

## THE 3 SEAS INITIATIVE: GEOPOLITICS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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### Abstract

The Three Seas Initiative (I3M) is an ambitious geopolitical project comprising twelve EU Member States located between the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea: from North to South, a wide range encompassing Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Croatia. It is a region with more than 25% of the EU's territory and about 22% of its population, but with a much lower economic representation. I3M aims to promote the development of central European infrastructures with a view to bringing this region closer to the economic development levels of other European countries.

The I3M aimed for development of large projects of regional infrastructure in three major fields: energy, transport (road and rail) and the digital field (communications).

The geopolitical importance of this project is immediately evident from the fact that many of these countries are landlocked states with no access to the sea. These infrastructures will now give them access to three seas and thus contribute to greater independence and room for maneuver in their policies. This region, situated in the center of the European continent, one of the main energy markets of the future, is also the scene of a very strong trade struggle between Russia, with its natural gas supplies, and the US, with its growing production of shale gas.

The projects launched by I3M are therefore of greater economic and geopolitical importance, although they still have to ensure appropriate funding. Although the Three Seas Fund (TSF) was created, with a duration of 30 years and which aims to secure a financing of 100 billion euros (from an initial investment of the Member States in the amount of 5 billion euros), the truth is that much will depend on the support given by the EU and the countries interested in these projects, such as the US and China (link to the silk route).

Some European countries have seen the birth of this Initiative with some suspicion, such as Germany, which has increasingly been focusing on Nordstream II, and Russia, which accuse their promoters of representing US interests on the European continent.

Regardless of the controversies raised, I3M seems to be a form of regional cooperation that makes perfect sense and fully integrates into the spirit of European integration, seeking for its peoples the same development as the other Member States.

### Keywords

Three Seas Initiative, Central Europe, Energy, Infrastructure

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### Introduction

Gradually, the European Union has been expanding, and increasing the number of its member states. It was also able, in parallel, to launch the single currency - the euro - and deepen their degree of integration, even in times of crisis. It was not, however, able to prevent the existence of a multi-speed Europe, generating ideological cleavages and different perceptions of the Union model. Not even able to keep the *acquis communautaire* intact... and even see its integrity possibly as a large territory, with issues such as Brexit's...

In this process, there are aspects which are crucial for the future of Europe, and especially of Community Europe. First, the definition of its geographical boundaries. The Union has not stopped expanding, including any state that meets the membership criteria, without being careful to clearly define its boundaries. Problems such as those arising from issues such as Turkey's drift, and the Russian Federation-induced fragmentation processes in Ukraine and Georgia thus arise. A geopolitical entity such as the European Union necessarily has to explain its project, its founding idea and what is the space it concerns. A process that, to say the least, seems to be in crisis today.

Enlargement has been fast, but not without tensions, as divisions and regional blocs are emerging between Member States that share common interests and do not see themselves in the Paris-Berlin axis. These divisions are also assuming an ideological feature, with the emergence of alternative proposals, which have even led to attempts to marginalize the countries that propose them. Worse still, some countries are discussing leaving the euro, or even the Union, as is the paradigmatic case of the United Kingdom.

This work focuses specifically on the Central European region - a broad concept of Central Europe, as we will see - and, more specifically, the recent Three Seas Initiative (I3M), which refers to the space between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas and which has been shrouded in some controversy. Central Europe seems to be back, being a region that has common features and problems among its member states, some political identification, a shared past, and the perception of common threats.

The enlargement of the European Communities - and after the European Union - was done, until a certain moment, by integrating countries that had in common the fact that

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they belonged to the community of democracies in western Europe. It was a set of states, which albeit with different economic developments, had a great homogeneity in political terms and even in recent historical experience, marked by the "security guarantees" given by the Atlantic Alliance, which has enabled them to achieve major economic development based on increasing legal certainty which, although noticeably unevenly, has been establishing there.

With the fall of the Wall and the liberation of the countries of "Eastern Europe", they soon aspired to join the European Union on the one hand, in pursuit of the development they had dreamed of, and on the other hand to NATO, the organization that provided them with such assurances of security and respect for their newly acquired sovereignty.

However, if it is true that most of these countries joined the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance in the early years following the fall of the Wall, it is also true that they were still very suspicious of their eastern neighbor – now the Russian Federation – and also somewhat reluctant to join federalist projects that implied important compromises in terms of national sovereignty. It is therefore not surprising that, in parallel with the process of European integration, if they were drawing up forms of regional cooperation of which the Visegrad Pact is the most visible example – a point we will return to. These did not undermine European integration – far from it – but they emphasized regional specificities, which included not just economic issues (in terms of development, infrastructure needs, energy dependence, etc.), but also political and of security (fear of Russian interventionism, defense of sovereignty, etc.). Their perceptions of security were often not shared by other countries, who did not know what it was like to live under a totalitarian communist regime for almost half a century.

The European Union did not oppose these forms of regional integration and even considered them to have several positive aspects. Thus, these were growing in number and importance, becoming particularly active at the very moment when a President emerged in Russia – Vladimir Putin – who comes to challenge the policies of its predecessors and shelter some revisionist theories that criticized the breakup of the Soviet Union, the loss of territory and NATO's strategic advance towards its borders. Thus, organizations such as the Pact of Visegrad (so-called *Visegrad 4*, which began with a series of informal meetings to agree positions on their entry into the European Union, and that later has been formalized, recreating itself as a *Visegrad Plus*, a larger and less formalized entity to include "without identity loss" other adjacent states, such as Georgia) – grouping Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary –, which had a rather residual activity so far, have strengthened their cooperation and will even arouse the interest of other countries in the region, such as the Baltics and Romania.

While asserting their allegiance to the European Union and the European project, these countries viewed with increasing suspicion the more federalist proposals being put forward by France and other Member States. Their security – this is their belief – is essentially guaranteed by NATO and the United States, with problems that greatly affected the countries of the region and which had economic and security implications, one of the main being energy dependence on Russia. As important a problem as the Kremlin was proven to use it as a geopolitical weapon, as it became evident in the case of Ukraine.

However, it should be noted that this region of Central Europe already had a long tradition of attempts at regional integration, thus having a marked Central European identity, although this concept had no geographical and scientific basis and varied throughout history, to the interest of the powers. Proposals for the creation of a *Mittleuropa*, "the territory where Germanic culture constitutes the common denominator" (Joseph Platsch, *Mittleuropa*, 1904), added, in a perspective more favorable to the interest of the small powers that composed it, to others more focused on the Slavic states and Hungary, as the the case of the *Intermarium* (proposal by Marshal Pilsudski, President of Poland in the interwar period), a construct that had the advantage of being a real security glacis



against Russia. Other views from recent historians and analysts have extended this concept to Romania (Elena Zamfirescu, in her *Mapping Central Europe*) or even the Balkan countries according to a definition of Central Europe as the space of influence of four great empires: Germanic, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Turkish (Frédéric Mitterrand, *Les Aigles Foudroyées*). This broadening of the concept makes sense considering the recent past.

In fact, regardless of whether we call it Central Europe or Central and Eastern Europe (as some argue), there is a range of countries which, due to their recent historical experience and its implications at various levels, feel that they have common problems and challenges that will only gain from being addressed by all together. Even without calling into question other geopolitical commitments arising from its bet on European construction.

As a result of the above characteristics, it will not be strange to note that among these countries, there is a relatively high percentage of conservative “populist” governments contesting the federal model for Europe, immigration policies (likely to pose challenges to its newly acquired identity) and even some of the economic priorities for the European Union.

## **1. Central Europe space and historical context**

Although this work is not about the concept of Central Europe, it is considered that given the complexity of the region and the numerous integration proposals put forward over time, there is every convenience that we should look at, however briefly, those, before we study the latest: the Three Seas Initiative.

The complexity of the region is based on several factors, first the multiplicity of small powers that make it up, resulting mostly from the dismemberment of great empires, and the particularity of including all different languages, cultures and ethnicities, and these are rarely confined to just one state. They still have recent borders and, in some cases, much discussed, so it is natural that conflicts, claims and attempts of integration into wider spaces have multiplied, either under the broad concept of Empire or Federation.

These integration initiatives have taken many forms, from mere customs unions to larger federal geopolitical projects involving a larger or smaller number of countries. From more homogeneous designs, spanning only the two empires - the German and the Austro-Hungarian - to the broader concepts extending to the Baltics, the Balkans and even Italy and neighboring countries, as is the case in Belgium or the Netherlands. Some even propose models that evolve towards integration across the continent.

For this work we will adopt a broader view of Central Europe. This is, by the way, the spirit of I3M, from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans, it also encompasses the riparian states of the Danube, the main central European river, which flows into Germany and flows into Romania's Black Sea coast.

This area is bounded to the north by the Baltic Sea and the great European plain, which runs from the Elbe River to the Gulf of Finland and is a major concern for the safety of Poland. In the center stand out the Czechs mountainous terrain, but also the famous Gate of Moravia, which gives way to several countries and is an important point for projects of I3M. The southernmost Carpathians follow, entering several countries and surrounding the great plain of Pannonia. To the west, the Alps span Austria and Slovenia and to the south the Balkans border the peninsula of the same name. Finally, Transylvania, a plateau region, which was the entry point and historic establishment of German-speaking minorities, still residing in the territory of present-day Romania.

This is a concept that deliberately leaves Germany out, even considering that it was precisely this country that, since Bismarck, but especially since William II, made it



impossible to integrate the whole region corresponding to the territories of the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Moreover, in the specific case of the Three Seas Initiative, Germany, while having observer status, turns out to be “on the other side”, in that, with the construction of Nordstream II and the direct supply of Russian gas to Europe through its territory, it is at the center of the threat of energy dependence for all of Central Europe.

Bismarck's option for the creation of the German Empire and thus setting aside the ideal of *Grossdeutschland* (the union of Germany and Austria), will have a big impact on the hope of setting up a *Reich* (Empire) capable of assuming itself as a platform for the framing of all these small, mostly Slavic nations that do not see themselves in the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy. “What they admire in the *Reich* the supporters of *Mittleuropa*, is of being, not a state in the modern sense of the term, but a principle of organization, a supranational notion, a center of attraction for the new states, which adaptive federalism of institutions would allow to integrate”<sup>2</sup>.

This federal ideal for the organization of central European space was particularly alive among Slav authors, as Jacques Droz points out: “numerous among the Slavs were those who recognized that there would be no other solution to the organization of central Europe than national autonomy within a federation of states”<sup>3</sup>.

Other integration proposals focused mainly on the economic field, such as that advocated by Frédéric List, as early as 1840, through the creation of “a large economic space”, “a vast federal state, constituting a commercial unit, encompassing the small neighboring nations – Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland - which would see the Danube and the Mediterranean route open via the Habsburg states”<sup>4</sup>.

Several other proposals - like Gustave Höfken's (1842), Chancellor Schwarzenberg or Baron Karl von Bruck (1848) – defended the creation of a vast *Zollverein*, a continental customs union stretching from the North Sea to the Adriatic.

These initiatives, which will win numerous supporters, will have a first setback with Bismarck's creation of the Second Reich, which will make it impossible to unite with Austria, defeated in Sadowa. As Jacques Droz points out, “the ideology of *Mittleuropa*, that is, the sense of the solidarity interests of the great states of Central Europe, between 1871 and 1914 knows an almost complete eclipse”<sup>5</sup>. But in the meantime, the Slavonic nations of the Double Monarchy are stirring under the banner of the principle of nationality.

In 1917, taking advantage of the misfortunes caused by the war, German Friedrich Naumann presented one of the most interesting proposals for integrating Central Europe with his book “*Mittleuropa*”, which immediately became a bestseller<sup>6</sup>. His proposal was that the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire should take advantage of the signing of peace to create a union, a *Mittleuropa*, which would constitute a large space capable of rivalling other great powers such as Russia and the USA. In a second phase, it would then be possible to accept applications from other European countries. The leadership would be German, but all nationalities would be respected.

However, during World War I, in the interwar period, and especially under the Third Reich, the Pangermanist ideas and the theories of the living space that will make the elites turn their backs on the idea of *Mittleuropa* and start thinking more in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> Droz, Jacques, 1960. *L'Europe Centrale. Évolution Historique de l'Idée de «Mittleuropa»*, Paris, Payot, page. 26 [Author trad.].

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Naumann, Friedrich, 1917. *Central Europe*, [translation by Christabel M. Meredith], New York, Alfred A. Knopf, (Classical Reprint Series, Forgotten Books, 2012).



*Osteuropa* (East Europe) and in the vast spaces to the east, the famous *Lebensraum* (or "living space") which Hitler aimed at.

An important attempt at regional integration in Central Europe, and with the merit of being born in a non-Germanic country, comes with the 1919 project of *Intermarium*, proposed by the first President of the Republic of a Poland then reborn, Marshal Józef Piłsudski. It intended to create a federation of states between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, namely Poland, the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Finland, Belarus, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia<sup>7</sup>. This is an important attempt but it will not materialize, so one of his followers, Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck, will in turn propose the creation of a Central European Union including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Scandinavia, the three Baltic States, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece. Another project that is just that.

Winston Churchill still attempts, at the end of World War II, to create a federation of small Central European nations<sup>8</sup>, which would constitute a *glacis* of security in relation to the Soviet Union. But Moscow strongly opposes. And these projects are not referred to anymore practically until the fall of the wall.

Some exceptions existed, proposals from intellectuals who spread their ideals in *samizdat*, but which did not have great expression. In 1953, Lieutenant Colonel F.O. Miksche, an exiled Communist Czechoslovak officer in London, vigorously defended the creation of regional federations in Europe, bringing together countries with identical interests, the same culture and economic interdependence. He considered that the Danube Basin could be "the core of future development for all of Central and Eastern Europe in the event of a collapse or diminution of Russian pressure"<sup>9</sup>. In his work, the author specifies this idea a little better when he states that "the problem of the creation of a Central European Federation can only be overcome in one way, through a limited federation in an area with favourable conditions, and which would constitute a nucleus to which neighbouring nations could later join. The regions inhabited by the Austrians, Czechs, Hungarians and Slovaks, which are geographically, culturally, psychologically and economically complementary, have favourable conditions for the initial federation"<sup>10</sup>. This is a very limited region, leaving out the Baltics, but also Poland, Romania or the Balkans.

Already at the end of the twentieth century, there were also some proposals for regional co-operation, of which we stand out:

In 1989, four countries launched the Quadrangular project - Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia. It was an initiative of the Italian President Gianni De Michelis and sought to counterbalance the growing German influence in the region. The initiative soon expanded to 18 countries, taking the name of the European Central Initiative, but the variety of agendas and the Yugoslavia War ultimately deprived it of any success.

Most important was the creation of the Visegrad Group - with the participation of Poland, Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Hungary - which, after a weak start-up phase, began to gain importance after the rise to power in Russia of President Putin.

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<sup>7</sup> Chodakiewicz, Marek Jan (2016). *Intermarium: The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas*, Routledge, 1<sup>st</sup>. ed.

<sup>8</sup> Droz, Jacques, op. Cit, page 264.

<sup>9</sup> Miksche, F.O. (1953). *Danubian Federation. A Study of Past Mistakes and Future Possibilities*, England, Kenion Press Ltd., Bucks (introduction by Philip Dunant, viii+38 pages.), pag. 4. [author trad.].

<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit., page 33.



## 2. The Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative (I3M), an ambitious geopolitical project launched by Poland, was created in August 2016 in Dubrovnik, on the Adriatic coast of Croatia, at the first I3M Summit with twelve Member States: from North to South, a wide range covering Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Croatia. A range that, while geographically and demographically significant, is not economically significant. We are talking about "a region that represents 28% of the European Union's territory and 22% of its population, but only 10% of its GDP"<sup>11</sup>. The aim was to promote the development of central European infrastructures, which would allow further economic development and thus bring that region closer to the levels of other European countries.

Map nr. 1 - Countries participating in the 3 Seas Initiative



Source: [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iniciativa\\_Tres\\_Mares](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iniciativa_Tres_Mares)

In July 2017, the II Summit took place in Warsaw, which was attended by US President Donald Trump, who praised this initiative, while launching harsh attacks on the *Nordstream II* pipeline and Germany itself for launching this project with Russia while supporting the sanctions policy regarding the conflict with Ukraine.

The Third Summit took place in Bucharest in September 2018 and its main objective was to identify the priority projects to be developed. The meeting was a success and the *Business Forum* was created<sup>12</sup> and I3M Network of Chambers of Commerce was established. A Declaration of Intent was also signed for the creation of the Three Seas Investment Fund. But the summit also had a major international impact by counting with the presence of "strategic partners", notably the USA, the EU and Germany, the latter with observer status and invited by Poland<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> PWC & Atlantic Council (2017). *The Road Ahead - CEE Transport Infrastructure Dynamics* (<https://www.pwc.pl/pl/pdf/the-roa-ahead-raport-pwc-atlantic-council.pdf>).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to creating an enabling environment for the implementation of I3M's priority projects, the Business Forum will also have a role in monitoring the progress of projects under implementation.

<sup>13</sup> The issue of a possible future inclusion of Germany in I3M as a Member State has been debated in the margins of its meetings as it is a major challenge. While, on the one hand, the resulting potential is evident,



The Fourth Summit, held on 5 and 6 June 2019 in Slovenia, was intended to make a first progress report on the development of the projects identified in Bucharest. However, their results came to light as the major development turned out to be the effective creation of the Three Seas Fund, which is under the administration of Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic and already has 500 million euros, still a very small amount for the overall needs of this project. The idea that it is time to move from political statements to actions was consensual. However, it is fair to point out that we are beginning to see a change in the perceptions of Germany and the European Union regarding I3M, with the first discussing internally the possibility of accession and with Brussels considering that this Initiative is fully in the spirit of European integration and therefore will be available to support several of its projects.

About the character and objectives of I3M much has been said. Its creators, who refuse any reference to geopolitics, argue that it is merely an initiative aimed at developing regional infrastructure and thus favoring European integration through the convergence of their economies with those of Western Europe<sup>14</sup>. This project will allow this region to take full advantage of its central position in Europe and the fact that it has a good network of contacts with the West and the East. It thus allows the north to be brought closer to the south and to the east to be brought closer to the west, while ending the limitations of some states that had no access to the sea.

Its enemies, however, see it as only a form of US interference intended to sell its shale gas (*shale gas*) to a continent that, it seems, will be the world's largest gas consumer. Others finally consider that there is also an attempt here to create a region with a different political and economic model than Brussels (although perfectly framed in the EU). The reality will be perhaps different from all these interpretations and perhaps have some of them all.

I3M was officially created as a way of achieving major regional infrastructure projects in three major fields: energy, transport (road and rail) and the digital field (communications), so as to overcome the relative backwardness that these countries still have in these areas. As synthesized by Alexandr Vondra<sup>15</sup>, at the energy level are on the table four major projects:

- “A pipeline connection to two large LNG terminals (liquefied natural gas): Swinoujsce, on the Baltic coast [from Poland], already operational; e Krk, a Croatian island of the Adriatic Sea”;
- The “*Gas Interconnection Poland-Lithuania (GIPL)*, integrating isolated gas markets from the Baltic countries into the EU network”;
- “The North-South Gas Corridor (BRUA), a two-way pipeline system. In the South it will connect to offshore explorations in the Black and Caspian Seas (via TANAP pipeline in Turkey). In the West, it will integrate the Balkans into the EU network via Baumgarten in Austria”;

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particularly in terms of financing, it is also clear that problems may arise, especially in the energy sector. Germany, however, has only applied for observer status because it wants to be present - and influence - an initiative that brings together neighbouring Central Europe and is the site of global competition between the US, Europe, China and even Turkey (*vide* Korybko, Andrew (2018). *Germany's Request to Partner with the Three Seas Initiative Is a Win for Poland*”, Global Research, available at <https://www.globalresearch.ca/germanys-request-to-partner-with-the-three-seas-initiative-is-a-win-for-poland/5652168>.

<sup>14</sup> “A citizen of ancient Europe has on average twice as many kilometers of motorway as one in Central Europe”, in Patricio de Antonio, 2017. *La iniciativa de los Tres Mares que conectará la Vieja y la Nueva Europa*, available at <https://ideas.pwc.es/archivos/20171013/iniciativa-de-los-tres-mares-conectara-vieja-y-nueva-europa/>.

<sup>15</sup> Vondra, Alexandr (2018). *Regional Integration at the Three Seas Summit*, available at <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/regional-integration-at-the-three-seas-summit/>.





- “The pipeline Eastring, which will link existing pipelines in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia.”

With regard to major transport infrastructure projects, according to the same author, the following should be mentioned:

- “Via Carpathia, a motorway linking a Baltic port (Klaipeda, Lithuania) to an Aegean commercial hub (Thessaloniki, Greece);
- Modernization of the north-south motorway along the E65 motorway which will connect the Baltic (from Szczecin, Poland) to the Adriatic Sea (Rijeka, Croatia);
- Rail Baltica, connecting Warsaw, Kaunas (Lithuania), Riga, Tallinn and Helsinki;
- Rail 2 Sea, linking Gdansk, Poland, Constance, a Romanian Black Sea port”<sup>16</sup>.

The planned digital infrastructures and supported by the EU are as follows<sup>17</sup>:

- RuNe Project (Rural Networks), a broadband fiber network connecting areas of Slovenia, the Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy) and the regions of Primorsko-Goranska and Istarska (Croatia);
- Project RO-NET Broadband, creation of broadband infrastructure in less favored areas of Romania.
- However, I3M has also launched a “Digital 3 Seas Initiative” (D3SI), which predicts several areas of cooperation<sup>18</sup>:
- Cybersecurity;
- *3 Seas Digital Highway*, aiming to fill the gaps in terms of communications infrastructure, including fiber optics and 5G technology;
- Launch of joint technology initiatives;
- Implementation of the *Industry 4.0* program;
- Strengthen e-commerce networks<sup>19</sup>

This is a very ambitious set of initiatives that will have a major impact on these countries and across Europe. Let's not forget that many of these countries are landlocked states with no access to the sea. These infrastructures will now give them access to three seas and thus greatly contribute to greater independence and room for maneuver in their policies. However, for the implementation of these projects there is a need to secure substantial funding that cannot be guaranteed by Member States alone. Thus, in addition to appeals to the European Union, US investments have already been secured (especially in the field of energy) and Chinese (although these have not yet materialized). It was also decided to create the *Three Seas Fund* (TSF), with a duration of 30 years and which

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. Cit.*

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, 2018. The Three Seas Initiative Summit: European Commission Investments in Connectivity Projects Bucharest, Romania.

<sup>18</sup> The Kosciuszko Institute, 2018. The Digital 3 Seas Initiative: a call for a cyber upgrade of Regional Cooperation, White Paper, Poland, available at [https://ik.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/white\\_paper\\_the\\_digital\\_3\\_seas\\_initiative-1.pdf](https://ik.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/white_paper_the_digital_3_seas_initiative-1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Only a selection of the most emblematic projects has been presented here. For a complete list of these projects, see “Priority Interconnection Projects” of the Slovenian Presidency.



aims to secure a financing of 100 billion euros (from an initial investment of 5 billion euros from Member States). A non-negligible scale.

Given the above, it is easy to see the geopolitical implications of this Initiative. First and foremost, the region is at the center of a titan struggle to supply natural gas to Europe, it being known that this will be one of the largest markets worldwide. On the other hand, there is a growing concern to ensure energy independence for the region that avoids the current over-reliance on supplies from Russia and which will be channeled through Germany (the aforementioned *Nordstream II*). In fact, Member States<sup>20</sup> are for the most very distrustful of this German-Russian project and consider it necessary to promote their energy independence by diversifying supplies.

The US has openly spoken out against Nordstream II, with President Donald Trump, at the I3M conference in Warsaw, strongly attacked Germany's energy policy, pointing to the contradiction between, on the one hand, support for the sanctions policy against Russia because of the conflict in Ukraine and, on the other hand, payment of millionaire sums of Russian hydrocarbons, which is a significant help to their economy.

But the implications of this Initiative are broader and in fact include US interests in supplying shale gas to Europe (a growing market), which makes Washington one of its main allies. But for US supplies to come to fruition on the intended scale, there are complex issues that must be resolved before, such as whether the countries of the region will opt for this solution, being the shale gas prices considerably higher than Russian gas, but constituting an instrument for the diversification of energy sources<sup>21</sup>. A first step was taken by Poland, in 2017, when making its first shale gas imports from the US<sup>22</sup>. Polish President Andrzej Duda even stated at the Warsaw Summit his country's intention to conclude long-term contracts with the US for these supplies, although complicated price negotiations have yet to be held, which the US President has said are already likely to increase<sup>23</sup>.

In contrast to Poland's choices, we saw that US Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Hungary in February 2019 was not the success that some had hoped for. The talks were tense and when Mike Pence tried to convince Hungary not to support Russian proposals to extend the *Turkish Stream* to Central Europe and instead opt for supplies from the US, the response received was at least cold. While the truth is that these US ambitions, for now, are just that, but the Russians can guarantee an immediate continuous supply at much lower prices.

For its part, China also sees I3M with great interest, which could enable it to use this huge infrastructure network (particularly as regards ports, motorways and railways) as part of its project *One Belt, One Road*. Although cooperation between China and the

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<sup>20</sup> With particular emphasis on Poland that with the Nordstream II, will lose most of the rights of way of Russian gas through its territory.

<sup>21</sup> Although the price issue is of course important, the growing influence of geopolitics on the EU energy market must also be considered.

<sup>22</sup> However, it should be noted that Poland aims to become a regional energy hub that could eventually replace Russia in the supply of natural gas to Ukraine and Moldova. It is also making major prospects for local shale gas production and has already drilled several holes.

<sup>23</sup> Engdahl, William, 2017. *Initiative polonaise des Trois Mers. Quel en est l'enjeu géopolitique?*, *New Eastern Outlook*, available at <http://lesakerfrancophone.fr/initiative-polonaise-des-trois-mers-quel-en-est-lenjeu-geopolitique>.



countries of the region is based on the initiative "16+1"<sup>24</sup>, Beijing is following with increasing interest the developments of this Initiative<sup>25</sup>.

On another level - more controversial - it is also important to note that among these countries are some of the most conservative states in Europe, such as Hungary, Poland, Austria or Slovakia, which have been challenging some of Brussels' policies, particularly in terms of sovereignty concessions (the federal way), the euro, immigration and defence<sup>26</sup>. Thus, suspicions have been raised that they might be trying to create, within the European Union, an alternative integration model to the Paris-Berlin axis (today increasingly Berlin-Paris), which has always been denied by the promoters of I3M, which have been repeatedly saying that it is part of the EU and is limited to infrastructure cooperation. However, no one is unaware that leaders like Viktor Orban, or Italian Matteo Salvini, now on a desert crossing after the alliance broke that held him in power, have been sponsoring the idea of a reformulation of the European Union in a more egalitarian project, or homogeneous in its distribution of the power of its Member States, and with a different vision of the future.

Growing suspicions of these countries towards Germany have been visible (especially after the announced Nordstream II, accused of being at the bottom and essentially "anti-European", because it aims to circumvent Poland by ostensibly passing through the Baltic Sea bottoms, marginalizing it on its way) and the French projects on European defense and a deepening of integration (with the consequent compromise on newly acquired sovereignty). Most of these countries have also been challenging Brussels' migration policies, which they consider to be contrary to European interests having clearly expressed the refusal to accept in their countries the quotas of immigrants which have been assigned to them.

In turn, at the 55th edition of the Munich Security Conference in January 2019, Chancellor Angela Merkel argued that the issue of dependence on Russian gas cannot be reduced to a discussion about whether it is coming from the Ukrainian gas pipeline or the *Nordstream II*, having been available for an open discussion that also includes the supply of US LNG to Europe. In contrast, at the same conference, US Vice President Mike Pence expressed his country's discomfort over this issue, noting that the US will not be able to guarantee the defense of the West if its allies continue to depend on the East, and has expressed itself as "vigorously against Nordstream II".

This shows, with some sharpness and clarity, the scale of the issues at stake and, contrary to the claims made by its leaders, I3M is clearly an Initiative with the greatest geopolitical relevance.

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<sup>24</sup> Chinese initiative to deepen cooperation with various European States: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. Cooperation focuses on infrastructure, education and culture, with three priority areas: infrastructure, cutting-edge technologies and green technologies.

<sup>25</sup> Poland has expressed some distrust of the initiative "16 + 1" considering that this has not led to major practical embodiments. It has also been showing some discomfort over the trade imbalance in favour of China.

<sup>26</sup> Most of these states continue to consider that NATO is the guarantor of their independence and security and have very strong bilateral cooperation with the US.



## Conclusions

This initiative, of obvious geopolitical importance, nevertheless presents several important challenges. First, the amount of investment necessary to achieve its various projects, especially those relating to energy and road and rail infrastructure, which can only be guaranteed through external investment. The European Union has already supported some of them (most of which falls, moreover, in larger projects of the European Union intended for all Member States). China, for its part, has not yet achieved anything very significant, with countries already accusing it of being no more than declarations of intent – and the US have only supported projects in which they have a direct interest, such as those in the energy sector. Thus, most of this millionaire investment remains to be secured, and this in a time that, it seems, will cool the economy. The Business Forum, being open to the participation of third countries, could play an important role in this field; hopefully so.

A major challenge for the US will be to convince Member States, once again in a climate of economic uncertainty, to buy shale gas from across the Atlantic, more expensive and more difficult to handle, arguing the need to diversify supplies. At the same time, these countries will have to face both Russian and German pressure. The fact is that natural gas supply needs are large and likely to grow considerably in the future, so the temptation will be to turn to the best-priced suppliers, although the United States will do everything to make their shale gas part of this equation.

Maintaining the cohesion of this set will not be easy either, especially if I3M cannot count on the support of the European Union (it is therefore important not to harass Germany too much). Making the situation more difficult, there is a reference to the existence of different security perceptions, very uneven levels of economic development and differences at the political level.

Finally, while the merits of this Initiative are clear, it does not appear that from the political point of view it will gain susceptible dynamics to be as an alternative to the current model of European integration. There are several reasons for this, but the region's dependence on EU funds for the development of these projects, makes it dangerous to choose to throw political challenges on Brussels orientations or to antagonize the major EU powers.

From an economic point of view, it seems that everyone will win (and not just the Member States) in the development of these infrastructures, capable of creating greater contact and business dynamics in the region.

This leads to the belief that I3M could succeed if it maintains its current orientation to present itself as a regional initiative aimed at developing the region's infrastructure within the EU framework, but without having to be overly dependent on Union mechanisms, always slow and demanding broad consensus difficult to achieve. From the point of view of security, its promoters have always stressed the importance of the transatlantic relationship, specifically in order to serve as a counterweight to the Franco-German or German-French axis, if preferred.

The next summit in Slovenia is expected to be already devoted to the implementation of the projects defined in Bucharest. This is a litmus test for assessing the ability to capture



the necessary investments and the political will of the states to withstand the aforementioned pressures they have been subject to.

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