

THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE, ENERGY SECURITY AND THE STABILITY OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a joint regional endeavour carried out between twelve European Union (EU) states mainly within the region around the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, and to collaborate on expanding cross-border energy, transport and digital infrastructure and to enhance economic development in Central and Eastern Europe. The Initiative was announced to the public with the Dubrovnik Joint Statement adopted by Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia on August 25th 2016 (Three Seas Initiative, 2016).

In the said document, it is stated that the Initiative is an informal platform established to take decisive action and provide political support for certain cross-border and macro-regional projects that have strategic importance for states interested in energy, transport, digital communications and economic sectors in Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, it is emphasized that by expanding the existing cooperation in these areas, Central and Eastern Europe will become more secure, more safeguarded and more competitive, thus contributing to the more resilient European Union as a whole. At the end of the statement, it is noted that that the Initiative is open to partnerships on specific projects with relevant

state or business actors from around the world, committed to the core values and principles of the EU.

The Report Which Inspired the Emergence of the 3SI

As per the information given on the 3SI website, the Initiative was led by then President of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and then President of Poland Andrzej Duda, who were inspired by the views contained in the report titled Completing Europe published by the US-based think-tank Atlantic Council in 2014 (Three Seas Initiative, 2023b). In this regard, it will be useful to briefly mention the basic idea and goals of said report, which inspired the emergence of the 3SI.

The report is titled Completing Europe From the North-South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunications Union (Atlantic Council vd., 2014). The purpose of the report is briefly explained in the foreword as follows:

Europe is at an inflection point in its history. The vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace is under pressure from within and outside its frontiers. Centrifugal political and economic forces challenge its cohesion and unity from the inside. At the same time, the EU faces multiple external threats, including a resurgent Russia, growing global economic competition, and geopolitical upheaval. The resilience of the European Union is at stake and this portends serious implications for the transatlantic community. Economic growth and energy security are backbones of that resilience, but both are weak spots in the chainmail of Europe.

The Atlantic Council and Central Europe Energy Partners decided to undertake *The Completion of Europe the North South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunications Union* to highlight a critical element in the process of addressing those weaknesses and completing Europe: infrastructure development across Central Europe in the energy, transportation, and telecommunications sectors. As an integrated set of energy, transportation, and digital links spanning from the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black Seas, the North-South Corridor is the starting point to the creation of a single European market, a cornerstone to the vision of a united Europe. The study is structured around those three dimensions of the North-South Corridor and complements them with a fourth: how to address the financial requirements of infrastructure investments.

As can be seen, the foreword of the report did not only inspire the 3SI, but also provided a roadmap for the Initiative.

The Development of the 3SI

After the Dubrovnik Joint Statement in 2016, the first summit meeting of the 3SI was held in Warsaw in 2017. At this summit, the EU's commitment to strengthening its unity, improving the region's transport links and integrating it into the Trans-European network, as well as implementing the EU's energy policy objectives was confirmed. Moreover, the

first list of the joint economic projects was adopted and the establishment of the 3SI Business Forum was decided (Three Seas Initiative, 2017). During the Warsaw Summit, the USA expressed its keen support for cooperating with the 3SI and the strategic importance of transatlantic cooperation was affirmed (Three Seas Initiative, 2017).

The third summit of the 3SI was held in Bucharest on September 17-18th, 2018. In addition to the member states, the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, Germanys Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas and US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry also attended the summit. The first 3SI Business Forum meeting was held during the summit (Three Seas Summit, 2018). The Fourth Summit and the second Business Forum were held in Brdo and Ljubljana on June 5-6th, 2019, and then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, as well as President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier and US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry attended the summit as partner country representatives. In the Summit Declaration, it was stated that the 3SI is open to the participation of the Western Balkans and the EU Eastern Partnership countries (Three Seas Initiative, 2019).

The subsequent summits were held online in Tallin in 2020 , Sofia in 2021 and Riga in 2022, respectively. During the Riga summit, it was announced that Ukraine joined the 3SI as a partner country, and Russia was strongly condemned for its military offensive against Ukraine (Three Seas Initiative, 2022a). It was announced that the 3SI Summit Meeting in 2023 will be held in Bucharest on September 6-7th.

Greece attended the Sofia Summit as a guest country and President of Greece Katerina Sakellaropoulou delivered a speech. The Greek President emphasized in her speech that Greeces geographical location provides the country with the potential to play a significant inter-regional role in Southeastern Europe. According to a news article in the Greek press, in a social media post following her speech, she said, Greece is participating in the Three Seas Initiative Summit as a guest country for the first time. I pointed out that a stronger relationship with this cooperation formation will add the Mediterranean as a fourth sea, to the Initiative for the benefit of all participants" (Hellasjournal, 2021). Its possible to assume that the Greek President may have indirectly aimed to include the Aegean Sea within the scope of the 3SI through this statement. Below is a paragraph from a contribution made by a Greek academic to the publication titled Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit. Advancing the common agenda, which was penned by the European Institute of Romania prior to the Bucharest Summit in September 2023:

Although the 3SI has placed economic development and connectivity at its core, Russias war against Ukraine and the cementing of global powers rivalry (US, China, Russia) underscore the Initiatives importance for a more geopolitical EU and for consolidating NATOs Eastern Flank. Today, effective cross-border connectivity and unrestricted transport still remain vital to European security and deterrence, as proved by the need to rapidly move troops across Central Europe in response to Russian military aggression. In this regard, Alexandroupolis port in northern Greece has proven of critical importance to NATO.(Manoli, 2023)

The Projects that the 3SI Developed

Considering their geographical locations, territorial acreage, population and economic capacity, it is observed that the territory of the twelve 3SI participating states account for corresponds to 30% of the EU's spatial area, 25% of its population and 20% of the EU's total gross product (Brie, 2023). These ratios give the impression that the 3SI, on paper, has a considerable capacity. Despite this capacity and the ambitious targets and plans put forward in the seven 3SI summits thus far, it can be concluded that the projects formed within the framework of the Initiative have remained on a very small scale and that no major concrete project has been put forward, let alone completed.

According to the 3SI website, the total number of interlinked projects within the Initiative by June 2022 are 91, while the estimated investment value amounts to □□□□□□ billion (Three Seas Initiative, 2023a). Three of these projects were created by Bulgaria, one by the Czech Republic, sixteen by Croatia, four by Estonia, fifteen by Hungary, eight by Latvia, nine by Lithuania, ten by Poland, seven by Romania, three by Slovakia and six by Slovenia (Three Seas Initiative, 2023a). Four of these projects are related to the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal/Connection/Link for shipment in the Danube River (Czechia and Poland), one is for the Danube River Regulation Study (Croatia), and one is for the FAIRway Danube project proposed by Romania, which will ensure efficient passage through the Romanian section of the Danube (Three Seas Initiative, 2023a).

The 3SI and Energy Security

The provision of energy security is among the primary objectives of the EU and its member states economic policies. In this regard, it is possible to say that energy security is a subject of particular concern to the new EU member states that make up the 3SI and that ensuring energy independence is one of the Initiatives main goals. Energy security was not directly addressed in the 2016 Joint Declaration, which announced the formation of the 3SI. Conversely, the Joint Statement of the latest 2022 Riga Summit referred to energy security in the statement in the following manner:

Emphasizing that the strengthening of energy security and diversification of routes and sources of supply across the region, together with accelerating the deployment of renewables and further improving energy efficiency and a just transition to a climate-neutral energy sector, are our paramount priorities.(Three Seas Initiative, 2022a)

A similar statement was included in the Joint Statement of the 2021 Sofia Summit. As for the 2018 Bucharest Summits Joint Statement, energy security was only mentioned as a concept. One may conclude that this subject became a part of the 3SI agenda essentially during the preparation and actual offensive phase of Russias military operation against Ukraine. In this sense, it must be emphasized that the subject of energy security was discussed as one of the most substantial topics in the report published in 2014 by the

Atlantic Council titled Completing Europe From the North-South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunications Union. The subject was explained at the beginning of the report as follows:

The North-South Corridors liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and its networks of gas and oil lines and electricity grids would diversify the sources of energy for all Central European states. This is exemplified by the LNG terminal being completed in Świnoujście, Poland, and the one proposed for Krk Island, Croatia, which would enable Central Europe to tap into an increasingly global LNG market, including prospective shipments from the United States under the right set of regulatory and market conditions. The corridor is crucial to the completion of an effective single European energy market, one that can receive inputs of oil, gas, and electricity from a variety of current and prospective European and non-European suppliers, and distribute them throughout Europe on a competitive basis. (Atlantic Council vd., 2014, p. 2).

It is highlighted in the report that the preconditions for the US to play a more active role in the North-South Corridor are present and that energy security has been the most prominent priority in US-EU relations for a long time. Furthermore, the report underlines that the US-EU Energy Council is among the most active intergovernmental bodies within this relationship and that one of the Councils main priorities is to diversify the EUs energy resources and prevent over-reliance on Russian petrol and natural gas. This priority closely monitored by the US special envoy for energy in Eurasia. Moreover, the report emphasizes that the said priority is carried out by the Special Representative and Coordinator for Energy Affairs, the US State Department's Bureau of Energy Resources and the US Department of Energy.

News reports mentioned that the issue of energy security was at the forefront of the speeches of President of Poland Andrzej Duda and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the Riga Summit (Nathan Alan-Lee, 2022). It is stated in the news regarding energy security that the Świnoujście (mentioned in the Atlantic Council report) liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal was expanded, that the gas pipeline between Poland and Lithuania has been completed and put into use in a way that would connect Poland to the Baltic States and to Finland. Additionally, the reports note that the Poland-Slovakia gas interlink is now active and the Baltic Pipeline is ready for operational use.

Furthermore, it was explained during the Riga Summit that a new plan, which would effectively double liquid gas import capacity in Croatia, was announced and that the topic of expanding the initiative beyond the EU borders was discussed. A Croatian academic underlined that the LNG terminal project in the Krk island is one of Croatias most promising contributions to the 3SI and that the project aims to meet the national energy needs and increase the security of gas supply by providing a new supply route to the countries of Central and Southeastern Europe. Moreover, the academic stated that flexibility in gas supply was achieved, that contribution was made towards energy diversity by primarily creating opportunities for utilizing new resources and new routes and, most importantly, reliance on Russian supply was decreased and that Croatia may become a regional energy hub (Samardzija, 2023, p. 16).

In his speech at the Riga Summit, US Secretary of State Blinken was quoted in news reports as stating that the 3SI has taken meaningful steps towards regional energy security (Nathan Alan-Lee, 2022). Moreover, the news indicate that the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which is a development finance institution and agency of the United States federal government, and the 3SI Investment Fund have agreed on a preliminary protocol that will form the basis of an agreement for the DFC to provide up to 300 million US Dollars in financing to the Investment Fund. It is underlined that the financing of the DFC will aid the energy and infrastructure investments that enhance energy security, promote energy diversity and develop connections in the Three Seas region (U.S. International Development Finance Cooperation, 2022). In its statement, the DFC explained that the Chief Executive Officer Scott Nathan expressed DFC is committed to investing in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. This will promote energy security and counter Russian aggression in Europe.

The information above indicate that the US is acting as the 3SIs source of influence, guide and financial supporter with regards to energy security. Although twelve members of the 3SI are EU countries, it would be difficult to claim that the EU is significantly supporting the Initiative. Especially with regards to energy security. The real owner of the Initiative, so to speak, especially in the field of energy security, seems to be the USA.

Projects Regarding the Danube Rivers Efficient Utilization within the Framework of the 3SI

The Danube River is the second longest river in Europe after the Volga and is among the main transportation and communication routes. In terms of economic worth, only the Rhine River carries more significance within the general European economy. The Rhine-Main-Danube canal, which was put into service in Germany in 1992 and connects the Main River and the Danube, physically connected Europe from west to east, linking Constanța (the largest port city on the Black Sea coast in Romania's Dobrudja region) with Rotterdam on the North Sea for the transportation of cargo and people. This created a 3,500-kilometer waterway through 15 countries in Europe, making the Danube one of the most important inland waterways in Europe (Clarke, 2018).

As mentioned above, four countries (Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland and Romania) have established projects regarding the Danube River within the framework of the 3SIs primary projects. The first three of these projects are related to the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal.
Romania's project is about the part of the Danube River that reaches the Black Sea. The Danube Delta has recently become a current issue due to Ukraines grain exports (Higgins, 2023). As one may recall, following its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 19th, Russia declared a warning stating that all ships en route from Black Sea waters to Ukrainian ports will be considered as potential carriers of military cargo (Altman, 2023). As per international news, at least six civilian cargo ships disregarded these warnings of Russia last month. One of the ships entered the Danube River and the remaining five anchored in the Black Sea, near the region where the Danube flows into the sea.

Afterwards, these ships sailed towards Ukraines up-river port of Izmail (Altman, 2023).

The news on the subject state that the ships which have collected grain along the Danube River mostly sailed through the Sulina Canal to Constanta, which is Romania's largest Black Sea port and is located 85 miles down the coast. The cargo was transferred to larger ships at Constanta, which then sailed out of the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits to distant ports. Its possible to say that these reports indicate how much the Danube River Basin and the region where the Danube River pours into the Black Sea are gaining key significance regarding the stability of the Black Sea region.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the components of the FAIRway Danube project presented by Romania within the 3SI framework. It is understood that the project includes hydrography, signaling, electronic mapping; computing systems and dissemination of water level forecasts; innovative technologies by monitoring the signaling scheme, the use of autonomous land, air and water systems as a support for current administration activities; procedures and systems for identifying and monitoring factors influencing airworthiness on the Romanian Danube sector; acquireing two new ships that will be used for measuring and signaling activities.(Three Seas Initiative, 2022b).

With regards to the developments in recent years concerning the Danube Rivers connection to the Black Sea, one must emphasize that there are considerations of using this river for military purposes. Following Russias annexation of Crimea in 2014, some interesting proposals were brought forward as part of NATOs efforts to consolidate its presence in the Black Sea. Sending NATO military ships to the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits within the framework of the 1936 Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits was among the peculiar proposals that were put forward. As is known, the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits grants Türkiye full control and authority to regulate the passage of military vessels through the Turkish Bosphorous and Dardanelles Straits.

The Convention guarantees the free passage of civilian ships in peacetime, restricts the passage of military ships of non-Black Sea littoral states and allows such ships to remain in the Black Sea for a maximum of 21 days. Clever ideas have been put forward in order to find a loophole within these limitations. In this context, the German option was proposed. According to this option, Article 30 of the 1948 Convention Regarding the Regime of Navigation on the Danube only grants the Danube countries the right to operate in the Danube with their military vessels. However, if a Danube country wishes to enter an area outside of the Danubes territorial jurisdiction, it must first obtain permission from the relevant Danube country. Germany is the only Danube country that has a navy and is not bordering the Black Sea.

According to this option, if Romania invites Germany to its territory within the Danube River, it would be theoretically possible to exceed the 21-day limit set by the Montreux Convention. In this context, it is mentioned that Germany sent only one vessel - a 3,500-ton Elbe-class (support vessel) - to the Black Sea for a total of 18 days in 2019. These clever ideas that have been put forward so that NATO could expand its presence within the Black Sea region essentially aim to get rid of the limitations of the Montreux

Convention (Tulun, 2021). It is clear that the intent behind such creative proposals is to find loopholes in legally binding treaties by going through the back door. However, such approaches can lead to severe consequences rather than military benefits. As such, they might cause serious detriment to Türkiyes efforts to maintain stability within the Black Sea region (which has recently turned into a battlefield) through her meticulous implementation of the provisions of the Montreux Convention. One must remember that any attempts to disrupt the status quo within the Black Sea, which was established by the Montreaux Convention and lasted for nearly eighty-seven years, could be amounted to sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind.

Criticism Against and Various Approaches within the 3SI

The 3SIs proposal has been met with hesitation by some EU Member States from the very beginning. Political issues of the present often have aspects linked to historical events. This historical context can be informative in explaining complex issues in contemporary international politics. In this context, it is necessary to review some historical events to understand why some EU countries oppose and distance themselves from the 3SI.

Several EU countries view the Three Sea Initiative as a modern-day practice of a proposal known as Międzymorze (Intermarium) in Poland before the Second World War. Intermarium refers to an area between the Black and Baltic Sea, bordering it from the north and south respectively. Its geographical borders are best explained with the rivers. The rivers, instead of precisely defining the spread of this area, help to understand their approximate size. In the north the boundaries follow the Baltic coast from the estuary of the Vistula and then, the Neman until the Gulf of Finland, where they slope south through Lake Peipus into Velikaya River. They proceed toward the general area where the Western Dvina bends, the Svir originates, and the Berezina, Sozh, and Desna, in turn, meet the Dnieper as it flows into the Black Sea. The boundaries hug its coast until the delta of the Danube to move sharply north from there following the Prut toward the Dniester and the Bug as it veers west to meet the Vistula and complete the cycle in its estuary at the Baltic. (Chodakiewicz, 2017, p. 35).

The intermarium proposal, brought forward by Polish statesman Józef Piłsudski in the interwar period, envisages the creation of a Polish-led confederation linking the states of the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Sea regions. The aim of the proposal was the cooperation between the countries in this region to support Central Europes independence and provide a counterbalance to the power of Soviet Russia and Germany. This proposal could never materialize, partly due to conflicting national interests. Lithuania perceived this as a threat against its national independence. Czechoslovakia did not want to join the alliance with Poland, while Hungary and Romania preferred to cooperate with Poland rather than with each other (Górka, 2018).

The 3SI has had active and guiding US support since its inception and has generally been perceived as a tool to strengthen the resilience of Central and Eastern Europe against Russia and China. In this context, an opinion was formed that it was under US control, and

the suspicion that Poland was trying to create a new US-supported center of gravity within the EU that would balance Germany and France has been the most important obstacle on the development of the 3SI since its establishment. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary were not initially among the countries enthusiastically approaching the creation of a new cooperation format in Central and Eastern Europe. These countries thought that the existing cooperation formats in the region, such as the Visegrad Group, were sufficient for this type of cooperation, and took a cautious approach towards the 3SI.

For instance, the Czech Republic has so far been one of the 3SIs least active members. It did not join the 3SI Investment Fund, nor did it seek to host the 3SI summits. The new Czech government canceled the above-mentioned Danube-Oder-Elbe water corridor project, which was the only project previously submitted to the 3SI (Juzov, 2023, p. 18). It is being stated that the Czech Republic, a member of the Visegrád Group and the trilateral Slavkov Triangle with Austria and Slovakia, does not find it necessary, in principle, to form another organization in the region. Additionally, it especially considers Germany as one of its close strategic partners and joined the 3SI in order to have a voice in the shaping the future of the organization (Kornis, 2022). Moreover, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are of the view that the 3SI should be progressing within the framework of the EU and the organization should connect, not divide the EU member states. Both countries welcome Germany's participation in the Initiative as an observer (Dostál et al., 2021, p. 3).

The Czech Republics reserved stance towards the Initiative and suspicion regarding Poland's political intentions were never resolved before the 3SIs 2018 Bucharest Summit. It is said that the Czech Republic's distant attitude towards the Initiative and its scepticism towards Poland's political intentions could not be overcome until the 3SIs 2018 Bucharest Summit. During this summit, the members were assured that the Initiative was in no way intended to weaken the EU and that the US interest in the Initiative had a positive impact on the Czech Republic's view of the Initiative. Additionally, it was stated that with the subsequent active participation of the US in the Initiative and the establishment of the investment fund, the 3SI started to become relatively appealling for the Czech Republic. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the changing geopolitical reality caused by Russias aggression against Ukraine has been a factor that has positively influenced the approach of EU member states in the region sceptical of the 3SI, such as the Czech Republic, compared to the past.

Views of the Black Sea Littoral 3SI Members on the Initiative

It is possible to say that the presence and role of Bulgaria, one of the important Black Sea littoral members of the 3SI, in the Initiative is important for the stabilisation of the Black Sea. It is observed that Bulgaria is particularly interested in the 3SIs work concerning energy security. As per its statements regarding the subject, Bulgaria stated that energy security and diversification of routes and sources of supply across the region remains a paramount priority for the 3SI, together with the transition to alternative energy sources and the implementation of the European Green Deal. Furthermore, Bulgaria considers it important that established cooperation formats, including working groups of the US-led

Partnership for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation (PTEC), continue their work. Additionally, it attributes much importance to the development of energy infrastructure and connectivity in Southeast Europe and the Black Sea region (Three Seas Initiative, 2021).

During the 3SI Riva Summit, President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev announced the acquisition of a significant non-majority stake in the terminals of the Port of Burgas, Bulgaria's second largest port, by 3SI Investment (Ullyett, 2022). The Burgas Ports proximity to the Bosphorous was mentioned in the 3SIs statement on the subject and the following aspects were emphasized:

The investment in BMF Port Burgas, is well aligned with the Funds objective to improve connectivity within the Three Seas Region. The Port of Burgas is an important infrastructure asset connecting the Three Seas Region with Central Asia and the Middle East, strategically located on the Black Sea coast and is the closest European Union port to the Bosphorus. The Port of Burgas also acts as the primary maritime gateway to Sofia and Plovdiv, Bulgarias most developed and industrialised cities, through direct rail and road connections. The investment will strengthen EU integration by decreasing infrastructural gaps and delivering broader economic benefits to the Region by improving connectivity and increasing the Ports capacity. (Three Seas Initiative, 2022c)

According to Bulgarian experts, in the medium-term perspective, developments in Bulgaria's immediate surroundings are important, which may intensify or suspend Bulgaria's desire to make a more vibrant contribution to the Three Seas Initiative. In this context, it is of primary importance for Greece, where Bulgaria is working and planning on various energy diversification projects in Southeastern Europe, to make a decision on joining the 3SI. Another point is that the acceleration of the North-South connection as a direct result of Russia's war against Ukraine will increase Bulgaria's interest in the 3SI provided that the conflict remains limited to Ukrainian territory (Georgiev, 2023, p. 15).

In this evaluation of the Bulgarian expert, the reference to Greece's participation in the 3SI as a member is noteworthy. This reference needs to be addressed together with the Greek Presidents above-mentioned idea at the Sofia Summit about adding the Mediterranean to the 3SI as the fourth sea. In this case, one can interpret that the Bulgarian expert made an indirect reference to the connection of Greeces port of Alexandroupoli with Bulgaria. On the other hand, it is known that the US plans to use the Port of Alexandroupoli as an energy transmission station, in addition to military purposes. It is worth remembering some of the issues that the US Ambassador to Athens at the time, Geoffrey R. Pyatt, touched upon in his speech at the port on July 23rd, 2020, upon the arrival of US military equipment, including heavy weapons, at the port of Alexandroupoli. In his speech, Ambassador Pyatt explains the importance they attach to the port of Alexandroupoli as follows:

Alexandroupoli plays a strategic role in our countries common goal of building European energy and regional security. The city is poised to become a regional energy hub with the completed market test for the FSRU[1] terminal and plans for a gas-fired GE power plant; a transportation, defense, and security hub with the geostrategic location of its port, rail, and road networks feeding into southeastern Europe; and a commercial hub with the ports

upcoming privatization. (U.S. Embassy in Athens, 2020)

Romania is one of the 3SIs active members. Following hosting the 3SI summit in 2018, Romania will host the 3SI summit for a second time in September 2023. It is understood that Romania will push to expand the 3SI towards the Black Sea region at the next summit. In his speech at the Romanian Atlantic Council at the end of 2022, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Bogdan Aurescu, stated that the participation of Romania, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine as members of the 3SI is a subject of priority for his country (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, 2022).[2]

The Romanian Minister stated that they are continuously supporting the development of regional strategic infrastructure on the North-South axis of Europe within the framework of the 3SI, that they consider this axis as the backbone of current and future plans to enhance the security and economic development of the region and that this axis needs to be carried out with substantial transatlantic participation and the active support of the US to the region. The Minister additionally expressed that the war in Ukraine and Russias unlawful aggression against Ukraine once again reveal the importance of the security-infrastructure relationship, that focusing on transport, energy and digital infrastructure in the Three Seas region is critical to solidifying the operating foundations of a permanent rules-based international order. Moreover, the Minister conveyed that Romania during the 2023 Summit will seek means to involve Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia in projects under the 3SI. He noted that concrete examples of such projects include building bridges, interconnecting power grids, connecting the Black Sea coasts of Romania and Georgia with underwater optical fiber and electric cables, as well as opening ferry lines to carry cargo. The Romanian Minister also explained that Romania foresees the the extension of the participating partner status granted to Ukraine to the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. He additionally stated that Romania will continue to explore the possibility of expanding the role of valued strategic partners of the Initiative, such as Germany.

Assessments on this subject prepared by Georgian experts explained that Georgia's security environment is deteriorating due to Russias unlawful occupation in Ukraine, that this change enhances the importance of participating in regional cooperation such as the 3SI, that the EUs and NATOs concern for Black Sea security has increased and that the infrastructure and logistics projects of the 3SI have gained importance in this context (Samkharadze, 2023, p. 39).

The Issues that the Three Seas Initiative is Facing

Its not possible to claim that the 3SI, which Poland spearheaded with the support of the US, has achieved any concrete success. A significant portion of the Initiatives efforts consist of political discourses on the economic potential of the region and the benefits that regional cooperation can bring. These discourses, so far, have not been substantial. From an external perspective, the Three Seas Initiative itself, as well as the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund appear to be under Polands full authority. It seems that this

jurisdiction has gained prominence, especially following Russia's military campaign against Ukraine and the emergence of a serious war situation on Ukrainian territory. The fact that the Initiative, despite being established around eight years ago, is still essentially conducted over a format in which heads of state come together, still dominated by political discourse, its projects created remain very limited and no steps have been taken towards the institutionalization of the Initiative, are all factors that make it difficult for the 3SI to maintain its activity effectively. The Initiative not attaching importance to institutionalization, not even establishing a secretariat and its ongoing obscurity within the overall structure of the EU are grave impediments to the Initiatives significance.

3SI members are among Ukraines prominent supporters in the escalating conflict started by Russia. This conflict is of particular concern for Poland, which is a member of the EU and NATO, and the Baltic countries. However, in its current capacity, it appears unlikely for the 3SIs support for Ukraine to translate into cooperation that goes beyond political statements. The Black Sea constitutes one of the three pillars of the Three Seas Initiative and is currently at the center of an armed conflict. Among the most critical defiencies of the Initiative orginate from the lack of direct contact with Black Sea littoral states other than the Russian Federation. In this context, the attempt of Romania, which is a Black Sea littoral state and pursues a relatively active policy within the 3SI, to include Georgia in the Initiative can be considered as a positive development. Nevertheless, the fact that no contact has been established with the most powerful country in the region with a large coastal area on the Black Sea indicates that the Initiative has not sufficiently taken into account the current geopolitical and geostrategic realities.

Conclusion

In the period following the Russian Federations offensive against Ukraine and the conflict escalating into an outright war, the 3SI began to considerably push aside the objective of establishing cooperation in the Central and Eastern European region to expand cross-border energy, transport and digital infrastructure, which was declared as the Initiatives primary objective. It began to emphasize political discourse in support of Ukraine, which also may serve military purposes. This conduct inevitably turned the Initiative into an active party in the conflict, especially in the Black Sea region. Considering its current situation, the 3SI is far from being a platform that can take on a beneficial role in restoring stability in the Black Sea region by taking a relatively balanced stance in the region. It can be argued that this stance the 3SI is choosing to take in the current period reflects an attitude that over-emphasizes an approach that based on military security.

All 3SI members are EU states. And with the exception of Austria, all of the 3SI members are NATO members. The stances of both the EU and NATO on the war situation that has emerged in the eastern region of Europe and mainly north of the Black Sea as a result of the Russian Federations attack against Ukraine, are clear. Although the 3SIs primary goal is to develop cooperation projects on energy, transportation and digital infrastructure in its field of application, it is attempting to involve itself more than necessary in the highly tense environment created by the state of war in Ukraine. This approach of the 3SI seems

like an attempt to surpass the EU and NATOs authority and will likely cause more harm than good to the Initiative. It would not be surprising if this attitude resulted in intervention in the flaming environment in the Black Sea not with fire extinguishers, but with flammable materials that would increase the flame.

On the other hand, it would be useful to meticulously examine the motives behind the creative thinking regarding the inclusion of the Mediterranean Sea, including the Aegean Sea, in the scope of application of the 3SI. It will be beneficial to the security and stability of the Black Sea region, as well as the whole of Europe, if the 3SI chooses to focus on its primary objectives, instead of adding issues on to its agenda which it can not solve.

* *Tulun, Teoman Ertuğrul. Üç Deniz Girişimi, Enerji Güvenliği ve Karadeniz Bölgesinin İstikrarı. In Enerji, Güvenlik, Hukuk ve Diplomasi Çok Boyutlu Analizler, edited by Zeynep Deniz Altınsoy, Anıl Çağlar Erkan, and Ahmet Ateş, 385. Ankara: Yetkin Yayınevi, 2023. https://yetkin.com.tr/enerji-guvenlik-hukuk-ve-diplomasi-cok-boyutlu-analizler-14492.*

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*** *Image: https://3seas.eu/media/news/three-seas-registered-as-a-trademark-with-euipo*

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[1] An FSRU is a floating vessel that can transport, store and re-gasify liquefied natural gas (LNG). An FSRU can transport and distribute natural gas to destinations without

onshore regasification terminals.

[2] Minister of Foreign Affairs Bogdan Aurescu conveyed Romanias priorities during the 2023 Three Seas Initiative summit in Bucharest.

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