



## “New Europe” - Could the TSI spell the end of the V4?

The Three Seas Initiative, also known as the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Sea (BABS) Initiative, is a joint Polish-Croatian project launched in 2016 at the Dubrovnik Forum, with the aim of strengthening the competitiveness of economies, trade, infrastructure, energy and political cooperation among countries bordering the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Sea. The following 12 countries are part of the initiative: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. Those who support the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) say that it is a very useful geopolitical idea and a new instrument of European integration. It will bring appreciation, not isolation, to the countries involved. Furthermore, the active support for the TSI by the President of the United States, whether one likes him or not, can only help. The Three Seas Initiative doesn't only have its supporters, but its opponents as well. The member countries of the Visegrad Group are no different.

Poland, which is one of the founding members of the project, believes that this project could be used to strengthen security and economic potential of Central Europe, while also interconnecting the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Sea. Poland has three main goals in regards to the TSI agenda – to promote and persuade other countries to join the project, to strengthen economic cooperation between the member countries and to fill the gap between Western and Eastern Europe. Poland also states that Chinese and American influences on the project are only for the purpose of building infrastructure and starting trade deals in Central Europe.

Hungary also supports the idea of the Three Seas Initiative, because it is an ambitious project that, during the “crisis” in the European Union, can represent a significant regional group of states with similar attitudes, points of view, but also problems. The TSI leans on common historical and cultural experiences of the member countries and that is one of the reasons why Hungary supports it. The main points that Hungary should focus on are energy security, infrastructure and deepening of economic and political cooperation.

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**Slovakia, on the other hand, respects the importance of TSI, but also believes that being part of the project is not one of the country's major foreign policy ambitions. However, that does not mean that membership in the group can't provide room for more cooperation in several areas, such as energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors, mainly in Central Europe.** The position of Slovakia is also crucial for the TSI, as it stands in the middle of Europe, meaning that without Slovakia the project would hardly work. Slovakia understands its importance and therefore is ready to open talks with other member countries.

**Similarly, the Czech Republic is not as fond of the entire idea of the TSI. The Czech Republic is, as many other countries, sceptical, because it believes that the project could raise concerns in Western Europe about distribution of power between western and eastern countries.** Furthermore, they argue, together with Germany, that the TSI could damage the cooperation with the European Union. Although the Czech Republic does not want to participate in the project all too much, it supports some areas of cooperation. **Energy and economic cooperation with TSI member countries are key aspects from the Czech point of view. Ensuring cyber security as part of continuous digitalization could also be provided via cooperation within the framework of the TSI, because the Czech Republic wants to ensure that they themselves, their allies and partners are safe.**

## **The question, therefore, is: could the TSI spell the end of the V4?**

According to many experts, as well as the participants of VYF 2017 representing the V4 countries, the answer is no. Visegrad Group member countries have many cultural and historical similarities and their main focus is to make the V4 stronger and not to join other organizations. However, this does not mean that the TSI project and many similar projects regarding cooperation between countries, such as the Slavkov triangle, Danube Region, Weimar Triangle and Nordic-Baltic cooperation, could, in theory, hurt the member countries' positions in Euro-Atlantic structures. The TSI is meant to complement connectivity between the east and west of Europe, with greater connectivity along the north-south axis, thanks in no small part to financial contributions made by the EU. V4 countries, therefore, respect the EU and would only accept deeper cooperation within

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the framework of the TSI project without its political dimension, with the main focus on economic cooperation.

Although the V4 countries' opinions on TSI differ, they agree in many key areas. They are all part of NATO and the EU, with their main ambition not being to create an alliance that would oppose such organizations. The TSI should not be a separate bloc, but should represent a way to cooperate more within the EU. The TSI could help its member countries to fully integrate in Euro-Atlantic structures. Thus, Central Europe would be more secure and competitive. V4 countries may miss a lot if they do not participate in TSI, but there is an essential question to be answered – how far will the institutionalisation go? Could it pose a threat to the EU?

Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic are therefore willing to reach a consensus regarding the TSI project under one condition – to not conceive another alliance. The V4 wants to cooperate on the aforementioned issues, but without institutionalisation or creation of new bonds. As mentioned above, the primary focus of the V4 are the EU and NATO. Since V4 member countries are located in the middle of Europe, they recognize the importance of economic infrastructure and north-south, as well as east-west interconnectivity. There is nothing to lose and a lot to gain by expanding cooperation in the energy, transportation, digital and economy sector.

The V4's reliance on energy supplies from Russia poses a significant security threat for the Group. The TSI possesses huge potential to eliminate this issue. As an example, we have the Baltic countries, which successfully lowered their energy reliance on Russia. This could be achieved through active cooperation in the development of infrastructure, therefore it is essential to focus on building new roads and railways, as well as deeper digitalization.

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