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## **THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE- A NEW ROLE FOR ROMANIA?**

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### **Abstract:**

The Three Seas Initiative Summit, which took place in Bucharest in the past week, was a good opportunity for Romania to enhance its regional role as a decision-maker, as well as a security provider. After its accession to NATO and the EU, this is the first considerable step that Romania makes in the direction of connecting several ties on security, defense, energy policy and trade, on a regional level. By stepping in in the first reunion of this kind, Romania has taken a leading role in establishing a network of communication and cooperation with the region's countries, aiming thus to coalesce all efforts towards a single goal. Although an impressive mission, it is also a very difficult one, as it is hard to establish whether the country has enough resources to pool towards such an effort in the long term. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to assess Romania's role in the Three Seas Initiative, as well as the resources and instruments available in that regard on a national level, notwithstanding the importance of the mission the country has engaged in and the international potential it looks forward to achieving.

*Key words: security, infrastructure, energy, digital markets, regional role*

### **1. Introduction**

The assessment of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) needs to be done in the current (in)security climate generated especially by the migration crisis and the Russian Federation actions in Crimea. Although directed towards achieving interconnectivity between three key seas, and three key domains: infrastructure, energy and digital market, it has a wider range of impact, having security at its core.

Although it is a proven fact that Romania would be able to contribute with resources and human capital in the development of networks of connectivity, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the great role that comes its way: that of regional provider of resources and ultimately security. And this is a much-coveted position by Romania, after 14 years of NATO membership and 11 years of EU membership.

Romania took on the difficult task of organizing the Bucharest Summit in the fall of 2018, unknowing at the time that such hard work would eventually pay off. And it did, as the Bucharest Summit was a moment of tangible premiers – the presence of higher EU officials and the Business Forum which took place within the TSI Summit format, to name just the most significant ones. Leaving aside critiques, Romania took advantage of these opportunities and inevitably tied its name to the commitment of working together with the other members of the Initiative to develop long term policies and networks that could

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advance cooperation among EU member states, as well as, who knows, maybe create the debut of a relaunching of the European project, much strained by the Brexit debate.

### **2. The role of the Three Seas Initiative for EU and NATO**

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a political platform initiated by Poland and Croatia, aiming to create interconnectivity between the three crucial seas for economic, energetic and digital development: the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea. However, it is also targeting the ampler picture: besides the region, its general interest is directed as well towards the European Union and the United States.

And its targeting of the United States was visible both in Warsaw in 2017 and in Bucharest, in 2018, as the TSI enjoyed a strong American presence. The presence at the Warsaw reunion and joining in by President Donald Trump of the TSI showed that the Initiative has a pro-Atlanticism trend. The presence of US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry at the TSI Summit in Bucharest in September 2018 was meant to reinforce US engagement in the region.

This year in Bucharest, Rick Perry argued in favor of reducing EU dependency on Russian gas and replace it with American support and provision of gas and oil. This is in line with what Donald Trump stated in Warsaw last year, that the US could be an effective alternative to Russian gas. The Trump administration would like to export more liquefied natural gas ( LNG) to Europe; therefore, the need of interconnectors that would link the landlocked countries of Eastern Europe to terminals such as those in Poland, Croatia, Lithuania. There is the belief that American presence on the European market would be able to force Russia to reduce prices, and will create stronger ties to the United States: economic, political and military. The American presence to the TSI is crucial, as it provides security through NATO and catalyzes strengthened cooperation.

Germany was included as well for strategic purposes and the need of political representation. Furthermore, the German presence to the TSI put an end to the rumors that the TSI was meant to counter the Franco-German union that seemed to take shape after Brexit. In this regard, one need not confound the Three Seas Initiative or the “Trimarium” with Intermarium, a forum of the 1920s, meant to deepen political communication of all states between Germany and Russia.

The main goals of the TSI are:

- Stimulating cooperation in the region
- Accelerating the modernization of infrastructure
- Consolidating energetic independence [1]

These goals can be translated in the following ideas that seem to be taking shape in the form of the Three Seas Initiative.

- Increase economic competition through the maximization of regional interconnectivity
- Achievement of real convergence between the EU states for the consolidation of EU unity and cohesion through the promotion of synergy, avoidance of divisions and strengthening and further advancing EU integration policy as a fundament of the relaunch of the European project, especially as a result of the fright perpetrated by Brexit and the Russian aggression in Ukraine [2].

Altogether, the TSI is intended to achieve unprecedented connectivity. It is specified in the Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative, issued in Dubrovnik, August 25th, 2016, that such connectivity is likely to build momentum for the enhancement of security - ”convinced that by expanding the existing cooperation in energy, transportation, communication and economic sectors, Central and Eastern Europe will become more

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secure, safe and competitive, thus contributing to making the European Union more resilient as a whole”[3] .

There are three main elements to be pursued with regard to regional connectivity: infrastructure, energy hubs and the digital component. All these are visible in some of the projects in which Romania is included as well: BRUA – showing manifest availability for the development of diverse energy routes, FAIRway Danube – showing the country’s interest in the development of the Danube and RAIL 2 SEA, on the development of the railway station from Gdansk to Constanța, for civilian and military fast transport, to name but a few.

All three dimensions (infrastructure, energy and the digital component) are put in the service of security for the long term. This is valid especially for the gas/energy -related dimension where the building of natural gas pipelines is essential for strengthening energy security and developing a competitive market, along with attempts to avoid monopolistic practices and political pressures [4].

The energetic level is highly important for all those involved, as well as for particular members such as the US, the European Union and Germany, which has been undergoing a very tense relationship with Washington in that regard, especially given the fact that Germany has been criticizing the America First Policy lately.

Digital connectivity is important for enhancing economic, social and territorial cohesion. As far as the digital field is concerned the aim within the Initiative is to build broadband infrastructure with over 2.5-billion-euro financing by 2020 [5]. Eventually, all this goes towards security building.

Military security falls within the hands of NATO, whereas energy security has no such terms of protection. Moreover, it is a fact that the TSI countries, on an individual level, do not have the resources to build energetic hubs. “(...) We see that pockets of poverty remain everywhere in Europe; whether in rural areas or around important urban centers, where deprived areas prevail and public investment is desperately needed”[6] . These create the prerequisites for security failures and breaches.

A high -performance infrastructure is essential to a better integrated EU and will benefit the following branches: the Single Market, the Energy Union and the Digital Single Market.

The grand objective of the TSI is to further strengthen European integration especially of the Eastern members of the Union. Its profound goal is to technologically modernize the Eastern block of the European Union, focused on security and regional integration, as President Duda repeatedly said [7]. In the long term, the TSI is pro-European to its very core.

Overall, this Initiative is an excellent example of creating security through the build-up of critical infrastructure aspects, such as energy, transport and digital infrastructure. And these fields are essential to Romania as well.

### **3. Romania’s involvement in the Three Seas Initiative**

As was pointed out by Commissioner Corina Crețu at the opening of the TSI Summit in Bucharest on the 18th of September, the TSI is all about cohesion and convergence and “lessening the gap between Western and Eastern Europe”[8] .

There are two directions to be followed: building a strong EU budget and having the right resources at the right place. There are specific and critical areas that are targeted: “(...) the regions still struggling with high unemployment, especially amongst young people, to the regions who are on the frontline of the refugee crisis, to those who suffer the

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most from the side-effects of globalization and technological change”[9] . Thus, among others, TSI plans to ensure there is a coordination between sectors and sectoral synergy.

Romania is thus taking a stand for regional leadership. TSI was not its initiative, but Romania capitalized on it and used it to strengthen its position both within NATO and the EU. The participation of Jean -Claude Juncker was considered to be Romania’s success, as in Warsaw, in the previous year, no EU official took part in the debates on the TSI.

The importance of organizing this Summit, as well as the role that Romania has been having and will continue to have in this Initiative was highlighted by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in his opening remarks at the debut of the Summit: ”In an increasing complex global context, Romania maintains its commitment to the three defining pillars of its foreign policy: strengthening its role and efforts within the European Union and within NATO, as well as consolidating and extending the Strategic Partnership with the United States of America. This is complemented by an active role in promoting stability, security and economic development at regional level”[10] .

Romania’s stance is part of its recent attempts to redefine its position within NATO and the European Union, especially after the Russian involvement in Ukraine. Along with the TSI, Romania has also been deeply involved in the Bucharest 9 format, established in November 2015, a regional form of cooperation aiming to support NATO goals and improve security and stability between the Baltic and the Black Sea.

“Bucharest sees both the B9 and the TSI as instruments to enhance EU-NATO ties and eastern and western European cooperation rather than as platforms for intra-western bickering”[11] . Along with Poland, which is also a member of both TSI and Bucharest 9 format, Romania may contribute to the consolidation of the entire EU and NATO eastern border.

Romania is a member is several projects within the TSI [12], as can be seen below. These projects contain components for the development of Romanian infrastructure and are intended to connect it to the main European infrastructure.

1. FAIRway Danube (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia). Its aim is to connect transport services on the Danube with stable fairway conditions and implement the “Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan of the Danube and its Navigable Tributaries”
2. Orient/East – Med Rail Freight Corridor (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia). Its aim is to reduce the impact of the fragmented railway station by developing new IT tools that could be applied in this domain.
3. BRUA (Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania). Its major goals are to provide open access to cheaper gas sources, bring improvements to price convergence and transparency, reduce consumer vulnerability and increase energy security.
4. Central and South-East Europe Energy Connectivity (Romania is included). It is intended to provide access to more diversified energy sources.
5. Connecting Europe Broadband Fund (includes all EU members). Its aim is to complement existing EU financial instruments for broadband development.
6. Ro-Net Broadband Project (Romania). Its aim is to build broadband infrastructure in disadvantaged areas, with the main target of covering 783 of the 2268 localities by 2020.

The investment for Romania from the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund for 2014-2020 is of 17,661,077,676 euros.

Debates in Bucharest were doubled by efforts to create a fund and strengthen financial integration for these countries, through the format of the Bucharest Business

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Forum. The Business Forum which took place at the same time as the TSI is proof enough that the TSI has taken tangible steps.

Consequently, strengthening infrastructure works to enhance the region's prosperity and security. Romania's Black Sea gas is currently extracted with American support. Its reserves are estimated at more than 200 billion cubic meters. Provided the extraction is successful, Romania could become a significant producer within the European Union gas market and reinforce thus, regional cooperation and interconnection. As the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis put it, "closer cooperation in concrete interconnectivity projects between our countries will serve as proof that, unlike other options, the European and Euro-Atlantic perspective is the only one that can ensure prosperity, sustainable development and stability in these regions"[13].

### **4. Conclusions**

The hosting of the TSI Summit in Bucharest was an excellent opportunity to validate the strategic lines of action in the future development of the TSI. Enhancement and development of regional cooperation in the Bucharest Summit marks a new phase of the TSI – the tangible results one. Be it a coincidence or not, the fact that it is taking place in Bucharest, puts Romania on the map even more, aiming to highlight the fact that it is a reliable partner and provider of security and stability for future actions.

Romania's advantageous stance within the TSI stems from its strategic position, as well as the fact that it represents a landmark of Atlanticism in this part of Europe. However, Romania needs to weather the storm coming its way and be careful in its rhetoric as the United States already posited the TSI as an initiative directed against Russia.

Overall, the TSI is a call for the strengthening of the EU in the aftermath of several crises, as well as showing an active support for Europe as a Union of equal countries and not a Europe of multiple speeds [14]. Despite of its spoken goals focused on infrastructure and energy and digital markets, the end goal of the Initiative is defense and security-related.

Defense and security cooperation may be modest in terms of scope, but should be highly developed in terms of content. Just as Secretary of Energy pointed out, "(...)We know that energy security is basically tantamount to national security and transatlantic energy security is fundamental to the national security of all our nations"[15].

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