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Less known than the Visegrad Four, but its ambition overcoming anything, the signature countries have planned the Three Seas Initiative. The agreement, which is to economically and politically change Central and Eastern Europe, was made in 2015 and associates 12 signature EU countries with almost 112 million residents (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

The Three Seas Initiative has big plans with transportation and energy infrastructure and aims to integrate Central and Eastern Europe with the West. Besides enthusiasm, a common approach brings questions if it would become a coalition of states opposed to Western Europe. Concerns are to be dissipated with two observers: the European Union and Germany. In 2019, individual state leaders supported the creation of an investment fund as a tool for financing projects. The USA also wants to contribute to this fund.

This text will focus on the priorities that the Czech Republic should stand by within the Three Seas Initiative. What should be the Czech contribution to the created fund? And what impact will the Initiative have on EU relations?

Northern-Southern Integration

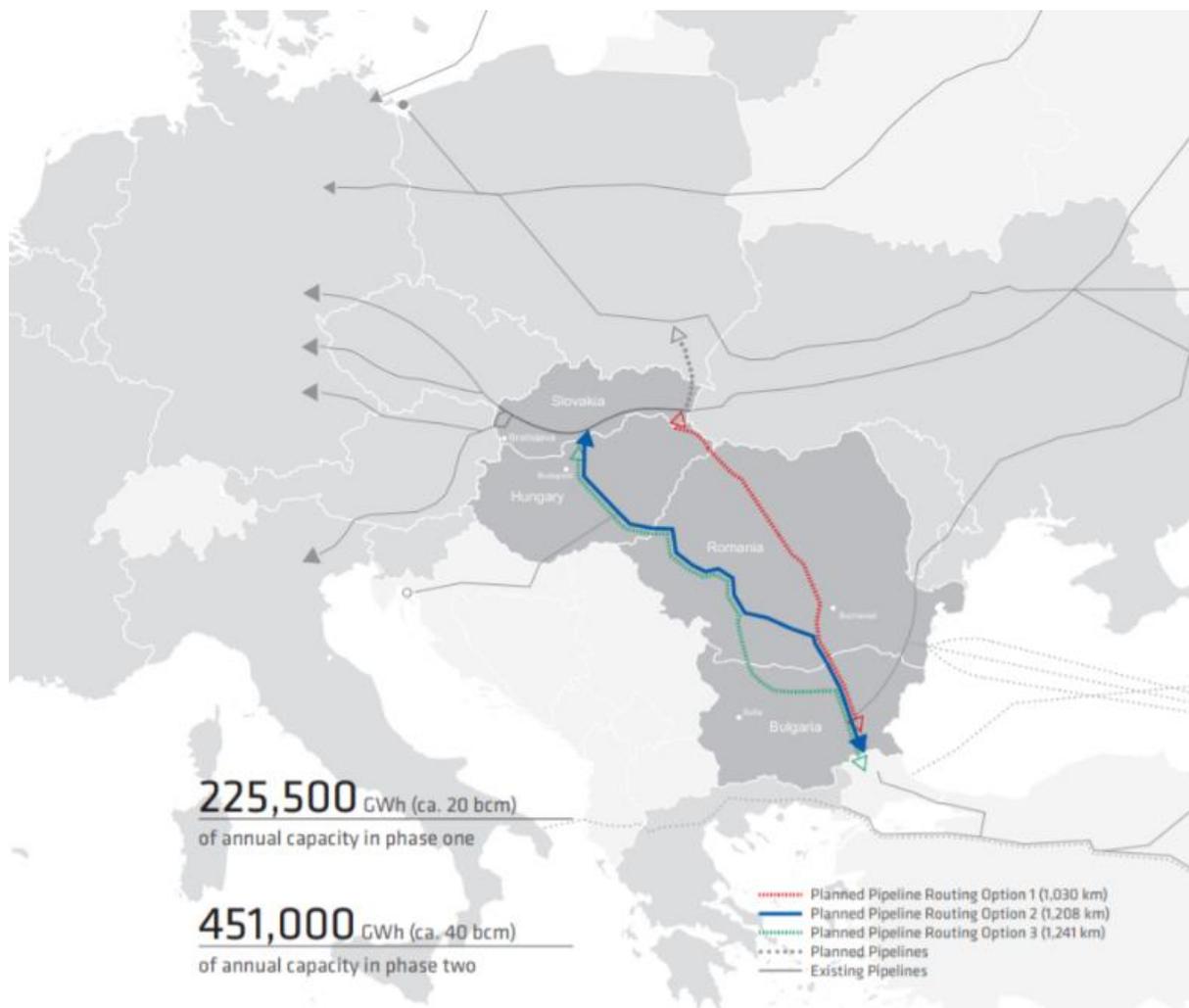
The Three Seas initiative (3SI) is a political-economic platform that was initiated by Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Polish President Andrzej Duda in 2015. After four summits in Dubrovnik, Warsaw, Bucharest, and Ljubljana, 48 projects were prepared between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. At a glance, it is clear that the priority is expensive infrastructure projects like highways, modernizing railways, building of new gas pipelines and terminals for LPG.

On top of building infrastructure, there are additional goals like geopolitical safety, energy safety, and decreasing the dependence on Russian oil and gas of the signature member states; additionally, there will also be development of new technologies, helping new investors enter and to reach climate goals.

The flagship project is to plan an interstate over Carpathia from Lithuanian Klaipeda across Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria to Greece. The Initiative points out that according to the recalculation of kilometers the signature countries have twice less the amount of kilometers of interstates than the other members of the EU. The interstates should become the main integration artery between the separated regions of Eastern Poland, Eastern Slovakia, Eastern Hungary, and Western parts of Romania and Bulgaria.

The second big topic is energy safety for Central and Eastern Europe. Historically, the countries have been dependent on the supply of oil and gas from Russia. Although new EU members have significantly diversified their energy sources since the Ukrainian-Russian rift in 2009, most signatories to the Three Seas Initiative are still more than 70% dependent on Russian gas [Zbińkowski 2019: 111]. All major gas pipelines in the signatory countries are located in the East-West orientation of Russia-EU or Turkey-EU. The aim is to build jumpers (such as the Eastwing in the picture below), double-sided pumping systems, and the construction of new terminals for supertankers carrying LPG from the USA, Norway, or the Persian Gulf.

Image 1: Location of the Eastring pipeline [Eastring.eu]



Energy safety is closely connected with the geopolitical situation of signature members. Most of the participating countries are members of the former, so-called Eastern Block. We find here former republics of USSR (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), former satellites of USSR (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania), and states of former Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). From the signature countries, only Austria has decent relations with the Russian Federation, but not long ago it was also pressured to dismiss a Russian diplomat because of industrial spying suspicion.

The uniting element of the initiative is therefore the effort to limit Russian influence and blackmailing of members through energy supply and ensure that members could gain especially natural gas from other sources. The unspoken reason is also competition of the Russian-German project Nord Stream I and II which is a controversial matter for Poland and Baltic states. Germany is the biggest subscriber of Russian natural gas in EU [Gazprom 2018] and direct gas line on the bottom of the Baltic Sea allows the detour of transit countries like Poland or Lithuania. The current situation in the EU (and especially in Germany) after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny is helping the cause of signature countries.

“Make Austro-Hungarian Empire Great Again”

We cannot overlook a certain nostalgic element. This project connects countries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire which the events of the 20th century threw into different phases, and after 100 years they are coming back for cooperation but this time as equal partners. The old power is represented here by Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia. If we add the former area of Transleithania in Romania and Cisleithania in today's Poland, we could, with little exaggeration, rename this project Austria-Hungary 2.0 with a Northern Polish-Baltic and Southern Bulgarian extension.

From this viewpoint of the project, Austria is not so sticking out but is different from all other signature members as the only one not belonging to the so-called Eastern Block. Austria is perhaps looking for opportunities to integrate into action of the North and South of its borders, and Vienna undoubtedly wanted to start transit infrastructure on its Northern border with the Czech Republic, where it has lacked the connection of an interstate network for decades.

The development of a strong and cooperating Central Europe is, however, raising questions if it would become a rival of other countries of the EU and a club for troublemakers which would then torpedo French-German efforts of narrower integration. For this reason they invited German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas and then Chairman of European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker to a summit in Bucharest in 2018. On the other hand, these countries need a common method if they want to overcome 40 years of firm socialism which did not care much about interstates.

The Three Seas Initiative can also become a platform that can face efforts of the People's Republic of China to parcel Central Europe with the New Silk Road project. With a common method, the signature states are to ensure not only greater attraction of potential investors, but also negotiating advantage. It looks like the intention is working because in February of 2020, American Minister of Foreign Affairs Mike Pompeo announced the intention of the USA to invest one billion of dollars into project 3SI [Atlantic Council 2020]. The geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China could come in the form of an investing storm for Central and Eastern Europe.

Position of the Czech Republic

And how will the Czech Republic (CR) face this very ambitious project? It looks like Czech will proceed with reservation and place all eggs in one basket.

Reservation was demonstrated by the representation of the CR at the summits. To the first meeting in 2016, in Croatian Dubrovnik, Czechs sent Václav Kolaja, former Deputy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek. A year later to the Warsaw summit, where even President Donald Trump was a guest, then came former Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech parliament Jan Hamáček. In Bucharest in 2018, came Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, this time Radek Vondráček. And to the last summit in Slovenian Ljubljana, very own President Miloš Zeman defended Czech interests. Czechs sent the most important player after 3 other meetings which was very different from Poland, for example, where Andrzej Duda was not missing at any events.

The Czech peripheral attitude is reflected even in preparation of projects, which are registered in official enumeration. There is a very ambitious, but also very debated, canal project in the Czech plan: Danube-Oder-Elbe. Left to the side, not even ecologists, transportation experts, or political representatives have agreed for the need of this transportation artery

so far, which was already thought of by Charles IV. The bigger problem is that the estimated amount of about 600 billion CZK was not counted for in the National Investment Plan. In it we only read that canal Danube-Oder-Elbe is “noticed [...] as a potential possibility in completing the state transportation system with possible water management benefits. However, before the start of its own project preparation, it is important to carefully assess its economical and environmental effects and elements of NATURA 2000.” [NIP 2019:28]

If we translate “potential possibility” into normal language, it is clear that the government is not counting this canal project until 2050. Because chairman of ODS party, Petr Fiala, [Daněk 2020] and other opposition politicians made negative comments, it is very probable that the project will also disappear with the departure of President Miloš Zeman into political retirement as he is the last high function promoter of this idea. And that is unfortunate because Hungary has prepared five projects, Slovakia three, and relatively little Croatia even eleven [3seas.eu]. The CR needs greater initiative.

How much will it cost?

Financing and co-financing of projects will be overseen by the investment fund that was established after the 2019 Ljubljana Summit, where the Polish bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and Romanian Exim Bank signed an agreement about cooperation and committed to offer the starting 500 million Euros. Members of development banks of Poland, Romania, Latvia, and also the Czech Republic were appointed into the controlling committee. The goal is to accumulate 3–5 billion euros.

At this time we need to consider the question of how far the CR should go in offering resources for common causes. If states want to proceed with solidarity, they should share the beginning investment costs per number of citizens. Another question is how much from the planned 3–5 billion euros would be from private resources? However, if the biggest countries of the initiative, Poland and Romania, (which make up 51.8% of population) together bring 500 million euros¹, then the Czech Republic, according to the same logic, would participate with roughly 92 million euros (see the table below).

Table 1: Contribution to the fund derived from the country's population size [Eurostat data]

Country	Population	Percent of Pop.	Contribution
Poland	38 433 600	34,35%	€ 331 568 693
Romania	19 523 621	17,45%	€ 168 431 307
Czech Republic	10 627 794	9,50%	€ 91 686 539
Hungary	9 771 000	8,73%	€ 84 294 932
Austria	8 857 960	7,92%	€ 76 418 088
Bulgaria	7 000 039	6,26%	€ 60 389 705
Slovakia	5 445 087	4,87%	€ 46 975 052
Croatia	4 105 493	3,67%	€ 35 418 304
Lithuania	2 794 090	2,50%	€ 24 104 762
Slovenia	2 070 050	1,85%	€ 17 858 430
Latvia	1 921 300	1,72%	€ 16 575 156
Estonia	1 328 976	1,19%	€ 11 465 146
In total	111 879 010		€ 965 186 115

¹ The 500 million euros is divided per population size, eg. Poland has around 331 million and the rest belongs to Romania.

Conclusion

The Three Seas Initiative is the biggest event of Central and Eastern European countries from the time of EU expansion in 2004 and 2007. The project has ambition to make organic unity out of less developed countries, which would help the less developed parts of the EU. It is also important that it interconnects states with history and so-called new and old members of the EU. Its primarily economic dimension decelerates concerns of other EU countries that it would become a platform for united, newer member states to pressure the old ones. It is primarily about construction, security, geopolitical positioning to Russia, and future preparation.

It will be important to attract enough investors because the total financial cost of all projects is assumed to be 570 billion euros, which is a gigantic amount. Considering American interest, the outlook is promising, yet in this outlook the CR is lacking. Canal Danube-Oder-Elbe is very ambitious and exactly the project that needs broad financing from various resources, but if its own Czech representatives do not agree that it needs to be built, it will be hard to convince others that they should invest billions of euros into it. Carefulness and inconsistency is felt throughout the history of the Czech involvement in the Three Seas Initiative. More openness and better preparedness of projects is needed. Investments, especially after COVID-19, will be needed like the need for salt.



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Karel Sál finished his studies at the Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague in 2016, where he defended his dissertation on topic *Democracy in the Lack of Interest: the Effects of Remote Internet Voting Implementation in the Electoral Process of Selected Countries*.

He focuses on problems of e-Government, internet elections and information freedom. Karel Sál is the author of expert articles, gives speeches at international conferences, and is a founder and editor of the e-politics.cz think-tank.

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