

The Three Seas Initiative: New Breathing for North–South Connectivity in the Context of Current Geopolitical Shifts in Europe



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Lithuania has been part of the Three Seas Initiative since its inception back in 2016. The widely known core objective of this regional framework, which is approaching its 10th anniversary, has been to improve infrastructure among its member states and to close the economic gap between Western and Eastern Europe. After all, the 3SI countries, Lithuania included, were perfectly aware of the huge infrastructure needs in this part of Europe, with the International Monetary Fund estimating € 1.15 trillion in total infrastructure costs for the Three Seas region¹.

However, one should recognize in all honesty that the Three Seas initiative until quite recently hasn't been fully internalized in Lithuania and across the region, already saturated with numerous other frameworks and platforms of cooperation. Neither has it been the first choice when the authorities of Central

Europe gather to tackle the most pressing priorities of regional development. European Councils, the NATO agenda and like-minded formats, such as Nordic Baltic and others, have traditionally been stealing the show, so to say, and this is for understandable reasons.

However, the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Riga, which took place in June 2022, marked a pivotal moment. Russian aggression against Ukraine not only created a new sense of purpose among the countries of the 3SI, but most importantly, it put a firm end to the East–West paradigm, which has been dominating the region for decades, hindering North–South infrastructure development. It is quite clear that before the Russian war against Ukraine and subsequent sanctions by Western countries, East–West connectivity has been prioritized and even fostered by the 3SI members as the most profitable trade axis, while North–South connections have been left relatively overlooked, also within the EU's infrastructure development plans.

With the Russian onslaught on Ukraine and indeed on

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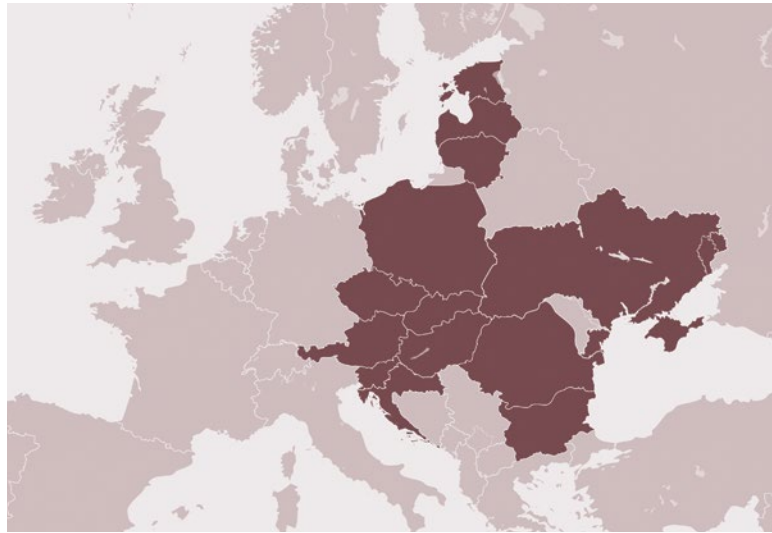
¹ Anil Ari et al. (2020), Infrastructure in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe: Benchmarking, Macroeconomic Impact, and Policy Issues, International Monetary Fund, p. 15, footnote 7, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/DP/2020/English/ICESEEBMIPIEA.ashx> [accessed 08-05-2022].



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the established world order, leaders of the 3SI countries have suddenly realized that what they created almost 10 years ago, with the establishment of this unique framework, perfectly fits the bad weather situation in which the world found itself after February 24, 2022. In fact, while being a politically inspired platform, the 3SI actually focuses on economic areas that are highly relevant for the purpose of improved resilience along the entire North–South perimeter of the East fringe of the Western World.

Moreover, the 3SI turned out to be extremely relevant in terms of support to Ukraine, a country geographically enshrined in the 3SI region, fighting for its independence and territorial integrity, and which is, moreover, in a way shielding its neighbors of Central Europe and indeed the continent as a whole from paranoid and dangerous Russian colonial convulsions.



 Three Seas Initiative (together with Ukraine; Wikipedia)

President Zelensky addressed the 3SI Riga summit as a special guest, and the declaration that was adopted by the 12 heads of the 3SI states is unambiguous: Ukraine was invited in Riga to begin the process of participating in the 3SI. The Riga declaration also stipulates that the 3SI sees itself as a platform for supporting Ukraine's recovery and is ready to involve Ukraine in the implementation of the 3SI regional infrastructure projects². This very strong expression of regional solidarity with Ukraine has a potential of consolidation and reinvigoration for the 3SI format itself, provided that concrete actions ensue.

Speaking of the future of the 3SI, this format should also be looked at through the lens of the major shifts in energy policy that Europe is currently witnessing. One

² <https://3seas.eu/about/joint-declaration-of-the-seventh-three-seas-initiative-summit?lang=en>

of the three priority pillars of the 3SI connectivity, energy has become a top issue in the context of Russian aggression on Ukraine. European dependence on Russian energy resources and the drive for diversification could also be addressed through close cooperation and regional solutions within the 3SI, fostering neighborly and European solidarity.

To better understand the evolution of Lithuanian positions on the 3SI we have to look to the past, and its record of participation in this initiative³:

While the 3SI comprehensively focuses on fostering transport, energy and digital infrastructure, investments in energy infrastructure and energy diversification were

³ Based on the article by Gediminas Vitkus & Gediminas Varvuolis "Lithuania; the search for synergies" in the publication by the Latvian Institute of International relations (LIIA): "Three Seas Initiative: Mapping national perspectives", Riga, 2022.

generally viewed as higher for Lithuania in the beginning. After all, Lithuania's accession to the 3SI coincided with its drive for energy independence and deliverance from Russian gas supplies, which had long been used as political weapon in trying to coerce Lithuania (dependent on Russian resources until then) to alter its values-based foreign policy. Synchronization between the electricity grid of the Baltic States and Continental Europe's TSO's (European Transmission system operators) was also finding its way to the political agenda around those years, attesting to the pioneering role that Lithuania was playing in the Three Seas region in energy diversification.

However, energy security was not the only priority of Lithuania in terms of infrastructure development. In the area of transport, Lithuania started out by adhering to the logic of East–West transport infrastructure, which remained more developed as part of a Soviet legacy. With the accession to the EU and the appearance of the 3SI, this logic started to be replaced with a greater emphasis on North–South linkages. Evidently, all Lithuanian transport projects singled out in the framework of the 3SI were aiming at reinforcing the North–South vector and at increasing the collective connectivity of the Baltic States with Poland and the wider Central European region.

With energy and transport projects clearly taking center stage in Lithuania's posture within the 3SI, the absence



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of digital connectivity projects was somewhat salient in the beginning. However, Lithuania's attention has gradually started shifting to digital and cyber security. Led by Lithuania, the EU's Cyber Rapid Reaction Team was founded in 2020 by a handful of like-minded EU member states, most of them part of the 3SI. A regional cyber security center was created in Lithuania's second biggest city of Kaunas, with strong involvement from the US and with the participation of Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, several events dedicated to cyber security were organized in close cooperation between Lithuania and Poland, in the run-up to the Riga summit.

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region and greater interests among the investors has also been positively perceived by Lithuania, as in January 2020 it has formally adhered to the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF) by making a 20 million euro contribution via its Public Development Agency (VIPA). Lithuania has been taking part in all the governing bodies of 3SIIF and encourages its companies and business entities to seek opportunities with this capital fund as an alternative financing instrument to foster growth and connectivity in the Three Seas region.

However, while adhering to the formula that the 3SI is an economically driven and politically inspired framework, Lithuania has always put a stronger emphasis on the geopolitical nature of this unique sub-regional format.

From the outset, one of the recurrent elements in the position of Lithuania vis-à-vis the 3SI has been the prominence given to the role of the European Union in this project. Indeed, Lithuania sees this intra-European connectivity initiative, with all 12 members belonging to the EU, as a great opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation and deepen EU integration. Therefore, it has always been of utmost importance for Lithuanian authorities that the Initiative operates in accordance with EU policies. As long as this criterion is met, Lithuania expects the Initiative to positively contribute to the EU market and increased connectivity among EU



☒ Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda speaks during the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Riga, Latvia, in June, 2022 (Photo Office of the President of Lithuania, Robertas Dačkus)

Analysis

countries. After all, whether desirable or not, the main vehicle to address the connectivity gaps within the 3SI region and to implement large-scale strategic interconnection projects will be EU instruments and the funding avenues they offer, be it through Trans-European Transport and Energy Networks, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Recovery and Resilience Fund, or others.

Another strong political point in the attitude of Lithuania within the 3SI was the emphasis on the transatlantic dimension. It should be noted that fostering strong transatlantic ties has always been at the core of Lithuanian foreign policy across all international formats and is equally prominent in the

context of the 3SI. Lithuania has been in favor of more active US involvement in regional projects and the 3SI activities, be it bilaterally or through a US financial contribution to the 3SI Investment Fund.

In terms of geographical reach, Lithuania has also advocated for the convergence of the 3SI with other like-minded partners across the globe, who have similar approaches to values-based connectivity and aim to offer quality infrastructure to various regions in the world. Therefore, a closer association between the 3SI framework and the United Kingdom, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Canada and others has always been strongly supported by Lithuanian authorities. The

investment potential embedded in some of the leading financial institutions of those major world economies would certainly be able to significantly contribute to increasing the overall capital value of the 3SI Investment fund. Moreover, involvement of those countries in the 3SI could contribute to the consolidation of the emerging, worldwide Trusted Connectivity Alliance, through the deployment of initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway and G7's new global infrastructure plan.

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Broadly speaking, a very clear priority for Lithuania has always been its closest vicinity, and in particular the three associated partners of the EU from the Eastern Partnership Countries (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). From Lithuania's perspective, the assistance that the 3SI could offer to those three countries as well as other aspirants from the Balkans, by extending the connectivity projects, could help to better anchor those states physically with the EU and would allow for better mobility and connectivity of the North-South axis of Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, Lithuania has been showing initiative by undertaking practical steps, such as the creation of the above-mentioned regional cyber security center with the participation of Ukraine and Georgia.

Cooperation within the framework of the 3SI opens new opportunities and perspectives for Lithuania,

not only to further strengthen energy security, but also to profitably participate in the regional energy market. On the other hand, with significant progress in the realm of energy security already achieved, the other 3SI objectives – transport connectivity, economic growth, and digital and cyber security – are also naturally receiving more attention.

Lithuania, along other countries in the region, is also gradually realizing that in the current geopolitical context this initiative has the potential to positively affect its national security. For Lithuania, the 3SI should follow national security aims and strengthen the defense capabilities of the region through the reinforcement of physical and digital infrastructure interconnected between the 12 countries of this format and with the western part of Europe. The 3SI projects may become increasingly relevant from the perspective of the regional security architecture, since they include infrastructure projects that can contribute to the strengthening of the military logistical capabilities of the NATO forces deployed to some of the 3SI countries and the improvement of overall infrastructure resilience.

Innovation, further involvement of women in science, technology engineering and mathematics, and an emphasis on enabling and making better use of certain parts of society such as youth; all those are topics that could also be successfully promoted in the



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framework of the 3SI in the future, with the consistent support of Lithuania.

All in all, geopolitics seems to be the main stimulus that drives Lithuania's posture vis-à-vis the 3SI. Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine are changing the entire regional paradigm. The 3SI and the North-South axis is becoming a backbone of sub-regional dynamics. Furthermore, the Three Seas Initiative reveals itself as geopolitically very relevant in the context of Lithuania's withdrawal from the ever-diminishing 16+1 – later 14+1 – format of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, and the resolute determination of Lithuanian authorities to pursue a foreign policy based on values and democratic standards. ●