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Trendsetting and Distance: Perception of the Three Seas Initiative in Selected Central European Countries

Abstract: The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a presidential platform for regional cooperation, established in 2016 and currently being developed by representatives of 13 EU Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. According to the founding declaration in Dubrovnik, the 3SI primarily serves to develop transport infrastructure, strengthen energy security, and advance digitalization in Central Europe. The aim of this article is to analyze the perception and public discourse on the Three Seas Initiative in selected participating countries. Examples of three countries with different approaches to activities within the 3SI are considered: a country actively engaged in the development of the Three Seas cooperation (Poland), a country with an ambivalent approach to the Three Seas cooperation (the Czech Republic), and a country that, despite participating in the 3SI, de facto distances itself from the initiative (Austria). The chronological scope of the research covered the years 2016–2025. The paper draws on statements by politicians, analytical materials, press sources, and academic articles. The study utilized a comparative method, qualitative content analysis, and document analysis.

Key words: Three Seas Initiative, 3SI, regional cooperation, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland

Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a decade-old international framework aimed at improving connections between the northern and southern countries of the European Union's eastern flank. The idea of establishing the 3SI was proposed by the presidents of Poland and Croatia in 2015, and the inaugural 3SI summit took place a year later in Dubrovnik. Initially, the Initiative encompassed 12 EU Member States, but Greece joined the 3SI in 2023. The main priorities of the 3SI include infrastructure development in the areas of transport, energy, and digitalization. The key instruments for cooperation within the 3SI are currently two investment funds and an innovation fund, established to finance commercial infrastructure investments in the Central European region. Since 2018, the list of priority projects implemented within the 3SI has been expanding. The organizational model of the 3SI is based on annual summits of heads of state (summit diplomacy), during which joint declarations are adopted. The summits have been hosted so far by Croatia (2016), Poland (2017 and 2025), Romania (2019 and 2023), Slovenia (2019), Estonia (2020), Bulgaria (2021), Latvia (2022), and Lithuania (2024). The next 3SI summit in 2026 will again be held in Croatia. In recent years, the scope of Three Seas cooperation has been expanding. Governments of the Initiative countries are playing an increasingly important role, while the business, local government, and scientific-ex-

pert components are strengthening. However, since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, security issues have become increasingly important.

A significant challenge facing 3SI is the lack of internal consistency in its format and the lack of strategic communication about 3SI, both within the participating countries and globally. Some decision-makers in the 3SI countries believe the format is aimed against Germany and could disintegrate the EU, while others believe that 3SI directly harks back to the interwar Intermarium and is a Polish geopolitical project. The Russian-Ukrainian war and the respective approaches to Russia and Ukraine also pose challenges that differentiate the participating countries. Many politicians believe that 3SI does not represent any new quality and does not generate additional funds for the implementation of costly infrastructure projects.

The aim of this publication is to demonstrate the characteristics of public discourse on the Three Seas Initiative in selected participating countries. Examples of three countries with different approaches to 3SI activities were considered: a country actively engaged in the development of 3SI cooperation (Poland), a country ambivalent about 3SI cooperation (Czech Republic), and a country that, despite participating in 3SI, de facto distances itself from the initiative (Austria). To achieve this goal, it was important to find answers to the following research questions: 1. In what contexts is the 3SI debate taking place? 2. Is 3SI presented through benefits or losses? 3. Who participates in the public discourse on 3SI? The chronological scope of the research covered the years 2016–2025. The following hypothesis was proposed in the article: the nature and tone of public discourse on the Three Seas Initiative reflect the geopolitical orientations, historical experiences, and varying levels of commitment of individual countries to regional cooperation, which in turn influence how the Initiative is perceived, discussed, and prioritized within national contexts. The initial turning point was the establishment of 3SI at the Dubrovnik Summit, while the final turning point was the Initiative's summit in Warsaw in April 2025. Given this formulation of the text's topic, the subject-based structure proved most useful. The paper draws on statements by politicians, analytical materials, press sources, and academic articles. The study utilized a comparative method, qualitative content analysis, and document analysis.

Poland – trendsetter 3SI

The Three Seas Initiative is considered to be initiated by the presidents of Poland and Croatia, Andrzej Duda and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Both politicians assumed office in 2015, winning the elections as candidates for center-right parties. Just weeks after his inauguration, Duda hosted Grabar-Kitarović in Cracow in September. At Wawel Cathedral, they jointly laid flowers before the sarcophagus of King Władysław III of Varna, a historical ruler who styled himself King of Poland, Hungary, Dalmatia, Croatia, and others. Even then, there was talk of “building a community of states between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas.” These talks continued during the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2015. President Duda stated that the project of deepening ties between the Three Seas Initiative countries had been a permanent element of the agenda of his bilateral and multilateral meetings since the beginning of his

presidency. However, the 3SI was formally launched at the first summit in August 2016 in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Representatives of the 12 founding countries of the 3SI (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary) attended the meeting. The diplomatic significance of the Dubrovnik summit was enhanced by the presence of representatives from the US, China, and Turkey. However, representatives from the EU, Germany, and France were absent. In the Dubrovnik Declaration, the 3SI was defined as an “informal platform” for regional cooperation. The founding document did not mention the establishment of formal structures, but it did highlight two main goals of the Initiative: pursuing the development of economic cooperation and strengthening the EU as a whole. President Duda has directly participated in all summits to date (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, pp. 56–57).

Poland is actively involved in the implementation of numerous strategic 3SI projects. The key instrument of cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative is currently the Three Seas Fund. It was established to finance commercial infrastructure investments in the Central European region in three sectors: energy, transport, and digital technologies. The Fund was initiated and conceived by the Polish National Economy Bank (BGK). A letter of intent was signed by six Initiative countries (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) establishing the Fund in September 2018 during the Business Forum accompanying the Bucharest Summit. The founding countries of the 3SIIF are Poland and Romania, represented by BGK and Banca de Export-Import a Romaniei (Eximbank Romania), respectively. Poland also contributed the largest sum of EUR 750 million. At the 2018 Bucharest Summit, a catalogue of priority projects was adopted to develop the infrastructure of the 3SI countries. In terms of infrastructure, the main communication axis for the Initiative countries is the Via Carpatia. This route runs along the EU's eastern border, intersecting routes connecting Western Europe with Russia. The Via Carpatia is intended to improve road transport from the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda to Thessaloniki in Greece, connecting Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. The Polish section of the route is currently at a relatively advanced stage of construction. In terms of energy security, the planned North-South Gas Corridor will connect the LNG terminal in the Polish port of Świnoujście, which opened in 2015, and the Baltic Pipe with the Adria LNG terminal on the island of Krk in Croatia. The Polish-Lithuanian gas pipeline (GIPL) officially opened in early May 2022. A few months later, gas transmission through the Poland-Slovakia interconnector began, and in October, the Baltic Pipe, carrying gas from Norway to Poland, began operation. The digital dimension is the least developed within the 3SI. In 2018, only two such projects were launched: one concerning the organization of the Three Seas “smart cities” forum and the other concerning the construction of a testing zone for autonomous vehicles. The remaining projects are in the initial planning stages, without a specific implementation timeline or estimated costs. Among them is Poland's proposal to create a “digital highway,” connecting the 3SI countries with a secure fiber-optic network and basing data transfer on fifth-generation (5G) mobile technologies (Lewkowicz, 2024).

The significance of Poland's involvement in the Three Seas Initiative is demonstrated by the fact that it has hosted two 3SI summits – the first in 2017 and the second in 2025. Initially, the 2017 summit was scheduled for Wrocław, but ultimately, due to logistics related to US President Donald Trump's visit, the summit was moved to Warsaw. The Warsaw

meeting was preceded by several months of preparations, resulting in a more substantial and concrete decision-making process than the first 3SI summit in Dubrovnik. The second summit of the Initiative was attended by the Presidents of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev; Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović; Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid; Hungary, János Áder; Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė; Latvia, Raimonds Vējonis; Romania, Klaus Iohannis; Slovakia, Andrej Kiska; and Slovenia, Borut Pahor; as well as the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Jan Hamáček; and Austrian Ambassador to Poland, Thomas M. Buchsbaum. US President Donald Trump was a special guest. The delegation's stature increased significantly compared to the founding summit, due both to the American leader's visit and the longer and more thorough preparations for the meeting. The declaration adopted in Warsaw emphasized building interconnectedness among the Three Seas countries along the north-south and east-west axes, which, as stated, is in the interest of all 3SI participants and the entire EU. Intensive cooperation was announced in the areas of economics, transport connections, energy infrastructure, environmental protection, and digital communications. Priorities included strengthening transport connections in the region to develop and integrate it with the TEN-T network, implementing EU energy policy guidelines, promoting the business-oriented nature of joint economic projects, and achieving full synergy with EU policies. The Warsaw Summit politically consolidated the Initiative, resulting in an invitation from the Romanian side to the next meeting in Bucharest. From that moment on, Romania became intensely involved in the development of the 3SI – Bucharest strives to present itself as the “third driving force” of the Initiative (after the initiators, Croatia and Poland) (Ukielski, 2018, pp. 47–48).

Poland hosted the 3SI Summit in Warsaw for the second time on April 28–29, 2025. This was the 10th anniversary meeting of the 3SI Heads of State. Eleven presidents and the Prime Minister of Croatia participated in the event; a total of 23 countries and the European Commission were represented. In terms of the number of leaders, it was the largest diplomatic event in Poland in 2025. Among the summit's major achievements were the expansion of 3SI to include new strategic partners: Spain and Turkey, and participating associated states: Albania and Montenegro. The adopted declaration reaffirmed the fundamental goals of 3SI cooperation, in particular the need to expand north-south infrastructure connections to strengthen the region's resilience, strengthen EU cohesion, and enhance transatlantic ties. For the first time in the history of 3SI, a dissenting position was added to the declaration – Hungary dissociated itself from paragraphs 4–9, which included, among other things, condemnation of the Russian war against Ukraine. The updated list of priority projects of the Three Seas Initiative includes 143 items. The declaration emphasizes the importance of the following projects: BRUA, the LNG terminal on the island of Krk, Rail Baltica, Rail2Sea, the completed project to synchronize the Baltic states' electricity grids with continental European networks, Via Baltica, and Via Carpatia. The first 3SI Investment Fund in 2023 completed the fundraising phase and moved on to the next stage: managing and increasing the value of investments. Work is underway to establish another fund, modeled on the aforementioned one, as mentioned in the declaration. Furthermore, the 3SI Innovation Fund, managed and co-financed by the European Investment Fund, has launched its operations – the first investors are Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Croatia. The Japanese side announced the opening of a representative office in Poland by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation. On April 29, 2025, at the initiative of

First Lady Agata Kornhauser-Duda, a separate program was implemented as part of the summit with the participation of the First Ladies of Estonia, Lithuania, Albania, Hungary, and Montenegro. One of the events accompanying the Business Forum was the scientific conference “The Three Seas Initiative: the economic dimension of intra-EU cooperation,” organized thanks to the cooperation of academic centers from Poland and others 3SI countries (main organiser was the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, ISP PAN) (Orzelska-Stączek, 2025; Bornio, Lewkowicz, 2025).

Since the 2023 parliamentary elections and Donald Tusk’s assumption of power, the approach to the 3SI can be described as ambivalent. We have two centers of power pursuing fundamentally different policies in this regard – the presidential palace, which is committed to the project, and the government, which remains more reserved. However, a certain evolution in the approach of Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials towards this format is visible. On October 10, 2024, a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland took place, at which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ position on, among other things, the 3SI was presented. On the government’s side, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Władysław Bartoszewski presented the position. He described the 3SI as a format of growing importance, which has gained in value in the face of the marginalization of regional cooperation within the V4. He emphasized the key role of the 2017 3SI summit in Warsaw, attended by President Trump, which strengthened US involvement in the Initiative. The strategic partnership with the US, confirmed by a bipartisan resolution and the announcement of the then US Secretary of State’s willingness to contribute USD 1 billion to the 3SI fund (which ultimately did not materialize), contributed to a change in the position of the European Commission and Germany, which ultimately accepted the status of strategic partners. The Deputy Minister emphasized the potential of 3SI as a platform for sectoral and EU cooperation, noting the possibility of building a blocking majority or minority in the European Council. He pointed to the benefits for Polish business from the business forums accompanying 3SI summits. According to Bartoszewski, the dominance of transatlantic-oriented countries within 3SI places pro-Chinese and pro-Russian states, such as Hungary and Slovakia, as outsiders. Strengthening involvement in 3SI is intended to strengthen regional security. This initiative also supports EU enlargement projects, and the admission of Ukraine and Moldova as associate members is intended to strengthen Poland’s position in the Weimar Triangle. 3SI is also expected to attract interest from third countries, such as Great Britain, Japan and South Korea (*Informacja...*, 2025).

In Poland, the 3SI is attracting interest from media, politicians, research institutes, and non-governmental organizations. In November 2021, public television launched a new (English-language) channel, TVP World. One of its programs is intended to present political and economic news from the 3SI countries. Furthermore, in 2021, TVP initiated the “Heart of Europe” International Television Festival, a platform for presenting productions by public broadcasters from Central Europe. Its goal is to promote films and filmmakers from the region’s countries. It is worth mentioning the activities of the Institute of Central Europe, whose staff has prepared a number of publications and analyses on the 3SI in recent years and co-organized seminars and webinars on the subject. Since 2022, the Three Seas Library has operated at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, whose goal is to popularize knowledge about the 3SI and to

compile publications on the topic. From September 2022 to February 2025, the ISP PAN implemented a project crucial to 3SI research, entitled the Three Seas Initiative Research Center. This included organizing study trips to 3SI countries, organizing seminars and conferences, and publishing a monograph on 3SI. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting the expert activity of the Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs, the Polish Institute of International Affairs, the Centre for Eastern Studies, the Władysław Anders Institute, and the Kościuszko Institute, which promotes the idea of the “Digital 3 Seas Initiative.” The Institute for New Europe is also interested in 3SI topics. Websites dedicated to 3SI are also popular in Poland, such as trimarium.pl, where, in addition to reports, opinions, and expert commentaries, podcasts about 3SI are also available. Several years ago, the State of Poland Foundation prepared a report demonstrating the state of public knowledge in individual 3SI participating countries. The Three Seas Local Government Congress has been organised in Lublin for several years. In the academic sphere, the literature on the 3SI in Poland is characterized by a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. Scholars analyze the historical context and development of the 3SI, examining its strategic, geopolitical, and economic implications. This includes inter alia assessments of its role in regional and international relations, critical evaluations of its objectives versus actual achievements, and explorations of individual countries’ perspectives and positions. So far, several dozen publications on the 3SI issues have been published in Poland (Lewkowicz, Szwed-Walczak 2022, pp. 43–44; Lewkowicz, Gołębiowska, 2024, pp. 133–157).

Noteworthy were interviews with diplomats from selected 3SI countries, which revealed the perception of leadership in the Initiative. It turned out that some interviewees personalized this status, emphasizing the personal roles of Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Polish President Andrzej Duda. One interviewee, Minister Krzysztof Szczerski, argued that all countries that have previously hosted summits are 3SI leaders (Poland has already done so twice). In his opinion, any country that decides to host a summit immediately becomes more actively involved in the Initiative’s work. A significant number of interviewed diplomats stated that they perceive Poland as the natural leader of 3SI, which is related to its previous involvement in this format and the fact that it is the largest country in the region. It was emphasized that Poland is also the country most aware of the benefits of 3SI in various areas, from energy and transport to science and culture (Orzelska-Stączek, Ukielski, 2020, pp. 80–82).

Ambivalent Czech Republic

The Czech Republic can be considered one of the Three Seas Initiative countries that has a rather ambivalent approach to this format. At the time of its announcement, the Czech authorities did not treat it as a significant regional project. They viewed it as a form of cooperation competing with the V4 and feared weakening the latter. A fairly common opinion among Czech political circles was that the 3SI was a solely Polish expansion project, which had not been consulted with the V4 countries. There were also voices that the 3SI could divide the EU, which Poland could exploit to further its own superpower aspirations. These suspicions stemmed from some Polish politicians’ references to pre-war Intermarium concepts in their statements about the 3SI. The lack of full Czech involvement in 3SI

also results from the belief that it may harm their interests with strategic economic partners: Germany, Russia and China (Lewkowicz, Szwed-Walczak, 2022, pp. 17–19).

The Czech Republic undoubtedly pursued a lukewarm approach to the 3SI initiative during Andrej Babiš's (ANO) premiership from 2017 to 2021. This stemmed in part from the state of bilateral Polish-Czech relations, and in part from the Czech view of the 3SI initiative itself as a concept promoted by the Polish government, which was unfavorable to the EU, allegedly competing with European integration, and unfavorably received by Germany, which was highly valued at the time. However, a certain revival of Czech activity occurred already in 2018 with the establishment of the 3SI Investment Fund at the 2018 Bucharest Summit, although Prague did not join the Fund itself. During this period, the Czech Republic embarked on its first and, to date, only infrastructure project under the 3SI initiative (incidentally, formally registered as a project submitted by Poland) – the construction of the Danube-Oder-Elbe waterway. However, this was a personal initiative of then-President Miloš Zeman, criticized by the Czech government as a fantasy detached from reality. The evolving importance of the 3SI in Czech politics resulted in the appointment of a government plenipotentiary for the Three Seas Initiative in 2020. In September of that same year, the plenipotentiary announced the Czech Republic's accession to the Three Seas Fund. However, this intention was not realized. Prague, in turn, appointed its own representative to the 3SI Fund Council; in April 2021, this position was held by the President of the National Development Bank.

The turning point in the Czech Republic's attitude towards the Three Seas Initiative (at least in the rhetoric of Czech political elites) came only with the December 2021 elections, the loss of power by Prime Minister Babiš, and the formation of a new coalition government led by Petr Fiala, who hails from the ODS, which is allied at the EU level within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) political family with Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. The Russian context also changed. In 2021, a diplomatic conflict erupted between Prague and Moscow over the revelation that Russian secret services had orchestrated terrorist attacks on Czech ammunition depots in 2014, resulting in the deaths of Czech citizens. This dispute culminated in the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats from the Russian embassy in Prague and a sharp deterioration of Russia's image in the Czech Republic.

The year 2022, in the context of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, brought not only a revival of American and British involvement in Central Europe but also a serious weakening of Germany's leadership role in the EU in the eyes of all countries on the EU and NATO's eastern flank. The political and material support the Czech Republic provided to Ukraine brought Polish and Czech foreign policies closer together. Logistical considerations naturally dictated that Czech supplies of equipment, weapons, and ammunition for the Ukrainian Army transit through Poland, further enhancing the cooperation between the two countries and underscoring the importance of transport and communications infrastructure not only for economic development but also for the security of the entire region. Similarly, the energy crisis accompanying the war in Ukraine, related to the interruption or reduction of gas and oil supplies from Russia to Europe, poses a serious challenge from the Czech perspective. Poland's independence from Russian gas supplies through the construction of the LNG terminal in Świnoujście and the Baltic Pipe make Poland, as a country with not only access to the sea (which the

Czech Republic lacks and which determines the possibility of diversifying energy supply sources using maritime routes), but also the aforementioned infrastructure, a country with significant potential for cooperation in this area. However, this cooperation is still poorly advanced. The Stork II interconnector, connecting the gas systems of Poland and the Czech Republic, is only in the design phase (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2023).

The victory of Petr Pavel, a retired general and former head of the NATO Military Committee, in the January 2023 presidential election was viewed by much of the Czech public as a restoration of the prestige of the presidential office. A positive sign is President Pavel's attitude, accepting an invitation to the 3SI summit in Vilnius in April 2024. Unlike his predecessor, the presidential office covered the entire visit to Lithuania in numerous posts, emphasizing that one of the most important goals of the president's participation in the Vilnius summit was to express support for Ukraine. The Czech president was similarly active during the last 3SI summit in Warsaw in April 2025.

Czech public and media interest in the 3SI is low, and without a clear commitment from the Czech government to publicize the entire concept, this state of affairs will not change in the near future. In most cases, these reports are limited to simple reports on individual presidential summits. Longer articles attempting to assess Czech policy have been published relatively rarely. One such example was Viliam Buchert's article in the influential weekly "Reflex," which was highly critical of President Zeman's absence from the Warsaw summit, where US President Donald Trump was a special guest. During the 2020 Tallinn summit, the influential portal idnes.cz cited German comments that the Czechs, instead of using the Three Seas Initiative to boost innovation, had limited themselves to the "Zeman channel." Similarly, the editorial staff of the economic daily "Hospodářské noviny" limited itself to brief commentary on current events. A more extensive study could be found on the website of the daily "Lidové noviny." Petr Fiala's assumption of power in December 2021 did little to change the landscape of media debate in the Czech Republic. Although the inclusion of Three Seas cooperation in the Prime Minister's exposé generated some media interest, they even attempted to define Czech interests. In 2022, Vojtěch Kristen, on the info.cz portal, pointed out that the 3SI is a platform that can help catch up on the backlog in building energy infrastructure, and Poland has demonstrated that this is possible. Meanwhile, Filip Harzer, liberal commentator specializing in Central European politics and a journalist for the "Seznam Zprávy" portal, saw President Petr Pavel's participation as a sign of a change in the Czech approach to the 3SI. This, he believes, was due to the change of government in Poland and the abatement of the danger that the 3SI would be used by Polish conservatives to fight Germany and EU.

Polish politicians and journalists have occasionally reported on the 3SI initiative in Czech media. For example, the conservative online magazine "Echo24" published statements by Polish President Andrzej Duda and journalist Grzegorz Górny, who outlined the potential importance of the 3SI for the entire region. Similarly, the online magazine "Česká pozice," part of the "Lidových noviny" media holding, published a translation of Grzegorz Górny's interview with Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, in which the Polish foreign minister assured that the goal of the 3SI initiative is to bridge economic and civilizational gaps with the West, but not in defiance of the EU. In 2021, the website of the magazine "Forum" published an article by Jagiellonian Club expert Grzegorz Lewicki on the geostrategic importance of the Three Seas Initiative for Europe and the

United States. More concerns about the future of the 3SI and Poland's participation in it appeared in a comment from April 2024 by the aforementioned conservative portal "Echo24," which cited the statement of the Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrzej Szejna, who assessed the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative as dead projects, and that Warsaw's main partners should be France and Germany (Bajda, 2024).

The expert perspective on 3SI in the Czech Republic is being taken up by a small number of think tanks, including the Association for International Affairs (AMO), the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, and the Václav Havel Library's educational and cultural institute. Since 2019, the topic has been featured in the annual publications of the AMO project, "Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy." A special 2021 AMO report on the Three Seas Initiative notes that the debate on 3SI in the Czech Republic is taking place primarily within think tanks and the state administration. Political parties are not particularly interested in this issue. The Communist Party identifies 3SI as a tool of American policy. The project is supported by the SPOLU electoral coalition of liberal-conservative parties, which considers it a geopolitical asset that deepens transatlantic relations. However, the coalition strongly opposes the only Czech project submitted to the 3SI – the construction of the Danube-Oder-Elbe waterway. A detailed and updated analysis of the Czech presence in the 3SI was presented by an AMO analyst in a 2024 publication by the Three Seas Initiative Research Centre at the Polish Academy of Sciences (Dostál et al., 2021, pp. 8–10; Dostál, 2024, pp. 55–69).

Czech analysts have also written critically in Polish media about the Czech Republic's lack of engagement in the 3SI. Pavel Havlíček from the AMO, writing in "Respublika," stated that until 2022, the Czech Republic had not been particularly active within the framework of the 3SI. In his view, this was a mistake that should be corrected as soon as possible. According to Havlíček, the strength of the 3SI lies not only in its Investment Fund but also in its regional nature and the interest shown by the US. The initiative could become a driving force for the development of critical infrastructure, as exemplified by Estonia's data centers financed through the fund. At the same time, 3SI continues to face challenges – such as a lack of transparency, low levels of funding, and limited engagement from some member states, particularly the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Havlíček notes that the Riga summit marked the first-ever Three Seas Civil Society Forum, aimed at increasing openness and public participation in the project. For the Czech Republic, the opportunity lies in greater regional activity, a clear investment strategy, and support for cooperation with Ukraine and the Eastern Partnership countries. In the long term, strengthening US and EU involvement in financing north-south infrastructure projects will be crucial. The Three Seas Initiative also needs fresh ideas and better communication (Havlíček, 2022).

The independent think tank, the Institute of Politics and Society, also promoted the Three Seas Initiative in the Czech Republic. In 2020, the institute organized a debate on the Three Seas Initiative at the Polish Embassy in Prague, with the participation of, among others, Ian Brzezinski (former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO Policy), Garrett Marquis (former National Security Council spokesperson), the Czech perspective was presented by Přemysl Bosák (then a member of the Supervisory Board of the Three Seas Fund), and the keynote speaker from Poland was Paweł Jabłoński, then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Institute then published a short analysis of the 3SI, in which (in addition to emphasizing the importance of the

3SI for achieving greater energy independence for the region) the author presented the 3SI as an idea for Austria-Hungary 2.0, with the complementary participation of the Baltic states and Bulgaria. At the same time, the analysis recommended greater involvement of Prague in the 3SI Initiative, rather than limiting it solely to the Danube-Oder-Elbe waterway, the viability of which is questioned by most Czech political forces. Another Czech think tank focusing on international affairs, EUROPEUM, in one of its analyses also pointed to Poland's role as the initiator of the 3SI. The authors of the analysis noted that initially, 3SI was associated in Prague with Józef Piłsudski's controversial idea of Intermarium, which caused considerable reservations on the part of the Czech authorities. Furthermore, the project was considered a brainchild of the Law and Justice party (PiS) as an instrument of combating Brussels and Berlin. Despite these concerns, it was indicated that it could be a useful tool in implementing Czech foreign policy in the area of Europeanization of Eastern European and Western Balkan countries aspiring to join the EU, a constant priority for Prague in the region (Bajda, 2024).

Interestingly, Czech business circles are showing interest in the 3SI, particularly those associated with the Czech Chamber of Commerce (IGRC). The IGRC itself boasts renowned experts in this field, led by former Czech ambassador to Poland Jan Sechter. His expertise and active involvement in the Three Seas Initiative, particularly in cooperation with Poland, evidenced by both practical work in infrastructure and economics (e.g., rail connections with Poland) and journalistic work (in popularizing this topic), allow for an optimistic outlook on this trend of 3SI activities in the Czech Republic (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2023).

Austrian Distance

Austria is considered the least engaged 3SI participant state. Vienna prioritizes the supremacy of the EU, and the Three Seas Initiative is intended to operate within its framework. Austria has expressed interest and support for the 3SI, but also advocates for the European Union to play a leading role. The main task of the 3SI is to implement existing EU plans and projects regarding infrastructure, digitalization, and energy. In summary, Austria sees the initiative as a useful complement to the EU that can help mitigate economic disparities in Europe (Kornis, 2022). Austria was not entirely satisfied with Poland's leadership within the 3SI during the right-wing government period. Austrian public opinion was often anti-Polish. This approach remains consistent with the German concept (and therefore external to the 3SI), which seeks to shift the decision-making center of gravity from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe towards the EU. Austria advocates for the communitarization of the Initiative's activities and not leaving it under the direct management of its members. Finally, one of the most important arguments hindering Austria's involvement in 3SI is its geographic location. The country is landlocked, which significantly hinders its full identification with the interests of some of the Initiative's members (Brzezińska, 2021, p. 11).

A significant factor influencing Vienna's approach to the Three Seas Initiative is the Austrian approach to Russia, which is highly critical of the Three Seas Initiative. Austria's historical and political experiences undoubtedly influence friendly Austrian-Russian rela-

tions. Austria was the only country among the Three Seas Initiative members that was not part of the Eastern Bloc, a factor that had a significant impact on its wealth in the region – Austria is by far the wealthiest member of the Three Seas Initiative. An additional argument for mutual Austrian-Russian sympathy is the issue of Vienna's military neutrality. As the only Three Seas Initiative member, it is not a member of NATO and therefore does not share the concerns of the former satellite states regarding threats from the East.

Despite the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing aggression in Donbas since 2014, Austria has been strengthening its relations with Russia, organizing high-level visits. Putin was received in Vienna just four months after the occupation of the peninsula. He also traveled to Austria on his first foreign trip since his re-inauguration in 2018. The strong business and social ties between the two countries' governments are evidenced by the appointments of former Austrian politicians to Russian state-owned companies. Citing neutrality, the Austrian authorities have ruled out direct support for Ukraine with arms supplies after 2022. However, they have delivered 10,000 helmets and 9,000 bulletproof vests. At the same time, by abstaining from voting, they de facto supported sending military aid to Ukraine under the EU's European Peace Facility. They also allowed the transit of weapons from NATO countries through their territory, which distinguishes them from the Hungarian government, which refused such aid. Austria's limited response to Russian aggression is also determined by close energy ties. Austria imports as much as 80% of its gas consumption from Russia (compared to the EU average of 45%). Despite the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, the authorities in Vienna are not actively seeking other sources of supply. Austria's assertive policy towards Russia has been limited to refusing to settle gas contracts in rubles. Before the invasion, Russia was among the ten largest markets for Austrian companies – the value of exports in 2020 amounted to EUR 800 million. In 2020, Russian direct investments in Austria were the largest after German ones and reached EUR 21.4 billion (Ogrodnik, 2022).

The only politician to speak positively about 3SI is Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen. He has spoken several times about his country's place and role in 3SI, including describing the format as a valuable tool for defining, developing, and implementing common goals for the region's countries. At the same time, he has not always demonstrated genuine interest in participating in subsequent 3SI summits. This was evidenced by the lowest-ranking delegations (ambassadors) present at the 2016 and 2017 summits. Van der Bellen personally participated in the Three Seas Initiative Summit, which took place in Bucharest in 2023. In his address, the Austrian President emphasized Austria's unwavering support for Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression and called for closer cooperation in combating global warming. He also welcomed the announcement regarding Greece's planned accession to the 3SI as a full member state. Despite pursuing an active policy in Central Europe, the Austrian government remains marginally involved in 3SI. As the only member of the Initiative remaining outside the Investment Fund, it is also not part of any of its priority projects. The continued lack of interest in the Three Seas Initiative is evidenced, for example, by its omission in Foreign Minister Michael Linhart's first speech to the National Council in 2021, even though he mentioned other regional formats – the Slavkov Triangle and the Central Five (Żornaczuk et al., 2021; *Alexander...*, 2023). There are also no other statements about the Three Seas Initiative from representatives of the Austrian government: the Federal Chancellor, individual ministers, or even the

Chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Austrian National Council. The most important Austrian political parties have also remained silent on the matter. The position of Austrian parties on the Three Seas Initiative is unknown. The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), a member of the current government, has not yet commented on the Three Seas Initiative. Other coalition parties did the same: the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and NEOS – New Austria and Liberal Forum, as well as the opposition Greens (Grüne) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (Brzezińska, 2021, pp. 6–8).

The 3SI doesn't receive much media attention in Austria. It's difficult to find any information about it. The only exceptions are President Alexander Van der Bellen's brief statements, posted on his chancellery's website on the occasion of his official visits to the 3SI summits. A similar strategy is employed by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, among others, which publishes short and general notes about the Initiative. Industry media, including those related to the gas industry and, above all, those representing the dominant Austrian small and medium-sized enterprise sector, generally avoid discussing the 3SI. Isolated, rather general, but also outdated information (dated 2017, 2018, and 2020) can also be found on the websites of some Austrian magazines, such as "Wiener Zeitung," "Der Standard," "Salzburger Nachrichten," and "Kurier." All of them are descriptive in nature, introducing the topic of 3SI and appear most often on the occasion of the Initiative's summits (Brzezińska, 2021, pp. 8–9).

There is also a noticeable shortage of analyses, reports, and other scientific and expert materials on Austria's place and role in the 3SI initiative. Two in-depth, though somewhat outdated (from 2021 and 2022), publications by Velina Tchakarova (Director of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy – AIES) and Livia Benko are available online. The analyses highlight the determinants of Austria's presence in 3SI, its energy dependence on Russia, and present the most important projects in which this country is involved. Mention is made of a high-capacity rail-road corridor that will connect the ports of Gdańsk and Świnoujście with those of Trieste, Ravenna, and Ancona. Another significant project is the construction of a second railway track, which will ensure traffic capacity to and from the Slovenian port of Koper. The railway line is part of the TEN-T Mediterranean and Baltic-Adriatic core network corridors, serving 16 Central European countries, including Austria. Another priority 3SI project is the Danube Fairway, which involves modernizing the hydrological data processing, measurement, and alarm systems of the Danube waterway on sections connecting Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania (Tchakarova, Benko, 2021; Tchakarova, Benko, 2022, pp. 11–23).

Experts from the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) have periodically engaged in discussions on the Three Seas Initiative. During a January 2024 workshop in Warsaw, organized by the Polish Academy of Sciences, IDM researcher Péter Techet argued that the 3SI cannot be considered an intergovernmental organization under international law, as it lacks legal foundations and institutional structure. He suggested that greater formalization could clarify the initiative's goals and improve its effectiveness. Despite these limitations, all participants of workshop agreed that the 3SI serves as a valuable platform for regional dialogue within the EU and a bridge for co-operation with candidate countries such as Ukraine and Moldova (*Workshop...*, 2024).

Following the outbreak of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the countries most actively involved in the Three Seas Initiative sought to strengthen Austria's engagement

in the format. A symbolic step in this direction was a panel discussion held in April 2022 at the House of Industry in Vienna, organized jointly by the embassies of Latvia, Poland, and Romania. The event gathered representatives of politics, diplomacy, and business, who analyzed the significance of the 3SI for regional cooperation. A joint statement by the ambassadors emphasized the initiative's role as a tool for building a cohesive and competitive European Union. Speakers, including Georg Knill, President of the Federation of Austrian Industries, and Victoria Reggie Kennedy, US Ambassador to Austria, highlighted the economic potential of the region and the need to develop energy infrastructure. In the concluding remarks, it was noted that Austria – though cautious toward the 3SI – plays an important role as an economic partner and a bridge for transnational cooperation in Central Europe (*Podiumsdiskussion...*, 2022).

Assessment and Summary

The debate on the Three Seas Initiative unfolds within a complex geopolitical, economic, and institutional context shaped by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which has redefined security priorities in Central Europe. In this setting, the 3SI is viewed as a tool to enhance regional security, energy independence, and infrastructural resilience, while also addressing broader economic challenges such as inflation and post-pandemic recovery. The discussion takes place within the wider European and transatlantic frameworks, with the EU and the US acting as key partners, positioning the Initiative as both a regional integration platform and a strategic transatlantic link. Public discourse portrays the 3SI mainly through its potential benefits – most notably the creation of the 3SI Investment Fund, strengthened regional cooperation, US and EU involvement, and successful projects like Estonia's data centers – while also recognizing its weaknesses, including limited transparency, funding gaps, uneven political engagement, and insufficient societal participation. The Initiative's narrative is shaped by political leaders, analysts, think tanks, and increasingly civil society actors, exemplified by the 2022 Riga Civil Society Forum, with the EU and the US influencing its strategic and financial direction. Overall, the 3SI emerges as a promising yet underdeveloped framework that reflects Central Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy, modernization, and stronger regional cohesion, though its progress depends on political will, coordination, and broader public engagement.

Poland is undoubtedly a proponent of the Three Seas Initiative, which is perceived as a win-win situation. Outgoing President Andrzej Duda is widely considered a co-founder and main promoter of Three Seas cooperation. The 3SI presents itself as an opportunity to strengthen the position of Central European countries in the international arena, primarily within the EU, but also in transatlantic relations. Public discourse portrays the 3SI as a pillar of economic, energy, and infrastructure security, and perhaps even military security in the future. From a Polish perspective, the 3SI creates the opportunity to build a political bloc under informal Polish leadership, lobbying for the region's interests. Public discourse on the 3SI involves not only politicians but also local government officials, research institutes, journalists, and non-governmental organizations. The 3SI is promoted in Poland through scientific projects, conferences, sporting, and cultural events. The public debate focuses on priority projects implemented within the 3SI, the main areas of

activity, and Poland's significance and role in this endeavor. The approach and commitment of new President Karol Nawrocki to the 3SI poses a challenge – however, it can be assumed that he will continue his predecessor's regional policy.

In the Czech Republic, the discourse on the Three Seas Initiative is relatively low-key. This stems from Prague's reticence to fully engage in this format of cooperation. The 3SI is not known to the public and receives little attention in the Czech media. The only topic that gained attention was President Miloš Zeman's proposal to build the Danube-Oder-Elbe corridor. However, it has raised considerable concerns among environmentalists, local governments, and residents of the areas through which it would run. Despite the coming to power of Petr Fiala's center-right government in 2021 and Petr Pavel's assumption of office as president in 2023, Prague has not yet defined its stance on the Three Seas Initiative. Therefore, the Czech attitude towards the 3SI can be described as that of an uninvolved observer. For many years, the Czechs considered the Visegrad Group their primary regional format. However, the deepening crisis in Visegrad cooperation may be a factor that will bring the Czech Republic closer to the 3SI. The fact that major energy and infrastructure projects have bypassed Czech territory is a negative development. The likely coming to power of Andrej Babiš in the fall of 2025 does not indicate any greater government involvement in the 3SI.

Austria can be described as the most distant participating country in the 3SI. This is due to numerous factors, including: a high level of economic development, well-developed infrastructure, lack of access to the sea, a policy of neutrality, close relations with Russia, and the resulting long-term dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. Germany's stance on the 3SI is also a significant factor in Vienna's regional policy. Austria seeks to communitarize the project and not leave it as a separate initiative solely within the purview of Central European countries. This emphasizes the key and leading role of the EU, thus rejecting Poland's leadership in the 3SI. There is no broader public discussion regarding the 3SI in Austria. This is evidenced by the complete lack of media and information coverage regarding the Three Seas Initiative, which indicates that the Initiative is not at the center of public, expert, or business interest, nor is it a political priority for Austrian decision-makers (both current and previous). Due to Austria's location on the western flank of the 3SI, no major projects involving this country are planned. Austria's desire to play a greater political and economic role in the post-Habsburg area of Central Europe may provide an opportunity for greater involvement.

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Trendsetting i dystans: percepcja Inicjatywy Trójomorza w wybranych państwach Europy Środkowej

Streszczenie

Inicjatywa Trójomorza (*Three Seas Initiative*, 3SI) stanowi prezydencką platformę współpracy regionalnej, powołaną w 2016 r. i tworzoną obecnie przez przedstawicieli 13 państw członkowskich UE: Austrii, Bułgarii, Chorwacji, Czech, Estonii, Grecji, Litwy, Łotwy, Polski, Rumunii, Słowacji, Słowenii i Węgier. Według deklaracji założycielskiej w Dubrowniku 3SI służy przede wszystkim rozwojowi infrastruktury transportowej, wzmocnieniu bezpieczeństwa energetycznego i rozwojowi gospodarki cyfrowej w Europie Środkowej. Celem artykułu jest analiza percepcji i dyskursu publicznego na temat Inicjatywy Trójomorza w wybranych państwach uczestniczących tego formatu. Pod uwagę wzięto przykłady trzech państw odmiennie podchodzących do aktywności w ramach 3SI: państwo aktywnie zaangażowane w rozwój współpracy trójmorskiej (Polska), państwo podchodzące do współpracy trójmorskiej ambiwalentnie (Czechy) oraz państwo, które pomimo uczestnictwa w 3SI *de facto* dystansuje się od tej inicjatywy (Austria). Zakres chronologiczny badań objął lata 2016–2025. Artykuł opiera się na wypowiedziach polityków, materiałach analitycznych, źródłach prasowych i artykułach naukowych. W badaniach wykorzystano metodę porównawczą, jakościową analizę treści oraz analizę dokumentów.

Słowa kluczowe: Inicjatywa Trójomorza, 3SI, Austria, Czechy, Polska

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