

# **The Changing Dynamics of Regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Three Seas Initiative**

Paper presented at the 2019 ASN World Convention, Columbia University 2-4 May 2019”

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## **Abstract:**

As the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states continue to undergo a nationalist revival, perhaps the most perplexing phenomenon has been the vibrancy of subregional cooperation initiatives. The Three Seas Initiative is the most recent platform to join the list. While it is still too early to deliver a verdict on the effect this initiative will have on the future of European integration, it is indisputable that it marks a shift in the dynamics of European subregionalism. Namely, some of the states that are spearheading and supporting the initiative seem to be openly contesting European unity, which goes counter to the previous initiatives that were formed in support of further EU integration. To explore this dynamic further, this paper engages with the literature on subregionalism as it analyses CEE’s standing within the EU and explores the rationalist and normative foundations of the most recent pushes for cooperation.

## **Introduction**

Since the twin political shocks of 2016 – the results of the United Kingdom’s referendum on its association with the EU and the election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, there has been a prolific body of research dedicated to the nationalist revival across the developed world. Within the EU, the nationalist ascendancy has been particularly evident in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, as the Fidesz and PiS governments in Hungary and Poland serve as poster children of the inward-looking and illiberal turn. Yet, at the same time, the region is still home to a number of vibrant subregional cooperation initiatives. The Three Seas Initiative (TSI, or as it has been referred to more recently, 3SI) is the most recent platform to join the list which includes groupings such as the Visegrád Group (V4), Slavkov triangle, 16+1 and the Danube Group. In the first year following its creation in 2016 in Dubrovnik, Croatia, the initiative also known as the Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea (BABS) Initiative largely flew under the radar. However, it became the focus of attention in 2017 when the US president Donald Trump attended the initiative’s second summit in Warsaw, Poland. Since then, there have been more questions than answers about this framework of cooperation among the twelve Central and Eastern European states. While it is still too early to deliver a verdict on the effect this initiative will have on the future of European integration, it is indisputable that it marks a shift in the dynamics of European subregionalism. Namely, some of the states that are spearheading and supporting the initiative seem to be openly contesting European unity, which goes counter to the previous initiatives that were formed in support of further EU integration.

To explore this dynamic further, this paper engages with the literature on subregionalism as it analyses CEE’s standing within the EU and explores the rationalist and normative foundations of the most recent pushes for cooperation. It first reviews the relevant literature on subregionalism, focusing on experiences of subregionalism within the EU. It proposes that by combining two distinct analytical lenses – namely, classical theories of regionalism and the modes of subregionalism within the EU – we obtain a useful framework for analysing current subregional initiatives within CEE. The paper then applies the theoretical framework to examine the case of the still relatively young subregional initiative, the TSI. It argues that from a functionalist perspective the initiative can be deemed as complementary to the EU, however from the neorealist and constructivist perspectives it is much less so. When examined through neorealist lens, the US patronage of the initiative under president Trump, the initiative appears to run counter to EU unity. From the ideational perspective, Poland’s leadership of the initiative under PiS government pits it against the EU as nationalist doctrine with a clear and unwavering focus on sovereignty and statist power is being legitimised.

## **Regionalism and subregionalism in European context**

In studying regionalism, one of the first stumbling blocks is one of ontology – namely, what constitutes a region? On the one hand, essentialists argue that there is a ‘natural’ core of economic, security, religious and/or cultural links between states and peoples that define a region. On the other hand, constructivists would argue that there are a number of different ways, not restricted to geography, to define a region and who is ‘in’ and ‘out’ (Deutsch 1957). There is equally little

consensus around the terms ‘regionalism’ and ‘regionalisation’ (Nye 1968, Gamble and Payne 1996, Pempel 2005, Ravenhill 2009, Acharya 2012). While some would argue that regional cooperation is at the core of regionalism, others would find that it is also about perceptions, identities and ideas. For most older studies, regionalism has to be based on some form of association or organization, while more recent studies allow for it to take other forms. In a similar vein, regionalization is for some a top-down process, led by mostly economic motivations, while others see it as a bottom-up, societally driven process (Wendt 2003).

Given the cacophony of perspectives on regionalism and regionalisation, there is no surprise the study of subregionalism offers an equally vibrant body of approaches and definitions. If anything, given that it is a subset of the above-mentioned elusive categories, subregionalism is even more prone to contestation and differences in definitions. The lack of uniformity can be observed in the way that some scholars use the term to refer to types of state-level cooperation within a set smaller geographical area irrespective of the overarching governance structures. Others also include sub-state level cooperation, while a large portion still refer to the need of belonging to a larger regional grouping and mode of cooperation (Hook and Kearns 1999). For instance, for some, ASEAN is an example of subregionalism in East Asia given that Southeast Asia is a subregion within East Asia. Others would contend that that ASEAN is an example of regional cooperation, as there are subregional economic arrangements among ASEAN member states.

Moreover, some scholars argue that subregional arrangements can include participation from substate units such as provinces and cities and introduce the concept of ‘microregionalism’ (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008). In fact, the contention is that subregionalism offers the opportunity for sub-state/sub-national entities and non-state actors to participate. Namely, subregions often tend to be defined not by national borders, but natural borders such as bodies of water or mountain ranges. Besides the already mentioned representatives of sub-national and local government, they can also include actors from the private sector and civil society (Gebhard 2013). Yet, a large majority of works on subregionalism would argue that for there to be a subregional cooperation, there needs to be a larger region which has formalised modes of cooperation of which the former is a subset (Hamanaka 2015). For the purposes of this paper, subregional cooperation and subregionalism are seen as forms of cooperation and integration on a level below what is considered a larger formal region and mostly on the nation-state level. Thus, it is a form of *inter*-state cooperation within a set formalised region.

### **Drivers of subregional cooperation**

The majority of studies of regionalism take a state-centric view of the drivers behind processes of regional cooperation and institution-building at the regional level. Namely, despite the recognition that market and civil society actors play an increasingly important role in the contemporary era, as per the ‘new regionalism’ literature, there is still a bias towards focusing on states as the main actors propelling regionalism (Börzel 2015). One of the major reasons for this is the complexity surrounding the analysis of the often spontaneous and more informal networks that involve the market and civil society actors.

Thus, while recognising some of the limitations involved in adopting a state-centric perspective, we are deemed to explore the impetus for regionalism relying on the conventional theoretical approaches. The dominant theories of regionalism can be broadly placed into either rationalist or constructivist camp. Within the rationalist canon, the mainstream theories are those of neoliberal institutionalism, rationalist functionalism and neorealism, while the constructivist approaches tend to be less prominent in the regionalism literature and a bit harder to systematise as they tend to stress different ideational drivers of regional cooperation and integration (such as ideas, norms, identities and/or discourses).

Neoliberal institutionalism and rationalist functionalism seem to dominate the field. They assume states as the key actors driven by rational calculations. Both theories recognise international anarchy, but stress the existence of complex interdependence among states. Neoliberal institutionalists argue there is a shared interest in dealing with the problems that arise from such interdependence and that one of the best ways of addressing them is by setting up international institutions (Keohane 1984, Martin and Simmons 1998), particularly at the regional level. In their view, globalization is often seen as the major external driver for regionalism. Global markets entail increased transborder mobility and economic linkages and trade issues are less cumbersome to deal with at the regional than at the multilateral level (Schirm 2002, Breslin et al. 2003). Functionalists, on the other hand, view regionalism as a state response to the problems that emanate from regional interdependence. From this perspective, regionalism is seen as the most effective means of solving common problems. Functionalism's major contribution to the field is the idea that regional integration is essentially the product of regional cooperation on technical and non-controversial issues, which then spills over into the realm of high politics and redefines the group identity around the regional unit (Hurrell 1995).

The remaining major theory within the rationalist approaches, that of neorealism, makes the opposite assumption about the merits of cooperation. Namely, under the conditions of international anarchy, cooperation is risky for states which are concerned about the equal distribution of power among them (Baldwin 2013, Grieco 1988). To explain why regional cooperation occurs, neorealists point to the role of hegemonic powers. Namely, hegemonic stability theory points to powerful states within the region or outside it, which are willing to and capable to act as "regional paymaster, easing distributional tensions and thus smoothing the path of integration" (Mattli 1999, 56). Powerful states facilitate the emergence of regionalism in pursuit of economic or geopolitical interests. From this perspective, the economic objectives of regional integration do not derive from the pursuit of welfare, but from the close relationship that exists between economic wealth and political power and from states' inevitable concern with relative gains and losses. The United States, China, Russia, South Africa or Nigeria supported and engaged in region-building in order to strengthen military alliances, promote stability in neighbouring countries, or secure access to new markets, cheap labour, water and energy resources (Antkiewicz and Whalley 2005, Gowa 1995, Clarkson 2008). On the flip side, forming regional alliances to balance powerful states posing a threat in and outside the region, rather than bandwagoning with them, is another explanation for regional cooperation under anarchy (Walt 1987).

Finally, constructivist approaches place an emphasis on ideas, norms, identities and discourses as ideational drivers of regionalism. The classical contribution within this school of thought comes

from Deutsch's (1957) thesis of a security community that is formed by a group of states which no longer consider force as a means to solve conflict. States can remain formally independent in pluralistic security communities, which is essentially what most regional security organisations are. If they agree to politically merge they become amalgamated security communities. Collectively shared meaning structures, norms and values are important for a regional identity facilitating mutual trust and rendering armed conflict unconceivable (Adler and Barnett 1998, Acharya 2005). Yet, it is still unclear whether shared norms and values are a precondition for or rather an indicator of regional integration. Namely, whether regionalism is a crystallisation of an already existing regional identity or whether the process of increased and sustained regional cooperation creates such identity.

Stepping down to the subregional level, the literature seems to suggest that the impetus for subregional cooperation emerges mostly in cases where regional cooperation has failed or deepening the already existing cooperation. For instance, some subregional initiatives are openly concerned with localised economic cooperation and creation of the so-called "growth triangles", which are in many cases a substitute for free trade agreements (Hamanaka 2015). Other initiatives involve agendas and activities that might be specific to that particular geographic locale and are driven by practical considerations such as cooperation in transport, education, tourism, culture, science and technology, environment, organized crime and border management (Dangerfield 2016). In that sense, subregionalism is seen mostly as driven by factors that functionalist and neoliberal institutionalist schools would suggest are at the centre of regional cooperation.

Equally, given its preoccupation with issues of low politics, subregionalism is often viewed as politically less ambitious and less impactful mode of cooperation. For instance, subregional arrangements have often been referred to as mere 'talking shops' or dismissed as 'cinderellas' of regionalism or opportunities for 'diplomatic tourism' and well-paid sinecures (Dangerfield 2016, Gebhard 2013). Yet, others would argue that there is an inherent problem with evaluating different types of subregional cooperation on equal terms as they vastly differ in their nature and scope. As Dangerfield (2016) suggests, the sheer fact that some subregional groups have been around for a number of decades might suggest that participating states see some value in them or else they would not be "willing to continue to invest money, human resources and political capital in these groupings."

### **Subregional cooperation in the European context**

Given this paper's focus on subregionalism on the European continent, and specifically within the EU, it is worth examining to what extent the general theoretical expectations apply in this context. However, it is imperative to note that within the literature on subregional formations in Europe there is a terminological ambiguity similar to that described earlier regarding the use of labels 'regional' and 'subregional'. Namely, some scholars tend to use these terms interchangeably and synonymously, while others make a clear distinction between regional cooperation as that which takes place on the level of the EU or the Council of Europe, as opposed to subregional initiatives which are much more limited in their scope and content (Petritsch and Solioz 2008, 19–20). Cottey (1999, 5–6) also contends that Europe as a whole is a region and "sub-regional refers to a

geographically and/or historically reasonably coherent area (...) The term is not exact, since it is clear that the definition of any sub-region (like that of a region) reflects not only geography, but also history and politics – often making the issue contentious.”

Whatever definition of subregion one chooses to take, there is no doubt subregionalism has become an increasingly prevalent and important feature of modern-day Europe. Broadly, the study of European subregionalism distinguishes between the old and new wave of subregional cooperation (Dangerfield 2016). The old wave subregional formations were set exclusively in Western Europe during the Cold War. Some of these initiatives actually predated the formation of the European Community and were seen as pivotal in providing the cornerstones for future European integration (e.g. Benelux Economic Union). The new subregionalism of the post-Cold War period played an important role in integrating the former communist states into the EU and has been described as much messier with respect to the scope and types of formations it has entailed (Dangerfield 2016, Bailes 1997).

There are different ways the role of subregionalism in Europe has been conceptualized. Cottey (2009) identifies four main roles for subregionalism: (1) bridge-building between EU/NATO members and non-members; (2) an ‘integrative function’ supporting EU and NATO aspirant members; (3) a framework to tackle transnational policy challenges; and (4) supporting (economic, political and/or institutional) reform in participating states. An even more parsimonious categorisation has been put forward by Dangerfield (2004), who purports that in the context of European integration, subregionalism can be divided into (1) pioneering; (2) complementary; and (3) substitutive arrangements. Pioneering cooperation was at the heart of the old wave of European subregionalism. The Benelux Economic Union (BEU) was essentially the test case of small-scale integration that offered a roadmap for the European Community. At the core of any pioneering initiative is the comparatively higher level of integration on the sub-regional level, which in turn propels greater integration on the regional level.

The second type of groupings, those that are complementary to the broader European integration project, usually take the form of preparatory arrangements for the accession in the European Union. For instance, many of the early formations within the new wave of subregionalism after the fall of communism in Europe were created with the goal of facilitating accession strategies, as well as overcoming the lack of enthusiasm, or even mistrust, among former Eastern Bloc states in building networks of cooperation. Dangerfield (2016) notes that the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), for example, only really came about because of European Commission pressure on the Visegrád states to start mutual trade liberalization.

The final type of subregional formations, according to this classification, act as an alternative to the European project. Namely, the substitutive arrangements can act as either less or more ambitious projects in comparison to the European Union. Namely, in cases where states do not want to fully commit to the membership in the Union, subregional arrangements such as the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), offer a less far-reaching alternative. While EFTA, for instance, provides an avenue for those states that are uninterested in joining the EU to still benefit from free trade and economic integration, it does not do it in a way that is direct conflict or as a counter to the EU. In that sense, it could be seen as a separate regional project rather than a

subregional arrangement. On the other hand, some of the substitutive arrangements are created as an alternative to the EU as they might not qualify for European accession in foreseeable future. Such is the experience of some of the instances of subregional cooperation within the 'European Neighbourhood.'

Overall, in the context of new wave of European subregionalism, we have seen a great diversity of initiatives, rendering it rather hard to generalise the specifics of their membership and scope of activities. The commonalities include: setting in the post-communist realm, focus on practical and functional cooperation, building of 'soft' security capabilities, as well as acting as complementary arrangements for EU integration (Dangerfield 2016). However, there are a number of notable differences. First, the EU patronage and participation has vastly differed across these cases. Second, the membership has varied vastly – from cases in which solely non-EU members have been included, to those that have had a mixed membership, all the way to those that have had exclusively EU states membership post-2004 wave of accession. Third, they have also differed in the scope of their agendas. While some have been more broad-based and comprised cooperation over a number of different fields, others have been more focused on a particular issue (such as trade liberalisation in the case of CEFTA). Fourth, some formations have tended to be more formally organised, while others have lacked any permanent institutions. Fifth, while for some geography and related interdependence has been the key criterion in creating the subregional groupings, for others, the framework for cooperation has been less endogenous and has sometimes been a product of external pressure.

The 2004 wave of EU enlargement has been a milestone in the dynamics of new subregionalism. Most of the subregional platforms for cooperation formed in the early 1990s were concentrated in Northern and Central Eastern Europe (Dangerfield 2016). These groups have been dedicated to preparing their members for EU and NATO accession by focusing on the fulfillment of necessary political, economic and social criteria, as well as closing the security gap that had been opened following the collapse of the Soviet Union and dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Once they have fulfilled the entry criteria, these organisations have found themselves redefining their mission. At the same time, the early 2000s have seen an increased attention paid to the various subregional formations within the Western Balkans, that have after the regime change in the two of the largest regional states (Croatia and Serbia) offered hope they would be next in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration (Minic 2013). Given the challenges of promoting cooperation between states that had only several years earlier been engaged in violent conflicts over precisely the desire not to be part of a larger state grouping, the EU and the international community more broadly were much more invested in maintaining the subregional formations. After all, it was in the EU and NATO's interest to promote such cooperation as a means of mitigating the factors such as lack of trust, economic underdevelopment and lagging democratisation that were conducive to producing regional instability (Cottey 2000). In that sense, the second phase of the new wave of European subregionalism was not only different in its geographical origin, but equally in the role the meta-region played in propping it up by designing and delivering programs and providing funding for their implementation. Over the years, however, there has been strong evidence that the local sense of 'ownership' has grown in earnest (Minic 2013).

## **Theoretical approaches to contemporary European subregionalism**

A recurring theme in the literature is that regardless of the origins, purpose, degree of institutionalization, scale and scope of the different subregional platforms within the European Union, the groupings have been generally supportive of the EU agenda. For instance, the EU macro-regional strategies related to the Baltic Sea Region, Danube Region, Adriatic and Ionian Region, and the Alpine Region, and adopted between 2009-2015, vastly build on the types of cross-border cooperation activities that have already existed within the subregional formations. Moreover, despite the notable differences in the role the EU played in ‘subregion-building’ in CEE and SEE, these experiences clearly demonstrate the links between subregional cooperation and EU integration. This, in turn, is what Dangerfield (2016, p. 36) has referred to as the “triangulated relationship between subregional cooperation, EU enlargement and EU security policy.” Thus, the overwhelming view has been that the new wave of European subregionalism has mostly been complementary to the broader European project.

This paper seeks to critically examine such a claim in light of the most recent political, economic and security developments within the European Union, its immediate neighbourhood, as well as the international system more broadly. Thus, rather than just assume that most subregional formations within the new wave of European subregionalism are inevitably supportive of the EU agenda, it is worth scrutinising this assertion further.

Table 1 matches the most common motives for subregional cooperation with the ways in which subregional cooperation relates to the EU agenda. In that sense, along the former dimension, we can distinguish between: 1) combination of motives which at their core emanate from the desire to address the complex interdependence among the states within a given subregion (as per the neoliberal institutionalist and rational functionalist perspectives); 2) the powerful states’ need to form alliances in pursuit of economic or geopolitical interests (as per the neorealist approach); and 3) the idea that there are shared norms and a common identity which enables states to engage in interstate cooperation on a subregional level and distinguishes them from other states (corresponding to the constructivist approach). Each of these motives can have a different relationship with the broader goals the EU has set based on Dangerfield’s (2004) classification. Namely, the subregional cooperation can be: 1) pioneering – opening a whole new area or means of cooperation which has not as yet been observed at the meta-regional level; 2) complementary – espousing similar objectives as the meta region and working towards achieving them; and 3) substitutive – acting as an alternative to the EU because of the incompatibility of goals between the subregional and meta-regional level.

**Table 1** Theoretical framework for studying the contemporary European subregionalism

	Relationship with the EU		
	Pioneering	Complementary	Substitutive
Motives for cooperation	Functional		
	Security or power-based		
	Normative or ideational		

The following section will apply the outlined theoretical framework in analysing the most recent subregional initiative to emerge from the CEE and SEE – the TSI. It will test to what extent the long-standing assumptions of complementarity between subregional and EU objectives are confirmed.

### **The creation of the Three Seas Initiative**

The TSI emerged as a joint project driven by Polish president Andrzej Duda and Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović in 2016, which at its core had the goal of strengthening and deepening relations and cooperation among EU member states on the east of the continent surrounded by the Adriatic, Black and Baltic Seas. While there have been scarce reports on the background of the Polish-Croatian partnership on this initiative, there are several competing explanations for the emergence of this platform. Primarily, both Duda and Grabar Kitarović have been elected in 2015 in campaigns that vowed a more conservative and nationalist turn – arguably, this has since been much more pronounced in Poland (Associated Press 2015; Reuters 2015). Both presidents are heads of states in parliamentary systems which leave more manoeuvring space in the foreign policy context rather than domestic policy, which is why championing a new foreign policy initiative would seem like a good way to assert power in policymaking and build one’s presidential legacy. For president Duda, this was also a way to assert Poland’s status as a major power to counter both German and Russian influence, as well as being an agenda-setter in the region (Zerka 2018). For Grabar Kitarović, on the other hand, the initiative was instrumental in her quest to redefine Croatia’s regional identity in accordance with what the Croatian political right traditionally advocates; namely, pushing it further from the (Western) Balkans and former Yugoslav identification (Srzić 2015). In terms of external support for the initiative, the US patronage stands out the most. It is not by chance that this platform gained ground following Russia’s resurgence in Eastern Europe and the war in Ukraine. There is ample evidence that the US began to develop a more comprehensive strategy towards Eastern Europe (broadly defined). The said strategy would entail elements such as US gas exports which were previously unavailable as an instrument of foreign policy (O’Sullivan 2017; Grigas 2017). The US has also found friends in these two leaders, as they are both unquestionably pro-American – Duda as part of the PiS

government that has been one of the most pro-US allies and Grabar Kitarović as a former high official in NATO and Croatian ambassador in Washington.

At the Initiative's first summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia, the group of twelve nations (Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria) signed a statement pledging to cooperate on issues related to energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors in this subregion. At the core of the initiative has been the desire to not only improve the cooperation among the involved nation-states, but also of the bloc with the Western Europe in order to accelerate the economic development of the newer EU member states.

From its inception, the initiative has been envisaged to be “an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the States involved” (The Three Seas Initiative 2016). For now, it has been spearheaded by the heads of state of the member states. The joint statement from TSI's second summit has underlined that it is “a flexible Presidential Forum which provides political support to foster a more effective cooperation of governments, business entities and non-governmental organizations interested in boosting regional bonds, while recognizing that achieving concrete results within this Initiative requires an active involvement of the respective governments and working contacts among respective Presidential representations” (The Three Seas Initiative 2017). The third summit equally underlined the initiative being “an informal presidential platform”, while putting forward various derivative initiatives such as 3SI Business Forum, 3SI Network of Chambers of Commerce and Forum of Regions of the 3SI (The Three Seas Initiative 2018). While the scope of interactions through various sub-fora seems to be widening, it seems that at the moment there seems to be no intention to formalise the platform by way of creating more permanent institutions such as a secretariat or similar. Rather, there is an agreement that different member states would take turns in hosting the annual summits and thereby setting the agenda. The initiative's

While the initiative's name suggest that the subregion has been defined by the three seas in Eastern Europe and the most recent EU enlargement waves, the member states still have notable differences. The first oddity is the inclusion of Austria, which is the only state that has not been under communist rule and the only state in the group which is not in the NATO. Anecdotally, one Austrian diplomat purported that Austria sees no cost in participating, though equally, it does not garner hope that the platform will bring about major breakthroughs. Second, the states involved have different stances towards Brussels. The spectrum is as broad to have Poland and Hungary on the one end, extremely sceptical over the role of European institutions, and the three Baltic states on the other side. Third, their stances towards other major powers such as Russia and the United States are equally mixed. The greatest divergence here is perhaps between Hungary as the leading pro-Russian state in the group and the rest. Finally, this is the first large grouping in which we have seen the Baltic, CEE and SEE states come together. On the whole, the Baltic bloc and the CEE states are undoubtedly more economically developed than the SEE states.

On the first blush, the implementation of the Three Seas agenda would have positive strategic implications for Europe. It would establish a powerful set of economic arteries, including energy

pipelines, powerlines, highways and railways, and telecommunication lines, that would mobilize the economic potential of a region that is home to 105 million people and has a €2.8 trillion GDP (Brzezinski and Koranyi 2017). However, ever since the initiative has been introduced and particularly since its 2017 summit in Warsaw, where the US president Donald Trump endorsed it, there have been open questions around the motives propelling the initiative and its relationship with the European Union. By the initiative's third summit in Bucharest, it seems that the EU has opted for an engagement strategy. While there were no top representatives of the EU key bodies at the previous two summits, the head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker attended the 2018 summit offering his support (European Commission 2018). Juncker stressed the manner in which the TSI fits the broader Union's strategy to improve infrastructure connectivity, telecommunications and energy diversification and how some of the key projects being discussed are (or will be) financed by the European Fund for Strategic Investments (the so-called 'Juncker plan'). Moreover, Germany's foreign minister Heiko Maas also attended the Bucharest summit and indicated his country is keen to joining the initiative, touting this as part of his country's new Eastern policy (Shotter 2018). It appears that as the initiative reaches closer to its fourth anniversary, some of the initial fears regarding its potential role as a force that would undermine the EU unity have been alleviated by the resolute embrace from the key EU institutions and member states. Yet, it is still worth examining the initiative's propellers and their complementarity with the broader EU goals, as it seems to signal a change in the new wave of European subregionalism.

### ***Functional dimension***

The reasons that are most often cited as the driving force behind the TSI follow the classical functionalist logic – the focus being on 'low-politics', economic and technical spheres of cooperation. The twelve signatories of the initiative pledged in their founding declaration to foster regional projects in the areas of transportation, energy, digital communication and economic sectors. Meagre transportation links and underdeveloped infrastructure in this part of Europe have been thwarting subregional integration and economic growth. It is a known fact that inadequate infrastructure is a substantial barrier to business and economic growth. At the moment, the average citizen of the "old EU" has twice as many kilometres of motorways to drive on than his/her counterpart from CEE (Atlantic Council and PwC 2017).

Since the end of the Second World War, infrastructure interconnections on the continent have tended to focus on the development of the East-West axis. During the Cold War, pipelines that brought Soviet oil and gas to Central and Eastern Europe were also weaponised as tools of coercion and control. In the post-Cold War period, the former Eastern Bloc focused more on furthering the links with the Western markets, while at the same time neglecting intraregional infrastructure development along the North-South axis. The TSI has been envisaged to help improve the connectivity along the North-South axis, as well as to complement connectivity between the East and West of Europe. Thus, improving infrastructure would open up economic opportunities for the countries in the region. It has been estimated that regional needs for transport development will be around €615 billion through 2025 (Atlantic Council and PwC 2017). There are five key transport corridors that are expected to play a paramount role for connecting the Three Seas region – North Sea-Baltic, Baltic-Adriatic, Rhine Danube, Orient/East-Med and

Mediterranean. Via Carpathia and Via Baltica have been the flagship projects that have been discussed in this realm.

There has already been a significant EU investment in the infrastructure in this part of the continent. Following decades of underinvestment, CEE has made unprecedented progress in the infrastructure development; approximately 5,600 kilometres of new motorways have been built over the last two decades (Atlantic Council and PwC 2017). This has been in large part due to EU funding as over €150 billion has been invested from the EU Structural Funds, with additional money made available from the Connecting Europe Facility and the European Investment Bank.

In recent years, the EU energy security came to the top of the EU agenda due to the increasing concerns about Russia as an unreliable supplier. The EU relies heavily on Russia for its energy, importing a large share of fossil fuels, with some member states depending nearly 100 percent on Russian gas (Dempsey 2017). The gas disruptions in Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 and the more recent Crimean crises, contributed to the EU's feeling of energy insecurity, leading to the development of a strategy to address energy supply crises. Thus, another important propeller for the TSI has been the recognition that Central and Eastern European states heavily depend on the energy from Russian Federation and the need to respond to that by diversifying sources of energy.

A great emphasis has been placed on the development of capacities to receive and regasify LNG in the north and the south of the subregion as an alternative to the existing regional pipelines and powerlines that have been flowing from the east of the continent. The LNG terminal that is now operational in Świnoujście, Poland, and the one proposed for Krk Island, Croatia are examples of the strategy of energy diversification and have been touted as essential in creating an effective and resilient single European energy market. In addition to these LNG sources, the initiative has also been looking to support the connection of regional energy networks to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline between Greece and Italy, as well as connect new Romanian Black Sea gas reserves to the region.

The EU is substantially involved in these initiatives as it has invested over €691 million in the construction of the LNG regasification terminal in Świnoujście and will invest further €101.4 million in the construction of the LNG terminal in Krk (European Commission 2017a, b). As part of its Energy Union strategy, the EU is committed to building missing energy infrastructure links and ensuring that every EU country has access to at least three different sources of gas.

During the 2018 Bucharest Summit, digital and telecommunications interconnectivity also came to the forefront with more crystallised plans of what the improved cooperation on this front would look like. The Polish government has been particularly active in advocating the “Three Seas Digital Highway”, which would see the improvement of the communications infrastructure, fiber optics, and eventually the implementation of 5G technology infrastructure in. Compared to the transportation and energy projects, priorities in this sphere are yet to be fully elaborated into actionable plans. Yet, from what has been discussed so far, they largely fit in the European Commission's 2020 Digital Agenda which strives to develop a digital single market (European Commission 2019).

These key projects in infrastructure, energy and telecommunications demonstrate there is a case to be made in terms of complementarity of the initiative's goals with the broader EU strategy. The financial assistance from European funds has been in fact crucial for the rollout and completion of the key projects so far and it is expected to remain the case over the coming decade. Much of the funds for the projects that have been announced at the initiative's past three summits will come from European Union Investment and Structural Funds, of which Three Seas countries have already pledged to use €2.5 billion by 2020, as well as a Three Seas Investment Fund (TSF), which six Three Seas members (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) created in 2018 (The Three Seas Initiative 2018). Thus, from a strictly functionalist perspective, we can establish that the initiative does not run counter to European unity and integration.

### ***Security and power dimension***

While the claims based on functionalist logic make a persuasive case for this form of subregional cooperation, much of the scepticism and suspicion remains centred on the competing explanations of the initiative's 'true' drivers. Namely, there are two issues that have been raised with respect to the grouping of these twelve Central and Eastern European states; the first revolves around the role Poland plays as the instigator of the initiative, and the second regarding the United States' warm embrace of the initiative under the Trump administration.

Poland's leading role in the initiative is to many reminiscent of the interwar "Intermarium" project spearheaded by the Polish authoritarian leader Jozef Pilsudski, who wanted to build on the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian union and unite the states caught between Germany and the Soviet Union as a strong alliance or even a federation. Such plan never came to fruition as the states in the region saw it as yielding too much influence to Poland (Chodakiewicz 2012). Moreover, some of the more recent initiatives under the Visegrád Group have signalled Polish ambition to assert itself more strongly as the dominant military force in this part of Europe. The V4 Battlegroup with Poland as the Framework Nation responsible for and commanding the entire collective is indicative of such ambitions, as well as a more recent Polish military modernization programme. While the TSI has no security cooperation component attached to it, Poland's outsized impact has yet again been cited as a reason for much concern. The Czech and Austrian presidents did not attend the 2017 Warsaw summit and their diplomats expressed worries over the initiative's "20th century neoimperial origin" (Przybylski 2017). Thus, from the perspective of Polish-led alliance formation, the developments appear to be shaky from the very beginning.

The other neorealist perspective to this subregional initiative is the one that focuses on the role of the external hegemon and the conflation of security and economic interests. The US has been an advocate of the project since its inception in 2016. The Obama administration highlighted the benefits of a greater regional cooperation as it would open up economic opportunities, as well as offer an avenue to address the issue of regional energy security. However, the strong endorsement from Trump administration as seen in the president's July 2017 visit to Warsaw raised questions of the nature and intentions of US involvement in this part of Europe. As a response to Russia's military involvement in Ukraine and the overall assertiveness in its Near Abroad, the US has already increased its military presence in the region, even more so than had been originally promised by the Obama administration (Itzkowitz Shiffrinson 2017). The promotion of US LNG

exports to Eastern Europe is an additional incentive for nurturing good relations with the states in the region and strongly supporting the initiative. In his speech at the Warsaw Summit, President Trump told attending nations, “If...you need energy, just give us a call (...) The Three Seas Initiative will transform and rebuild the entire region and ensure that your infrastructure, like your commitment to freedom and rule of law, binds you to all of Europe and, indeed, to the West” (Farber 2017). His remarks came after a shipment of American liquefied natural gas (LNG) was successfully shipped to Poland for the first time ever. It is no coincidence then that the US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry attended the 2018 Bucharest summit, where he announced a new “Partnership for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation” (P-TEC) initiative to help “raise these projects to the top of the political and economic agenda for their wider visibility and attractiveness” (U.S. Embassy in Romania 2018). Perry conveyed the US government’s vision of the initiative as a platform that could make it easier for the US businesses invest and build new energy and transportation infrastructure.

Unlike the Obama administration that has primarily seen LNG exports as a geoeconomic instrument to offset Russia’s influence, Trump administration sees it more as a trade instrument that is conducive to domestic job creation and trade deficit reduction. US push to crowd out Russian gas from Eastern Europe has elicited a lot of negative responses from some of Germany’s largest energy companies and advocates of the Nord Stream 2 project (Przybylski 2017). In this sense, we can speak of an outside-in push for subregional cooperation as a wedge between Western and Eastern Europe would suit the US.

Finally, in discussing the role hegemonic powers play in promoting subregionalism, it is important to consider China’s outreach to the region as of late. Some Chinese officials have taken credit for starting the discussion that led to the inception of the TSI, as “Adriatic Baltic Black Sea Seaport Cooperation” was proposed by Premier Li Keqiang at the China CEEC Summit in 2015 – a year before the first TSI summit (Xinhua 2015). While China has not participated in the summits that have taken place so far, it will inevitably benefit from the projects that aim to improve the regional infrastructure as it will complement China’s aims under the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the first official 16+1 (Central and Eastern Europe states of Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and China) summit in 2012, infrastructure, high technologies, and green technologies have been ranked as areas on top of the agenda (Kynge and Peel 2017).

The attractiveness of Chinese investments is understandable in this part of Europe as many of the states are in desperate need of funding to improve their infrastructure. Many in Brussels have expressed worries that China’s current efforts in the region will undermine the EU’s unified policy, as well as build up individual states’ leverage in negotiations with Brussels (Kynge and Peel 2017). The former relates to the fact that EU is adamant about maintaining single market rules on public procurement, while China has been known to push for guaranteed contracts for its companies. The willingness to bypass EU laws given the lure of Chinese investments has already been seen in the case of Hungary which failed to open its section of a €2.5 billion, 350km high-speed rail line from Belgrade to Budapest to a competitive tender (Shepard 2017). Moreover, on the diplomatic front, there is also evidence that the subregion is pushing away from Brussels. For instance, the

response to an international court ruling that China's claims to maritime rights and resources in the South China Sea were incompatible with international law found strong opposition from some of the regional states, Hungary being the most prominent (Fallon 2016).

Thus, while China is not directly involved in the TSI, some of the initiative's goals, particularly those focused on improving regional infrastructure and transportation are complementary to the Belt and Road Initiative. While this might not be nominally problematic, the experience so far has shown that the growing alignment between the bloc and China is proving to be a challenge for the EU and acts in a way that goes counter to deeper European integration.

### ***Normative and ideational dimension***

It is in the ideational sphere that the initiative seems to be presenting the greatest challenge to the European project. While on the declarative level the initiative has professed to be working to make "the European Union more resilient as a whole", as well as being committed to "fundamental values and principles of the European Union" and "contributing to the development of the entire European Union, which will, as a result, remain ambitious, united and resilient as a whole" (The Three Seas Initiative 2016, 2017), it is hard not to contrast this with the illiberal turn throughout the region. While this subregional initiative has mainly been the product of recognition that there are functional areas of cooperation that have been neglected, along with the self-interested pursuit aimed to boost the prestige of some its leading members, it is the issue of its identity and shared norms that emerges as inevitably problematic vis-à-vis the rest of the Union.

As previously noted, regionalism can be seen as both a crystallisation of an already existing regional identity and a process of identity-creation through increased and sustained regional cooperation. The obvious question to pose in this respect is whether there is a distinct regional identity? If we take the line of argument that identity is primarily relational and is created as a reaction to another entity, there is certainly some weight behind the claim that the shared experiences of post-communism and late association with the European Union (the exception here is Austria). The 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, followed by two smaller rounds in 2007 and 2013, created the so-called 'new' or 'Eastern Europe' pitted against the 'old' or 'Western Europe' broadly defined. A number of these states were members of the same entities that collapsed following the end of the Cold War, be they multiethnic federations or security blocs, which is where the roots of the narrower sense of regional identity stem from. As previously discussed, in the early years after the fall of communism, the EU was immensely supportive of the subregional groupings in CEE as they served as a tool to facilitate pre-accession convergence and negotiations. In that manner, identity was also created through a sustained regional cooperation. Clearly, there are some caveats here, as there was no pan-CEE regional cooperation platform that spanned across all the member states of the TSI, though it is undoubtable there was a lot of informal cooperation and knowledge transfer between all the states that acceded into EU in the last three rounds of enlargement.

A prevailing consensus among scholars and analysts of CEE points to significant maladies in democratic governance and diminishing adherence to liberal norms and values. This goes beyond what is normally ascribed to legacies of communist or pre-communist authoritarianism, or side-

effects of transition politics such as the lack of trust in institutions, corruption in the public sector, lack of true grassroots political parties, underdeveloped civil societies and similar (Cianetti et al. 2018). The diagnosis that has been attached to the region is one of ‘democratic backsliding,’ which in its core means a negative reversal on the autocracy-democracy continuum (Müller 2014; Sedelmeier 2014; Kelemen and Orenstein 2016). The states that were once lauded for the leaps in democratic progress – Poland and Hungary – have now become the poster children for precisely this phenomenon. However, it has to be noted that while democratic backsliding has not been exclusive to these two states, most of the analyses of regional backsliding are conducted using these two as the metric, which has obscured many of the different dynamics of backsliding that have not followed the Polish or Hungarian template (Sedelmeier 2014; Batory 2015; Iusmen 2015; Kelemen 2017). In either case, the region has noticeably been turning away from the normative foundations of the EU, which include liberal democracy, respect for human rights, individual liberty and the reduction of national sovereignty in favour of supranational organizations. The normative foundations in this subregion increasingly tend towards nationalist doctrines with a clear and unwavering focus on sovereignty and statist power (Rupnik 2016, Krastev 2018). Again, while this has primarily been the case in Poland under PiS government and Orbán-ruled Hungary, it has not been exclusive to the two.

The first waves of new European subregionalism following the fall of communism built on the norms that reflected and were complementary to the EU’s foundations. However, this instance of subregionalism, along with the examples of V4 increasingly being pitted against Brussels, as has been seen in the cases of response to migrant and refugee crises, illiberal practices and unwillingness to condemn democratic backsliding, tend to show there is a clear shift in the dominant norms. The new illiberal consensus is marked by xenophobic nationalism and positioned against the rights of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Perhaps most worryingly, there is a significant proportion of the youth in the region that seem to support it (Krastev 2018). Thus, the outlook is rather gloomy in terms of the prospects of resuscitation of the pre-EU accession consensus on liberalism, cosmopolitanism and the protection of minorities from the 1990s and 2000s.

One could argue that in this sense, subregional cooperation is doomed from the start if the predominant form of nationalism is exclusionary and inward-looking. The criticisms that have been voiced against the initiative have not only come from the Western European states, but also the participants of this framework. For instance, the Czechs and Slovaks have been cautious of the political dimension of the initiative. As it has been reported, Slovakian diplomats still treat the V4 as the most important platform for cooperation, while treating the TSI more like an ad hoc grouping (Przybylski 2017). Czech foreign minister Lubomir Zaoralek has also expressed his reservations towards Poland leading the charge and emphasising the East-West divide within the EU (Przybylski 2017).

Yet, it seems that for a good number of the states within the initiative, the grouping offers a potential to serve national interests and desired status in relation to Brussels, thus being able to override the inherent limitations of nationalism in the context of subregional cooperation. Arguably, the TSI member states who seek to challenge the core EU institutions are more than aware of the potential leverage they hold if they band together. While the smaller initiatives such

as V4 can also act as a spoiler (and have demonstrated they will when they do not agree with directives from Brussels), they certainly do not have the power in numbers compared to the potential of acting as a single voice under the TSI banner. While it is too soon to tell whether the initiative will indeed transpire into a more permanent platform for cooperation, it is undoubtable that the dominant norms that are informing it present more of a challenge to the EU rather than complementing its dominant principles.

## Conclusion

This paper’s main intervention has been in highlighting the changing dynamics of subregionalism in CEE. By developing a framework of analysis that distinguishes between two dimensions – the motives behind subregional cooperation and their relationship with the EU – we have been able to assess to what extent the most recent platform for cooperation in CEE presents a departure from the previous waves of subregionalism in this part of the continent. In essence, the TSI is manifestation of a more recent normative shift in the region, which has begun to diverge from the EU core on a number of vital governance and policy issues. The TSI has been an interesting case as it is the first grouping that has brought together all of the post-communist member states of the EU, and more prominently, in an era when nationalist agendas seem to be pervasive around Eastern Europe. The findings, summarised in Table 2 below, seem to suggest that from a functionalist perspective, the initiative complements the EU agenda as it furthers the goals of better transportation connectivity, infrastructure development and energy security. Moreover, the EU funding has been identified as crucial for the rollout and completion of these projects. On the other hand, the *realpolitik* and normative agendas behind the initiative seem to make it more of a substitute to the broader European project. In terms of power and security motivations, it could be considered as a Polish project to assert dominance and increase prestige as the leading power in this part of Europe, as well as an avenue for securing US geopolitical and economic interests. It also boosts the capacities that are necessary for furthering China’s Belt and Road initiative, even though this comes more as an unintended consequence rather than a feature of TSI’s design. Finally, the normative consensus in this subregion has an increasingly illiberal and nationalist bend, which poses the question of the future of the initiative, as well as its relationship with Brussels.

**Table 2** TSI as an instance of European subregionalism

	Relationship with the EU		
	Pioneering	Complementary	Substitutive
Motives for cooperation		x	
Functional			
Security or power-based			x
Normative or ideational			x

The fact that the TSI is a rather large grouping of states with highly divergent national interests is inevitably raising the question of its viability. However, the fact that it developed under the

conditions when most of the regional states have tended look inwards is an indication it presents a more palatable version of regionalism compared to the broader EU and offers an avenue to build a leverage against the Union's institutions. At the last TSI summit in 2018 the EU leadership has realised that the best way to prevent it from having more negative effects is to actively engage the platform and act as a more visible partner. While we are yet to see the effects of the said engagement strategy, it seems that the TSI is here to stay at least in the short to medium run. As the debates on the future of the EU continue, we should not be surprised to find the new CEE subregionalism is used somewhat cynically – as a tool to extract benefits from the Union when it suits the member states, as well as an instrument of building a unified front against it.

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