenced by the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline, despite protests from Poland and several other states in the region.<sup>9</sup>

In such a turbulent international environment in Central Europe, there was a revival in the sphere of regional cooperation. In January 2015, Austria, Czechia and Slovakia adopted the Slavkov Declaration, giving rise to the Slavkov Triangle, and in November 2015, on the initiative of the presidents of Poland and Romania, the so-called Bucharest Nine was established, serving to strengthen cooperation within NATO between the nine countries of the Alliance's eastern flank: Poland, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary and Bulgaria. In turn, V4 increased its activity on the international stage in 2015, in the face of the migration crisis. The idea of creating the TSI emerged during this period.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. Declared goals and examples of activities of the Three Seas Initiative**

The most important documents presenting the objectives of the Three Seas Initiative are Dubrovnik, Warsaw, Bucharest and Ljubljana declarations. The goals were also presented on the group's official website (<http://three-seas.eu/>). It should be emphasized that the TSI is not a classic international organization, which means that there is no legally binding document, e.g. a statute, which would clearly define its objectives. There is also no secretary general or other officials who could represent this group and speak on its behalf. The lack of institutionalization

<sup>7</sup> Sienkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-145.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



makes more difficult the analysis of its goals, decision-making mechanisms and functioning. Currently, two extreme positions are emerging regarding the declared objectives of the TSI. One of them assigns to this initiative only economic goals, limited to the implementation of infrastructure, energy projects, while the other emphasizes political goals and the desire to change the balance of power in Europe (including empowerment of the Central European region).

Based on the official TSI documents, it should be stated that this is an intra-EU grouping whose declared main objective, as it was mentioned, is to strengthen infrastructure, energy and economic cooperation between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Sea states, which serves to strengthen EU cohesion. These were the limits to the consensus of the twelve countries establishing cooperation in 2016.

After the Bucharest Summit in 2018, the TSI went from the conceptual phase and the development of goals, to the practical phase i.e. the implementation of projects. Parallel to the meeting of state leaders, the first edition of the TSI Business Forum was organized, with the participation of over 600 participants. On this occasion, a letter of intent was signed regarding the establishment of the Three Seas Fund. A joint statement was adopted on the establishment of the network of chambers of industry and commerce of the Three Seas countries (Joint Statement for the creation of the TSI Network of Chambers of Commerce), and the Business Council of the Three Seas was established. The official website of the TSI was launched ([www.three-seas.eu](http://www.three-seas.eu)), which, as stated in the Bucharest Declaration, is to be managed by the country organizing the TSI summit in a given year. The site is meant to serve to build the image of this forum, functioning, as mentioned, without a permanent institutional background.

The creation of the TSI Investment Fund was a success of the last summit in Ljubljana. His appointment was announced by the presidents of the Polish Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK) and the Romanian EximBank. However, this fund is open to all TSI member states. The fund will operate on a commercial basis. The funds collected within are to come from various sources. The founders set themselves the goal of raising approximately € 5 billion. The fund is to be a tool for financing joint initiatives of member states in the Central Europe region.<sup>11</sup>

In mid-April 2020, Estonia decided to join the TSI Fund. According to Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Urmas Reinsal, the Fund may provide a strong incentive to overcome strategic shortcomings in infrastructure investments, especially in areas such as energy security, digital networks and transport connections. In turn, according to Estonia's Finance Minister Martin Helme, joining the fund will provide Estonian companies with additional opportunities to raise capital in the Central European region. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, this country will contribute to the TSI Fund with € 20 million.<sup>12</sup>

A catalog of investment priorities entitled The Three Seas Initiative – Priority Interconnection Projects was adopted in Bucharest. The document, which has about 150 pages, among the projects submitted by Poland includes: Poland-Lithuania gas connection, The 3 Seas Digital Highway, Via Carpatia, Via Baltica, the Danube-Odra-Elba river corridor. A mechanism to control the implementation of projects was introduced in Ljubljana. In the field of infrastructure, Via Carpatia will be the main communication axis of twelve states (see Map 2). This route runs along the eastern border of the EU, crossing the routes connecting Western

<sup>11</sup> For more see: Domachowska, Agata: "Szczyt państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza: dalsze wzmacnianie współpracy", Komentarze IEŚ, No. 36 (2019), at <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/szczyt-panstw-inicjatywy-trojmorza-dalsze-wzmacnianie-wspolpracy-36-36-2019>.

<sup>12</sup> Estonia jako trzeci kraj dołącza do Funduszu Trójmorza, at <https://forsal.pl/swiat/aktualnosci/artykuly/1472285,estonia-jako-trzeci-kraj-dolacza-do-funduszu-trojmorza.html>.



Europe with Russia. Via Carpatia is meant to improve road journeys from the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda to the Greek Thessaloniki, connecting Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece.

The idea of Via Carpatia was created in 2006 in Łańcut, Poland, at a meeting of the transport ministers of Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, who, under the patronage of the president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, adopted the Łańcut Declaration. In 2010, at the next meeting in Łańcut, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece joined the initiative. In Poland, Via Carpatia coincides with the S19 expressway. After the TSI summit in Warsaw in 2017, the Ministry of Infrastructure presented the exact planned route of the S19 expressway from the northern border of the state through Białystok, Lublin and Rzeszów to the Polish-Slovak border in Barwinek. Generally, this project is to be implemented by individual countries on their own.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Via Baltica, the transport route is to connect the north-eastern regions of Poland with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Polish section of the S61 express road, 91 km long, will start in Ostrów Mazowiecka, and then run through Łomża, Ełk and Suwałki bypass to the Polish border with Lithuania. The estimated value of the investment to be completed in 2021 is to amount to 3,5 billion PLN.<sup>14</sup> In terms of energy security, the North-South gas corridor is to connect the LNG terminal in the Polish port of Świnoujście, which was opened in 2015, and the Baltic Pipe with the Adria LNG terminal on the Croatian island of Krk.

The construction of Poland-Slovakia, Poland-Lithuania and Poland-Ukraine gas interconnectors and a floating LNG terminal in Gdańsk are also advanced. The main goal of the Baltic Pipe is to integrate the transmission systems of Poland, Denmark and Norway, enabling the transport of Norwegian gas to Poland, then the Baltic States and the entire TSI. The construction of the gas pipeline is expected to be completed in October 2022. The terminal in the port of Gdansk is to be opened around 2025. The most advanced is the construction of the Poland-Slovakia and Poland-Lithuania interconnectors. Their launch is planned for the last quarter of 2021. The biggest problem appears to be the construction of the joint interconnector with Ukraine (see Map 3). In October 2013, the European Commission (EC) granted to this investment the status of a Project of Common Interest, which was extended in subsequent years.

The projects implemented under the TSI also include the creation of the Three Seas Regional Observatory to collect statistical data on the region. On July 3, 2018, the First Three Seas Regions Forum took place in Jasionka near Rzeszów under the patronage of the president of Poland. On this occasion, an agreement was signed on the creation of the Three Seas Regional Observatory by the University of Rzeszów, the Central Statistical Office and the self-government of the Podkarpackie province, which may be joined by similar institutions from other TSI states.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ukielski, Paweł: "Inicjatywa Trójmorza w polskiej polityce zagranicznej", *Studia Europejskie*, n° 2 (2018), pp. 45–58.

<sup>14</sup> Sienkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

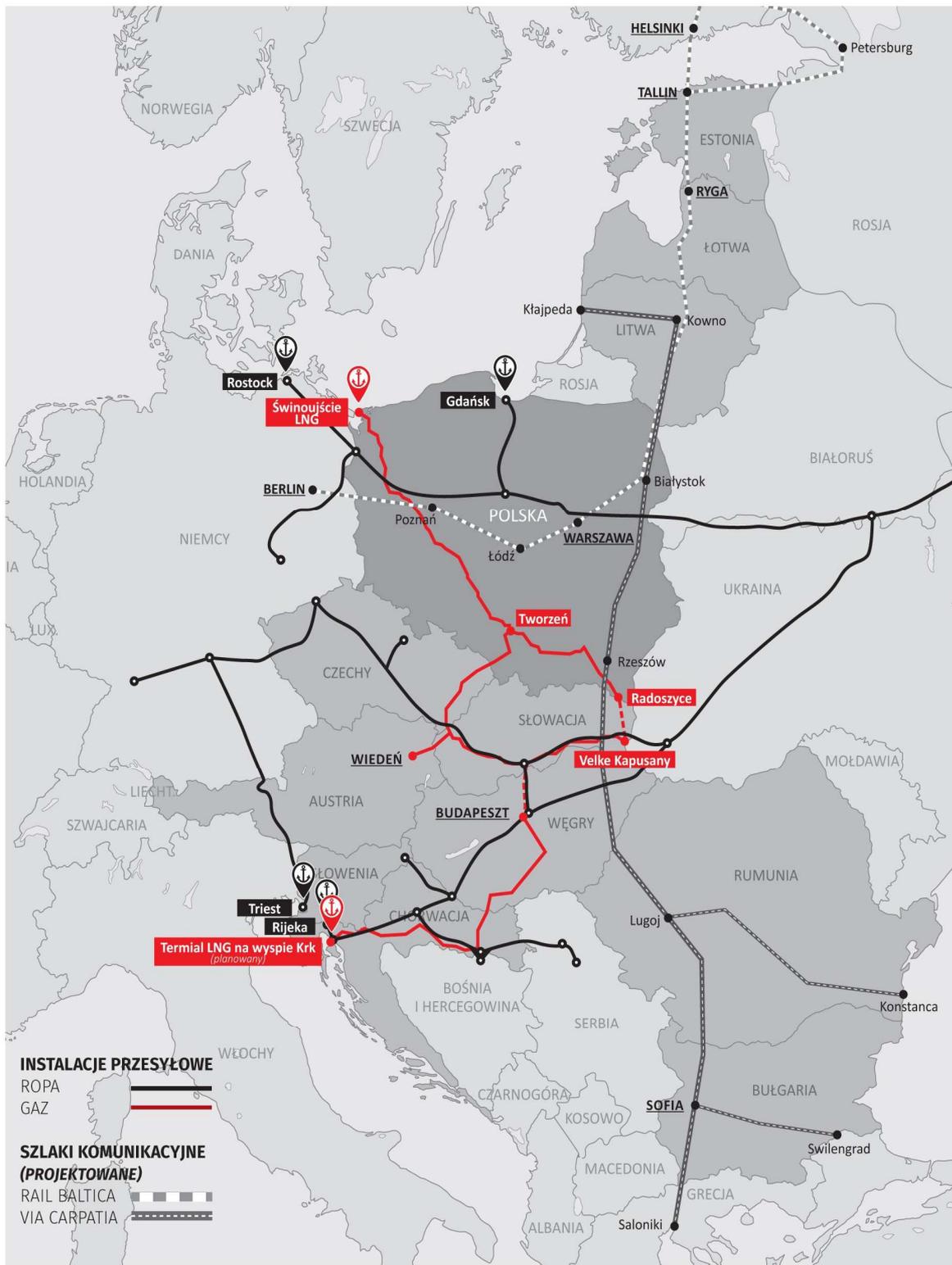
<sup>15</sup> Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek, pp. 87-89; Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, Bartosz: "Bezpieczeństwo energetyczne, transportowe i cyfrowe Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w świetle wybranych projektów priorytetowych Inicjatywy Trójmorza", in Zbarszewska, Anna; Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, Bartosz (eds.) (2019): *Inicjatywa Trójmorza w wymiarze historycznym, geopolitycznym i gospodarczym*, Poznań, WSPiA, pp. 200-201.

Map 2: The Via Carpatia Route



Source: *Jest pozwolenie na budowę fragmentu Via Carpatii. Wartość kontraktu to 148,5 mln zł*, at <https://forsal.pl>

### Map 3: Gas and oil pipelines in the TSI region



Source: Litwa popiera budowę trasy Via Carpatia w Polsce, at <https://biznesalert.pl/>

The TSI projects for rail and water transport are also noteworthy. An interesting civil-military initiative is the Rail-2-Sea project submitted by Romania. The planned dual-use railway line connecting the ports of Gdansk and Constanta will pass through 4 TSI states: Poland, Slovakia,



Hungary and Romania. In the first quarter of 2019, feasibility studies on the modernization of railway lines with a total length of 2,342 km were being developed on the Arad-Timișoara-Caransebes and Caransebes-Craiova railway sections. The Hungarian border-Curtici-Arad and Bucharest-Constanta border railway sections are modernized to a speed of 160 km per hour. The Rail-2-Sea rail route has great commercial potential because it connects the most important industrial centers of Romania (Timișoara, Bucharest) with the port in Constanta and can provide operational support for a modern digital network (e.g. 5G technology). The transport corridor coincides with the TEN-T core network as well as the TEN-T Rhine-Danube corridor (southern branch).

Also important is the Baltic-Adriatic corridor project initiated by Poland. Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and a non-TSI member, Italy, that also participates in this project. Thanks to the implementation of the Baltic-Adriatic axis, new freight and passenger traffic flows between the Baltic and Adriatic ports and their hinterland are to be developed. The investments carried out in 2016-2030 will cost a total of € 64.9 billion and lead to an increase in the GDP of the participating states by € 489 billion. The investments will stimulate additional employment for approximately 1.4 million employees. At the end of 2019, out of 161 projects related to the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor, 147 are under development or implementation, and 14 are already completed. 6 completed projects concern the implementation of the GSM digital communications system in rail transport, 3 completed projects are related to the infrastructure and services of motorways of the sea. The same number of projects were implemented in the field of telematic applications. Some projects were implemented for low-carbon and decarbonisation.

Another project, the Danube-Odra-Elbe water corridor, is a joint initiative of Poland, Czechia and Slovakia (Map 4). The main goal of the project is to build the missing fragments of the Danube-Odra-Elbe water corridor (D-O-E) as part of the European network of inland waterways (including TEN-T). It is an integral part of the Odra Waterway (E-30). The project implementation schedule so far covers the Polish part of the D-O-E water corridor. In addition, a Czech feasibility study of the project was developed in 2018. At the end of 2019, an analysis of the inland waterway transport sector was performed to the extent resulting from the modernization of the Odra and Vistula waterways. A preliminary concept for the construction of the Kędzierzyn-Koźle-state border waterway is currently being developed. At the beginning of 2021, it is planned to develop of the Odra Waterway Development Program (E30), along with the missing Polish part of the connection between the Danube and Odra and the Elbe. After 2021, however, further studies and plans will be made to enable the launch of about 500 km of the channel by 2030. It is assumed that the water corridor would bring positive benefits not only in Central Europe, but also in other EU areas. Connecting waterways that are currently isolated would be a far-reaching stimulus for the further development of transport, in this case ecological, in the Black, Baltic and Adriatic Sea basins.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dziewiałowski-Gintowt, Bartosz, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-213.

**Map 4: The Danube-Odra-Elbe water corridor**

Source: *Kanał Odra – Dunaj – Łaba. Inwestycja warta jest 8 mld euro*, at <https://inzynieria.com>

TSI digital projects are important for cybersecurity in Central Europe. The 3SI Digital Highway is a new project submitted by Poland and open to all TSI states and the Scandinavian region. The main goal of the project is the implementation of joint ventures on cross-border digital infrastructure resistant to cyber attacks, which enable better and safer data transfer from north to south of the region, filling gaps in the communication infrastructure, including fiber optics and 5G technology. In 2019, the project was in the design and development phase. In 2020, the transition to the implementation phase is planned, i.e. the creation of a final highway map proposal, signing of a consortium to implement the digital highway, preparation and submission of relevant applications for EU and national funds, construction of the digital highway (provided that sufficient funds are made available). Another initiative, Central European Drone Demonstrator (CEDD), is a transport and digital project created on the initiative of Poland. All TSI states have been invited to participate, while Moldova and Ukraine are the partner states. The main goal of CEDD is to create rules for the operation of the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) market and to implement aviation and ICT infrastructure to ensure the safety and efficiency of so-called small heights (U-space). 2019 is the implementation stage of the project. From January 2020 to the end of 2021, development and evaluation of the project's



implementation was planned. The CEDD initiative is in line with EU policy. At this stage, the EC strengthens member states in creating test environments for drones in specific geographical areas, which are called 'drone demonstrators'. The project can significantly affect the future of the TSI region. U-space creates a completely new area of the economy in which competition is currently very low. It is also a space of alternative transport requiring new infrastructure and new rules that will contribute to the integration of the region.<sup>17</sup>

Another example of strengthening economic cooperation under the TSI is the creation of a common stock index. The CEEplus index, called the Three Seas Index, was launched on September 4, 2019 during the Economic Forum in Krynica (described by journalists as "Polish Davos"). The letter of intent in this matter was signed by the presidents of the Visegrad Group exchanges (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary) as well as Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. It was decided that the largest of the region's exchanges, the Warsaw Stock Exchange, would be responsible for the calculation and publication of the CEEplus index. To prevent Polish companies from dominating the index, a limit has been set. The weight of companies from one country may not exceed 50%. In addition, the weight of the largest company was limited to 10%, and the sum of companies weighing more than 5% - to 40%. The main criterion for qualifying companies to the index was liquidity of shares (average turnover per session over six months above € 90,000).

Currently, the index includes 114 of the most liquid companies listed on the stock markets in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Zagreb and Bucharest. Bratislava and Ljubljana stock exchanges also see the prospect of joining. In this way, the Three Seas Initiative has gained a tool that can help to achieve recognition and attractiveness in the eyes of investors. It should be remembered that stock indices are indicators that illustrate trends in given markets. Therefore, CEEplus will provide reliable knowledge about the potential of the TSI states. Until now, "fragmentation", i.e. a large number of relatively small states in the region, did not favour attracting capital. But the capital is needed, especially for investments in more innovative, yet more risky ventures. Thanks to CEEplus, the voice of stock exchanges from Central and Eastern Europe will also be better heard in the debate on capital markets in the EU. The TSI has been involved in promoting the stock exchange, among others the largest insurance company in Poland – PZU, which launched the first financial product based on the Three Seas Index on January 22 – a passive fund managed by TFI PZU. PZU also actively participated in promoting the potential of the region's companies during the World Economic Forum, i.e. an event attracting the best business and political leaders in the world. Around 3,000 people took part in this year's jubilee 50th edition, coming from 117 states, including 53 heads of state and government.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the discussed TSI priority projects, it can be stated that their implementation will contribute to increasing integration, consolidation and cohesion of Central European states, and thus to increasing their security level. The implementation of energy projects will provide new sources of gas supply for the TSI region, which will make member states independent of Russian Gazprom as the dominant supplier. Transport projects implemented as part of the TSI priorities will affect the region's cohesion in various ways. They will undoubtedly contribute to eliminating differences in infrastructure development in the EU. They will contribute to the development of regional trade and the GDP growth of regions located along transport routes. Dual-use projects will increase security through increased mobility of the armed forces of

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 213-218.

<sup>18</sup> For more see: Gołębiowska, Marlena: *Indeks giełdowy państw Inicjatywy Trójmorza walczy o dużą stawkę*, Komentarze IEŚ, n° 116 (2020), at <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/index-gieldowy-panstw-inicjatywy-trojmorza-walczy-o-duza-stawke-116-19-2020>.



NATO's eastern flank states. Water routes will increase the use of low-carbon transport, which will improve air quality, and will also increase road safety. Digital projects, on the other hand, will enable the emergence of modern, robust and secure technological infrastructure, resistant to cyber attacks. Undoubtedly, selected energy, transport and digital TSI projects are the answer to allegations that the security component is not implemented in the TSI.<sup>19</sup>

### **5. The opportunities and challenges faced by the Three Seas Initiative**

States that have decided to be included in the TSI have a geographical, historical and political identity. However, there are many challenges and obstacles that may hinder the entire cooperation process. The region's problems include real and potential ethnic conflicts between individual states of the region (e.g. Hungarian-Romanian in Transylvania and Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian in former Yugoslavia), border conflicts (Polish-Czech for Cieszyn Silesia and Romanian-Bulgarian for southern Dobruja), as well as language conflicts (Slovak-Hungarian dispute in southern Slovakia).<sup>20</sup> Other issues that may affect the future of the TSI include political issues (political diversity of the member states of the TSI, concerns about the dominance of large states, e.g. Poland, over small states), quite large disproportion of potentials (in terms of demographics and economics, TSI is dominated by Poland and Romania, other states belong to small states), lack of member states in the mainstream of European integration and, at the same time, among wealthy states, such as Germany or France – most of the TSI states are from the post-communist area (except Austria). The TSI is a presidential project in which the main role is played by the heads of states, while the implementation of expensive projects is the responsibility of the prime ministers of governments. This dichotomy may have an impact on the effectiveness of implementing the initiative, especially in a situation of cohabitation in a given state, such as currently in Croatia. There is also a question about the institutionalization of the project, establishing of permanent institutions, or the statute.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind the major economic barriers to the development of the TSI. The Russian Gazprom's long-term energy contracts will expire in the entire region by 2022. If TSI member states are to meet their strategic goals in the field of energy security, they must quickly develop gas storage technology, improve energy efficiency and secure alternative sources of supply. Financing of projects implemented under the TSI is a significant obstacle. Since November 2019, only Poland, Romania and Estonia were involved in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. There was no bigger interest from the investors. As a result, the new fund is undercapitalized. The planned reduction of the EU budget for 2021-2027 is also a serious obstacle. Lower cohesion policy funds will undoubtedly limit the possibilities of implementing many TSI infrastructure projects. Currently, there is a political consensus in the US on supporting the TSI. However, in November 2020, presidential elections will be held there. In the coming months, American politicians will focus on the election campaign and home affairs. The issue of the US involvement in Central Europe may be set aside.<sup>22</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic that has been going on since the beginning of 2020 poses both opportunities and challenges for TSI states. The virus has been confirmed in almost all Central European states. The introduced restrictions significantly reduce the demand, in tourism, entertainment, gastronomy and trade, to name a few, and at the same time constitute an

<sup>19</sup> Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, Bartosz, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>20</sup> Gizicki, Wojciech; Łoś, Piotr: "Geopolityka Trójmorza", *Przestrzeń Społeczna*, vol. 1, n° 17 (2019), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Stępniewski, Tomasz: "Inicjatywa Trójmorza: uwarunkowania geopolityczne i nowy model regionalnej współpracy", *Studia Europejskie*, n° 2 (2018), p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> See more: Lewkowicz, Łukasz: *Deklaracja wsparcia finansowego USA dla Inicjatywy Trójmorza*, Komentarze IEŚ, n° 125 (2020), at <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/deklaracja-wsparcia-finansowego-usa-dla-inicjatywy-trojmorza-125-28-2020>.



actual slowdown and in some industries, it results in complete blocking of manufacturing processes. Emerging European economies may also feel the effects of the pandemic due to reduced foreign trade turnover. Exports play a dominant role in the economic growth of most Central European states. The high importance of foreign demand in terms of the GDP growth of these economies becomes today a high risk related to the possible costs of its disruption and disruptions in the supply chains. This applies to, among others, V4 states, for which countries from the Eurozone remain key trading partners, including primarily Germany, but there is also China, considered especially as a supplier of goods to these markets.<sup>23</sup> The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also become a global stress test. Restrictions related to social distancing have forced the world to adapt accelerated actions, for instance, in the field of communications, digital skills, computerization of enterprises and digital public services. Paradoxically, this could be a turning point in the digital transformation of Central European states in the coming years.<sup>24</sup>

The involvement of external actors is a major challenge for the success of the TSI. From the beginning, the TSI has been supported by the US. Its goals are perceived as being in line with American interests, especially in the field of energy. This state sees the opportunity to find new outlets for its own gas, which at the same time comes in line with the process of diversifying energy supplies in Central Europe. States of the region, including Poland, are perceived as potential buyers of US liquefied gas as an alternative to Russian gas. Thanks to the participation of the US president Donald Trump in the TSI summit in Warsaw in July 2017, the Initiative became the center of interest of the global media. At the summit in Bucharest in 2018, the US side was represented by the secretary of Energy, Rick Perry. In a letter to the participants of this summit, president Trump maintained strong support for the TSI and for common goals, which he described as developing infrastructure and business ties, strengthening energy security and reducing barriers to free trade. Unlike the declarations adopted in Dubrovnik and Warsaw, the importance of transatlantic relations was strongly emphasized in Bucharest. It was emphasized that the US economic presence in the Three Seas region could become an additional catalyst for a strengthened transatlantic partnership. The US Secretary of Energy also appeared at the last TSI summit in Ljubljana. In November 2019, a resolution was adopted in support of the TSI, whose authors were Republican Congressman of Illinois Adam Kinzinger and Polish-origin democrat Marcy Kaptur from Ohio. Non-economic issues were also often present in the statements of the US representatives. During the opening speech of the forum in Dubrovnik in 2016, General James L. Jones stated that the Initiative would increase the security of Northern, Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>25</sup>

On February 15, 2020, at the 56th Munich Security Conference, the secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that the US intends to transfer up to \$1 billion to Central European states involved in the TSI for energy investments. These funds are to be transferred by a special government agency with the support of the Congress. According to the secretary of State, the purpose of the support is to revive private investment in the energy sectors of the region. The declared US commitment to the TSI refers to entrepreneurship support funds created in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s to stimulate business in the emerging market economies of the

<sup>23</sup> See more: Gołębiowska, Marlena: *Koronawirus – skutki dla Europy Środkowej*, Komentarze IEŚ, n° 138 (2020), at <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/koronawirus-skutki-dla-europy-srodkowej-138-41-2020>.

<sup>24</sup> See more: Gołębiowska, Marlena: *COVID-19 a cyfryzacja Europy Środkowej*, Komentarze IEŚ, n° 162 (2020), at <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/covid-19-a-cyfryzacja-europy-srodkowej-162-65-2020>.

<sup>25</sup> Lewkowicz, Łukasz: "The Three Seas Initiative in the Context of International Challenges", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, vol. 17, n° 3 (2019), p. 9; *Message of the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, addressed to the participants of the 2018, Three Seas Initiative Business Forum, Three Seas Initiative Summit, 17 September 2018*, at <http://three-seas.eu/message-of-the-president-of-the-united-states-of-america-donald-trump-addressed-to-the-participants-of-the-2018-three-seas-initiative-business-forum/>



region. The declared amount of the support is not low enough, considering the infrastructure needs of the region. However, the emergence of an American government investment support agency may be a strong political signal sent to potential investors, especially investment funds that are looking for large strategic economic projects guaranteed by the governments of the countries concerned. The desire to support Central European countries is also a part of the American-Chinese rivalry in the region. Another summit of 17+1 format is planned for spring 2020, this time in Beijing (the meeting probably will be postponed). An information about \$ 1 billion for the TSI released just before this meeting may put pressure on and persuade China to raise the stake for the states of the region.<sup>26</sup>

In the first period of the functioning of the TSI, the EU institutions approached this initiative in a rather ambivalent way. The negative perception of the initiative and its goals was influenced by the fact that this project was put forward after the takeover of power by the Law and Justice party, during a period of deterioration of Polish-German relations and increased tensions in Poland's relations with the EU institutions. Poland was accused of destroying European unity and violating the rule of law and democracy. In December 2017, for the first time in history, the procedure under Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty was launched, which weakened Poland's international position and decreased its negotiating potential. Also, from the German perspective, it was assessed that the TSI was an attempt to create a competitive block against the states of "the old Europe" in order to destroy the current balance of power in the EU. The authorities of Poland and Hungary, having tense relations with EU institutions, were accused of seeking to build a Central European grouping under the auspices of the US as a counterweight to Germany's influence in this region. Until 2018, any high-level representatives of the EU did not participate in the TSI summits. The European Commission did not explicitly criticize the TSI, but unofficially regarded it as an attempt to unite the region by Poland, with the aim to create a counterweight to the German-French alliance under its leadership. Acknowledging American engagement and the development of the initiative in 2018, the EC changed its previous position. On the occasion of the Bucharest Summit, the EC published an information and promotion brochure on the TSI. It states that the EC recognizes the contribution of TSI to regional development, which leads to a greater coherence of the EU as a whole. The Commission has defined the objectives of the TSI as improving connectivity in the region, especially in the areas of energy, transport and digitization, stimulating economic development, and facilitating convergence between EU states and strengthening the EU.<sup>27</sup>

From the point of view of the importance of the TSI, the question arises as to whether the initiative can be expanded to include Eastern European states. Ukraine is a state keenly interested in participating in this project. Ukraine's participation would naturally extend the geographical scope of the initiative to the Black Sea belt. Ukraine appears to be one of the countries of key importance for the implementation of this initiative. Therefore, looking at the TSI in wider perspective, the question should be asked about the configuration of relations with the neighboring states of this initiative, in particular with Ukraine. This also applies to the relations with the states of the Western Balkans. At the same time, it is noteworthy that according to the promoters, Poland and Croatia, the participation in the TSI is limited to EU member states due to the need to emphasize the importance of this project as pro-European. In this context, the idea of expanding the TSI in the future to include Scandinavian states, whose perception of subjectivity and regional security is similar to Central European states, seems more realistic.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lewkowicz: *Deklaracja wsparcia finansowego USA*, *op. cit.*  
Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-84.

<sup>28</sup> Stępniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 41.



## 6. Conclusion

The Three Seas Initiative, currently implemented by the Polish authorities, is a part of the traditions of Polish political activity in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. It can be treated as an attempt to increase the level of diversification of Poland's foreign relations. The TSI does not seek to create new organizational structures or build formal relationships. However, there is a pragmatic approach focusing primarily on economic cooperation around specific projects. A particular definition of TSI cooperation was given by Polish president Andrzej Duda at the summit in Ljubljana: "We want to measure the effects of the Three Seas Initiative not by the number of meetings or signed declarations, but by kilometers of roads built, modernized gas pipelines or amounts spent on urgent investments." Since 2018, the Initiative have moved from the conceptual to the implementation phase. There is no doubt that it is in the interest of Poland and other Central European states, in particular, to implement the strategic economic and infrastructure projects indicated during Bucharest Summit, which will create the opportunity for further development of the region. The biggest challenges TSI states are facing are of internal matter, e.g. COVID-19 pandemic, negotiating the new EU budget and conflicts of interest between member states, and of external matter, such as the Middle East and African migrations, Brexit, and Russia's neo-imperial policy. Undoubtedly, the effectiveness of regional cooperation will be determined by a specific "success story", for instance, completing a large project such as Via Carpatia.

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