

NETWORK OF THE 3 SEAS REGIONS



A TOOL FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL



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Institute
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Development
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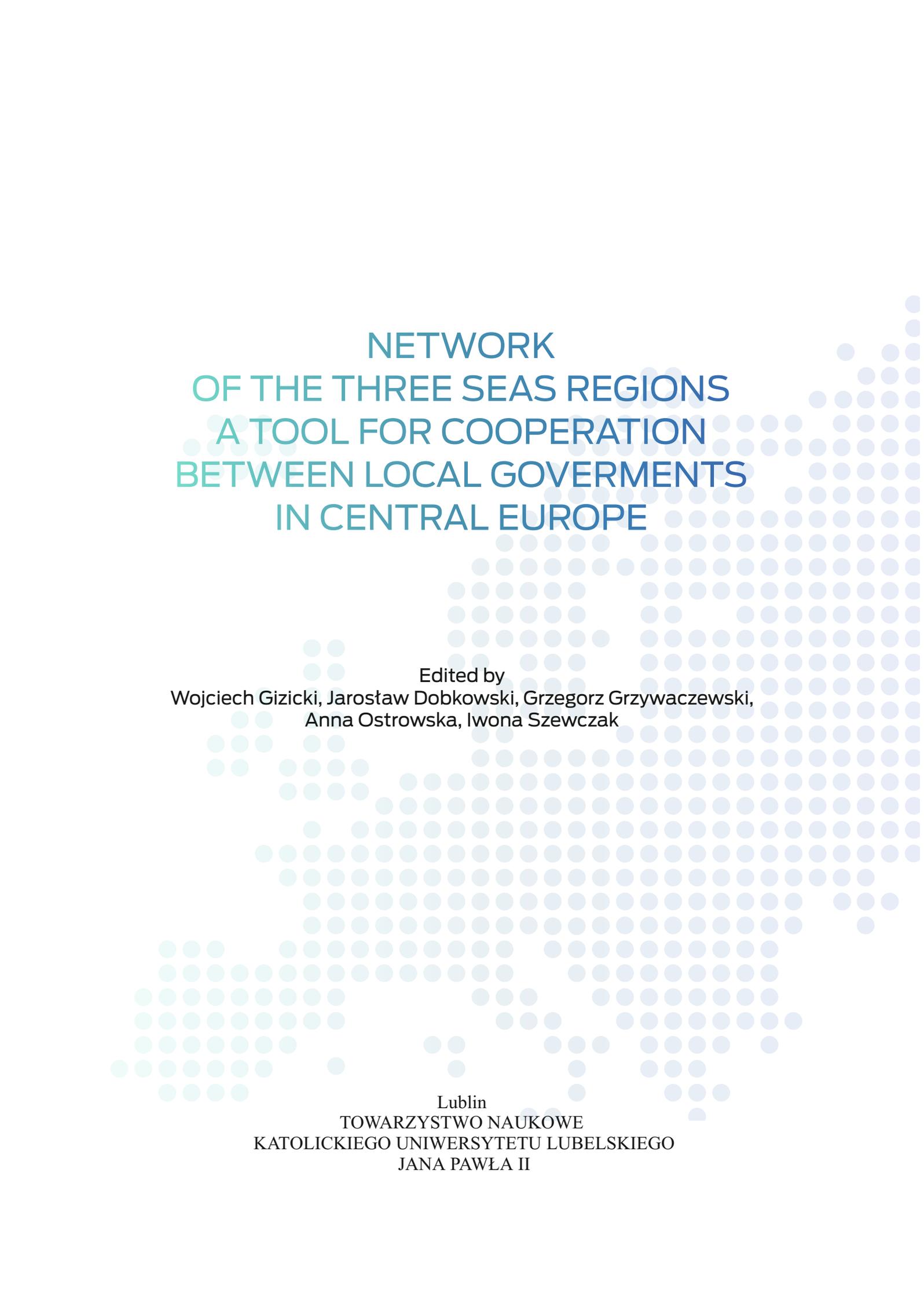
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TOWARZYSTWO NAUKOWE
KATOLICKIEGO UNIWERSYTETU LUBELSKIEGO
JANA PAWŁA II /
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Edited by

Wojciech Gizicki, Jarosław Dobkowski, Grzegorz Grzywaczewski,
Anna Ostrowska, Iwona Szewczak

Lublin

TOWARZYSTWO NAUKOWE
KATOLICKIEGO UNIWERSYTETU LUBELSKIEGO
JANA PAWŁA II

Reviewers

Doc. Ing. PhDr. Stanislav Konečný, PhD Koszyce, Uniwersytet Pawła Józefa Šafárika
w Koszycach, Słowacja
Dr hab. Marcin Janik, prof. UŚ, Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach

Translated by
Rafał Augustyn
Tomasz Pańkowski

Edited by
Tomasz Pańkowski

Typeset by
Jarosław Bielecki

Cover design
Agnieszka Gawryszuk

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Studied by the Institute for the Development of Local Government
of the Lubelskie Voivodeship
ul. M. Curie-Skłodowskiej 32/9, 20-029 Lublin
www.irst.lubelskie.pl

Commissioned by the Marshal Office of the Lubelskie Voivodeship
ul. A. Grottgera 2, 20-029 Lublin
www.lubelskie.pl

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TOWARZYSTWO NAUKOWE
KATOLICKIEGO UNIWERSYTETU LUBELSKIEGO
JANA PAWŁA II

ul. F. Chopina 29/11, 20-023 Lublin
tel. 81 525 01 93, tel./fax 81 524 31 77
e-mail: tnkul@tnkul.pl www.tnkul.pl
Dział Marketingu i Kolportażu tel. 81 524 51 71
e-mail: kolportaz@tnkul.pl

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary international relations are subject to very dynamically changing events, phenomena, and conditions. This, in turn, has a considerable effect on the level of international and state-internal relations. Some of the most imperative global challenges include security, stability, sovereignty, and territorial indivisibility – both at the level of individual states and other entities.

In the 1990s, the previous Cold War balance of power in Europe became eroded. Some political circles in the former Soviet sphere of influence proposed the creation of a bloc of cooperation for the states situated between Russia and Germany. At the time, however, it proved impossible to implement this idea, not least because of the political weakness of the states that had not consolidated their sovereignty. This perspective was transformed as the NATO and EU structures were enlarged to include new members in 1999, 2004 and 2007.

As a result of strengthening the position of the Central European countries on the international arena, an initiative was launched to create the Three Seas area. The Three Seas States Initiative Group was established in 2015 with a clear objective – to improve the security and economic situation of the Central European countries. The initiators of the project were Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The project is an opportunity to empower the entire region on the international arena and to create a security architecture that will give a sense of stability to the citizens of the twelve countries that have joined the initiative.¹ These states share a geographical, historical and political identity. However, there are a number of obstacles that could significantly hamper the entire consolidation process.

The economic sectors such as energy, transport and digitalisation are of crucial importance for this concept. Although the Three Seas concept is relatively new, a number of important investment projects have already been developed within this framework. A good example is the energy corridor running along the north–south axis, which will eventually connect the gas terminal in Świnoujście with its counterpart in Croatia. This should make the transmission of this energy resource more secure. The second flagship project is the Via Carpatia land route that links the Baltic coast with the Balkan Peninsula. This road is to become part of the EU Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme and will run from Klaipėda via Kaunas, Białystok, Lublin, Rzeszów, Košice, Debrecen, all the way to the Romanian Black Sea port of Constanța. A further branch of the route is also being planned, which is to connect the Baltic via a direct land route to the distant Aegean Sea via the Greek port of Thessaloniki. Infrastructure projects of this kind are intended to serve the development of the Three Seas states, but in essence they are also beneficial for investors from Western Europe as they increase the attractiveness of the entire region, contributing to the development of competitiveness throughout the EU. Supporting investment, modernisation and operational processes covering many spheres of life also involves the effective use of new digital technologies. All of this can facilitate and streamline opportunities for building integrated networks of cooperation between the local governments of the Three Seas countries.

This report, based on comprehensive scientific research and expert proposals, recommends taking action for the development of the Three Seas countries in terms of cooperation, which is also based on the construction of regional networks, including local government units.

¹ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ITS GROUNDING IN ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

The multidimensional nature of international relations requires the involvement of various actors. Local governments are no exception in this respect. The nature of their activities, their closeness to the local residents' concerns and their partnership initiatives with similar entities in other countries means that the local government can and should be seen as an important actor in such relations.

1.1 Regional significance of the international cooperation and partnership of local government units

The international cooperation of local government units is one of the key elements of European integration, both internally (between local governments in the EU member states) and externally (between local governments in the member states and those in non-EU countries). It should be noted that international cooperation of local government units manifests itself particularly through cross-border cooperation, which covers almost 30% of the EU area. The results of the research carried out (Cross-Border Cooperation in EU, 2020) indicate that the greatest interest in various forms of cross-border cooperation is found primarily in the Three Seas regions, above all in the areas of Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Croatia, as well as the Romanian-Bulgarian and Romanian-Hungarian border regions. It seems that the indicated research results correspond with the expectations of the residents of these regions, who strive to achieve the highest possible level of socio-economic development. Therefore, when considering international cooperation of local governments in Central and Eastern Europe, attention should be paid, on the one hand, to the opportunities arising, *inter alia*, from the main assumptions of EU cross-border cooperation and, on the other hand, to the opportunities arising from the activities promoted by the Three Seas Initiative. The action

plans developed by both the European Union and the Three Seas Initiative (although in a much less formalised way) predispose local government units to enter into mutual partnerships. In the context of regional development, these are initiatives that allow for a significant increase in the international activity of local governments. However, it should be pointed out that this cooperation must be implemented through the appropriate instruments. While in the framework of cross-border cooperation implemented by the European Union for several decades we have been dealing with the institution of Euroregions – conceived as local governmental organisations, within the framework of the activities proposed by the Three Seas Initiative no institutionalised forms of cooperation have been established, with the exception of the Network of the Three Seas Regions. Developing network administration by creating multifaceted partnerships, which bring together primarily local government units but also entities from the academic and business sectors, will allow to elevate the development potential of the Three Seas Initiative from the inter-state to the macro-regional level.

1.2 International and European determinants of international cooperation between local governments

One of the main goals of this report was to conduct an analysis of the potential of local governments for implementing international cooperation. This process has been an important element in the work of the Polish local government administration since the early 1990s. Nonetheless, the current geopolitical situation requires ongoing analysis and an adjustment of the legal regulations regarding the development of a model of international cooperation between local governments, in particular with regard to the international cooperation between different regions of Central European states.

1.2.1 The idea of the UN World Charter of Local Self-Government as a universal standard for international cooperation between local governments

Article 21(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted as a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on 10 December 1948 (unpublished), states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Hence, the Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco on 26 June 1945 (Polish Journal of Laws [henceforth: Dz.U.] of 1947, No. 23, item 90) distinguishes between the concepts of independence and local government (Pióro, 1973).

As a rule, international legal subjectivity is attributed primarily to states and only exceptionally to other actors in international relations. The attribution of treaty-making capacity to states in Article 6 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, done at Vienna on 23 May 1969, does not yet mean that the constituent parts of a state and their authorities will not be able to be actors in international law since this depends on national law regulations and subsequent international recognition. For example, Article 32 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany of 23 May 1949 (Bundesgesetzblatt 2022, Part 1, p. 968) stipulates that the maintenance of relations with other states is a federal matter, however, before concluding an agreement which concerns the special relations of one of the federal states that federal state must be consulted in due course; furthermore, within the framework of their legislative powers, the federal states may, upon the consent of the Federal Government, conclude agreements with other states.

Legal subjectivity is also granted to regions under the Constitution of the Kingdom of Belgium of 7 February 1831 (Moniteur Belge – Belgisch Staatsblad, 17 February 1994, No. 35, as amended). Interestingly, the Flemish Region, the French Community of Belgium and the Walloon Region are parties to cooperation agreements with the Government of the Republic of Poland of 6 June 1994 (unpublished) and of 10 October 1996 (unpublished), respectively.

In light of Article 172(2)–(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (Dz.U., No. 78, item 483, as amended), a local government unit is entitled to join international associations of local and regional communities and to cooperate with local and regional communities of other countries, whereby the principles under which local government units may exercise these rights

are determined by law (Florczak-Wątor, 2019). Pursuant to Article 76(1)–(2) of the Act of 5 June 1998 on the local government of voivodeship (Dz.U. of 2022, item 2094), the cooperation of a voivodeship with regional communities of other countries is carried out in accordance with the state's internal law, its foreign policy and its international obligations, within the limits of the tasks and competences of the voivodeship, and the voivodeship participates in the activities of international regional institutions and is represented in them in accordance with the principles defined in an agreement concluded by national organisations associating local government units. This means that Polish local governments at the level of voivodships have no international legal subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Article 1(3) of the Charter of the United Nations indicates that one of the purposes of the United Nations is to seek international cooperation in the resolution of international issues of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian nature. The international cooperation between local governments also falls within this scope (Perkowski, 2013).

Although it has its own agendas in the form of functional commissions and standing committees, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is competent in these matters, primarily launches various programmes (such as the international programme on town twinning as a form of international cooperation implemented in the 1960s) and supports the activities of international NGOs.

One such organisation is the International Union of Local Authorities, which has been operating since 1913. At the 27th World Congress of this organisation, held on 22–26 September 1985 in Rio de Janeiro, the idea of drafting a world charter of local self-government, which would be a universal international agreement, first emerged. It was then that the World Declaration of Local Self-Government was adopted in Rio de Janeiro on 22–26 September 1985, intended to be the foundation of this type of legal act.

It was then discussed at the 17th plenary meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council on 28 May 1987 and recommended for use in the work of the UN Programme on Public Administration and Finance. The Council also decided to ask the UN Secretary-General to circulate the document to member states as a draft declaration on local government. It also continued its own work based on, *inter alia*, the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122), which had already been in force at the time, culminating in the Second United Nations Conference entitled "Environment and Development", held between 3 and 14 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. During this conference,

the Agenda 21 policy document was adopted, indicating ways to develop and implement sustainable development programmes in local life. It also defined the role of local government and international cooperation between local governments.

Therefore, at the 31st World Congress of the International Union of Local Authorities, held on 13–17 June 1993 in Toronto, the World Declaration of Local Self-Government was re-adopted in a slightly amended form. Article 10 included a clear legal basis for international cooperation between local governments.

The problem was extensively discussed at the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), held on 3–14 June 1996 in Istanbul. The report of Commission II addressed the problem of stepping up efforts to have the UN adopt the global charter of local self-government, and before that – despite appreciating the previous efforts of the International Union of Local Authorities, as well as the World Federation of United Towns and Cities (that has existed since 1957) and Metropolis (existing since 1984) – the report advocated establishing a joint organisation that would bring together cities and local governments around the world. The initiative was directly supported by the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements, as reflected in General Assembly Resolution No. 51/177 of 16 December 1996. Shortly afterwards, a special memorandum was adopted by the Commission on 29 July 1997 in New York during the 16th UN session (Topfer, Hoffschulte, 1998). Subsequently, in 1998, the specially established World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination was consulted and gave a favourable opinion. In the meantime, the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements was transformed into the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities. The submitted draft text of the Charter was discussed at eight regional conferences attended by representatives of local authorities from more than 100 countries and government delegates from almost fifty countries. Amendments and additions recommended at these conferences were incorporated into the final text, which was presented at a meeting of experts convened in Nairobi on 13–14 April 2000. On 9 September 2000, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe expressed a favourable opinion on the adoption of the world charter of local self-government, which was preceded by Opinion 12 (1999) of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on the preliminary draft world charter of local self-government.

The provisions of Article 12 of the proposed charter concern the international cooperation of local authorities. In their light, local authorities have the right of association, which includes membership in international associations of local authorities. Local authorities are also entitled, by law or international treaties, to cooperate with their counterparts in other countries, including in cross-border regions. Local authorities should, in a spirit of partnership, engage in the negotiation and implementation of international action plans regarding their functions and responsibilities.

The idea of the global charter of local self-government was eventually negated by the USA and China, with Japan recognising it should take the form of a declaration rather than an international agreement. Thus, the charter was not on the agenda of the 25th Special Session of the General Assembly (Istanbul +5) for the general review and evaluation of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and the Istanbul Declaration, held on 6–8 June 2001. Arguably, many countries felt that the adoption of the world charter of local self-government would undermine their own state structures.

However, further work on the charter was not discontinued. A second draft was prepared, which was the subject of an opinion by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe expressed in a special resolution of 4 June 2002 (Resolution No. 138 (2002)¹ on the second draft concerning the World Charter of Local Self-Government), preceded by Opinion 17 (2002) on the second draft of the Charter. Earlier objections that the model adopted in the European Charter of Local Self-Government might not be in line with the traditions and circumstances of some countries and that a broader formula should therefore be sought were raised. To this end, a special working group was set up in 2003. On 5 May 2004 in Paris, the Founding Congress of the New United World Organisation of Local Authorities “United Cities and Local Governments”, which included, among others, the International Union of Local Authorities, the World Federation of Partner Cities and Metropolis, issued the declaration *Cities, Local Governments: The Future for Development*. The United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities was involved in the creation of the International Guidelines on Decentralisation and Access to Basic Universal Services, endorsed by the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme on 3 April 2009. The guidelines outline the main principles underlying the democratic, constitutional (legal) and administrative aspects of local governance and decentralisation. At the same time, they are general enough to be adapted to the specific conditions of a state form (federal, regional or unitary) and different

state traditions (e.g., Napoleonic, Germanic or Anglo-Saxon, or traditional forms found in Asian and Arab countries). For this reason, they do not provide a uniform and rigid template applicable to all member states of the United Nations. They may be subject to national adaptations. However, their main purpose is to promote legislative reform and to guide such reforms where necessary and appropriate.

A further step was the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), which took place on 17–20 October 2016 in Quito. The conference emphasised the role of international cooperation between local governments. Horizontal cooperation of local authorities at the inter-state level is also addressed in many other policy documents.

Although the adoption of the global charter of local self-government will take considerable time and effort, the general direction on how to proceed with it is clear enough (Kieres, 2022). Although there are no UN universal standards, not even a declaration or a resolution regulating this issue, certain policy norms are expressed through common positions and, above all, resolutions adopted by international conferences, which, although not constituting typical sources of international law, create specific positive obligations for the states to facilitate, on their own, international cooperation between local governments and to prepare proper grounds for it. This perspective is reinforced by the good-neighbourliness principle expressed in the UN Charter (Jasudowicz, 1989). Chronologically, the following may serve as examples of such actions: Treaty of Friendship and Solidarity between the Republic of Poland and the French Republic (9 April 1991) (Dz.U. of 1992, No. 81, item 415), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation (17 June 1991) (Dz.U. of 1992, No. 14, item 56), Agreement between the Republic of Poland and the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic on Good Neighbourly Relations, Solidarity and Friendly Cooperation (6 October 1991) (Dz.U. of 1992, No. 59, item 296), Agreement between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary on Friendly and Good Neighbourly Cooperation (6 October 1991) (Dz.U. of 1992, No. 59, item 298), Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Italian Republic (11 October 1991) (Dz.U. of 1996, No. 52, item 226), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and Ukraine on Good Neighbourliness, Friendly Relations and Cooperation (18 May 1992) (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 125, item 573), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Russian Federation on Friendly and Good Neighbourly Cooperation (22 May

1992) (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 61, item 291), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation, signed in Warsaw on 23 June 1992 (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 118, item 527), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Latvia on Friendship and Cooperation (1 July 1992) (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 114, item 502), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Estonia on Friendship and Cooperation (2 July 1992) (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 121, item 536), Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Kingdom of Spain (26 October 1992) (Dz.U. of 1995, No. 18, item 84), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and Romania on Friendship and Cooperation (25 January 1993) (Dz.U. of 1994, No. 29, item 106), Agreement between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Bulgaria on Friendly Relations and Cooperation (25 February 1993) (Dz.U. of 1993, No. 118, item 529), Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Georgia (20 April 1993) (Dz.U. of 2000, No. 2, item 7), Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Turkey (3 November 1993) (Dz.U. of 1995, No. 118, item 566), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourly Cooperation (26 April 1994) (Dz.U. of 1995, No. 15, item 71), Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Moldova on Friendship and Cooperation (15 November 1994) (Dz.U. of 1996, No. 76, item 363), Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Uzbekistan (11 January 1995) (Dz.U. of 1996, No. 26, item 115), Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Hellenic Republic (12 June 1996) (Dz.U. of 1998, No. 129, item 852). All these bilateral agreements contain clauses on cooperation between regions in a broad sense.

The international legal basis for local government cooperation can also arise from agreements on individual matters of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian nature. Within the European context, examples include the 1993 agreement between Sweden and Norway on public health services, the 1996 agreement between Slovenia and Croatia on water supply, or the 1996 agreement between Austria and Slovakia on disaster prevention and relief (Perkowski, 2013).

1.2.2 Council of Europe standards regarding international cooperation between local governments

The statutory aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity among its members in order to protect and implement the ideals and principles which constitute their common heritage and to facilitate their economic and social progress. This aim will be realised through the Council bodies by discussing common problems, concluding agreements and by acting jointly in economic, social, cultural, scientific, legal and administrative matters, as well as by respecting and developing human rights and fundamental freedoms (see Article 1(a–b) of the Statute of the Council of Europe, adopted in London on 5 May 1949 (Dz.U. of 1994, No. 118, item 565)).

The Council of Europe acts by issuing recommendations for the member states, concluding conventions and agreements, and through adopting by governments of common policies on specific matters. The instruments of public international law are used, which means that the Council of Europe does not create secondary law. A convention or agreement concluded within the framework of the Council of Europe does not acquire binding force directly through its adoption, but only when, after it has been opened for signature by member states and signatures have been affixed, it is ratified in accordance with the conditions and procedures applicable to the legal system of the given state. Each state has the possibility of expressing reservations or making specific declarations, allowing for the detailed adaptation of the commitments it undertakes to the specificities of its legal system and possible constraints of a political nature resulting from the position of its government or parliament. Hence, the Council of Europe system is an example of international integration rather than supranational integration.

Nevertheless, since the 1950s onwards, various inter-state agreements have been concluded to regulate specific neighbourhood issues within a specific border between states, the subject matter of which included not only the contracting states, but above all local and regional governments and made it possible to develop direct cooperation between local and regional authorities.

In 1964, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe obliged the then Council of Municipalities and Regions “to study the possibilities and, where appropriate, the principles of cooperation [...] between the local authorities of the different member states of the Council of Europe, in particular between neighbouring districts situated on the

borders of the member states” (Guideline No. 227 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 1964). The urgent need for such action was also expressed in the 1970 position of the Parliamentary Assembly (Guideline No. 288 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 1970). The Association of European Border Regions, founded in 1971, also supported the work of the local and regional government in border areas. A draft convention was presented in 1976/77 (Draft European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Authorities or Communities, Strasbourg 1976 (CE/Loc (76) Misc 1), Draft European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Authorities or Communities, Strasbourg 1977 (CDRM (77) 5). Faced with a whole lot of practical problems in the provision of public services by local and regional authorities in border areas, the draft convention contained many ambiguous and vague notions, providing a legal framework rather than self-executing provisions, as expressed by the Parliamentary Assembly in its 1979 opinion (Opinion No. 96 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 1979). Nevertheless, the Convention draft is based on the convictions, reflected in the agenda, that the aim of the Council of Europe is to create closer links between its member states and to promote cooperation between them. In addition, this aim should be achieved, in particular, by concluding agreements in the field of administration, while the Council of Europe seeks to ensure that Europe’s local communities and authorities work together in pursuit of its objectives. The Council also takes account of the importance of cooperation between local communities and authorities in border areas in fields such as regional, urban and rural development, environmental protection, the improvement of public infrastructure and services for the population, and mutual assistance in the event of emergencies and disasters, drawing on its experience which has shown that cooperation between local and regional authorities in Europe facilitates the effective achievement of their objectives and, in particular, contributes to improving the condition and development of border areas. The Council of Europe has therefore decided to support this cooperation to the fullest extent possible and thus contribute to the economic and social progress of border areas and to the strengthening of the sense of community which unites the peoples of Europe.

The European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities was finally drawn up in Madrid on 21 May 1980.

The most important obligation arises from its Article 1, which states that each Contracting Party undertakes to

facilitate and promote cross-border cooperation between local communities and authorities under its jurisdiction and those under the jurisdiction of another Contracting Party. It shall endeavour to conclude the agreements and adopt the arrangements necessary for this purpose, respecting the distinct constitutional provisions of each Party.

Together with the Convention, the Explanatory Report on the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/fr/Reports/Html/106.htm>) was adopted and addressed to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Although it does not provide a binding interpretation of the text of the Convention, the report is intended to facilitate understanding of its provisions. In light of this memorandum, the obligation under Article 1 is an obligation of a general nature, taking into account the situation prevailing in the states that have ratified the Convention. It is a sign of the open-mindedness of these states towards the cooperation problems presented, especially those regarding the conclusion of agreements and the adoption of arrangements.

At the same time, Article 2 defines the key concepts. Cross-border cooperation is defined as any joint action aimed at strengthening and further developing good neighbourly relations between the local communities and authorities of two or more states, as well as at concluding agreements and adopting arrangements necessary for the implementation of such endeavours. Cross-border cooperation is limited by the framework of the competence of the territorial communities and authorities, as determined by domestic law. The Convention does not affect the extent and nature of this competence. For the purposes of this Convention, the expression "territorial communities and authorities" refers to the units, offices and bodies that implement local and regional tasks and are recognised as such under the domestic law of each state. Each Contracting Party may, however, at the time of signing this Convention or through a subsequent notification to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, designate the units, offices and bodies, as well as the subject and forms of action, as to which it intends to limit the scope of this Convention or which it intends to exclude from its application.

In order to make the Convention more flexible, without reducing it to a mere declaration, the Convention is supplemented by model inter-state agreements and outlines of memoranda, statutes and agreements that can be concluded by local authorities in the field of cross-border cooperation. According to Article 3, the states shall support

measures taken by territorial communities and authorities which take account of these models and outlines of agreements between territorial communities or authorities developed within the framework of the Council of Europe and, if they consider it appropriate, may use the models of bilateral and multilateral inter-state agreements developed within the framework of the Council of Europe which are intended to facilitate cooperation between territorial communities and authorities.

According to the Explanatory Report, "the graded system of models and outlines annexed to the Convention is intended to ensure that the states and local authorities can choose the form of cooperation best suited to their problems, given that the Convention does not preclude either the use of agreements in another form or the adaptation of the annexed models according to the particular case of cross-border cooperation." The inclusion of these texts in an annexe to the Convention does not imply any obligation on the part of the contracting parties to use them or even to apply them as presented if they choose to do so. Mentioning models in the Convention does not give them a binding character, but merely implies an obligation on the states to them proper recognition.

In this respect, in furtherance of the objectives of this Convention, the contracting parties are supposed to encourage undertakings by territorial communities and authorities that take account of the outlines for agreements between territorial communities and territorial authorities developed within the framework of the Council of Europe. If they consider it appropriate, the contracting parties may take account of the models developed within the Council of Europe for bilateral and multilateral agreements between territorial communities and authorities, which are intended to facilitate cooperation between them. In particular, the arrangements made and agreements concluded may be based on the models and outlines of basic memoranda, statutes and agreements annexed to the Convention, which should be adapted to the specific circumstances of each state. These model basic memoranda, statutes and agreements shall serve only as a reference and are not binding. If the contracting parties deem it necessary to conclude inter-state agreements, they may, inter alia, set the framework, forms and limits within which territorial communities and authorities engaged in cross-border cooperation may operate. Each agreement may also specify the authorities and bodies concerned. This does not preclude the states from applying other forms of cross-border cooperation in accordance with the agreement. Indeed, the provisions of the Convention cannot be interpreted in such a way as to invalidate the existing cooperation

agreements. Furthermore, agreements and arrangements must be concluded with respect for each state's domestic law-specific jurisdiction in the field of international relations and general policy, as well as with respect for the provisions regarding control and supervision to which territorial communities and authorities are subject.

However, each contracting party should endeavour to solve any problems of a legal, administrative or technical nature which might hinder the development and successful implementation of cross-border cooperation and, if necessary, make appropriate arrangements with one or more of the states concerned. In the case of cross-border cooperation based on the Convention, states are to examine the purposefulness of giving participating territorial communities and authorities the same opportunities as those offered by inter-state cooperation. They also ought to provide all possible information to facilitate the fulfilment of their obligations under the Convention. The states are also supposed to ensure that territorial communities and authorities are informed of the means of action at their disposal under the Convention.

As its name implies, the Convention provides a certain framework. It does not generate strict legal obligations and does not contain *ius strictum* provisions, but rather conditions for the creative elaboration of the principles contained in the Convention. As such, it does not produce direct legal effects, but rather has an indirect effect, creating moral and political obligations of a semi-imperative nature. Nevertheless, the adoption of the Convention signifies the legal sanctioning of cross-border cooperation, as well as a certain regulation of the activities of local governments that go beyond the territory of a country and its legal system through setting clearly defined boundaries and, above all, with respect to the territorial integrity of states.

The Outline Convention did not become an "empty" law. It provided the basis for the conclusion of the Benelux Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation on 12 September 1986 in Brussels, or for the agreement between Germany and the Netherlands of 23 May 1991 in Isselburg-Anholt.

It is worth noting that the Association of European Border Regions, operating in the area of the first cross-border union Euregio, which has existed since 1958, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, adopted the European Charter for Cross-Border Regions on 20 November 1991. Although the Charter is not a source of public international law and thus has no binding force, nevertheless, as a declaration by local and regional authorities, it sets out the intentions and objectives to be considered in the development of border and cross-border regions. It is an example of non-govern-

mental regulation in use in the European space defined by the Council of Europe. Its content has been amended twice and in 1995 it was given its current name: the European Charter for Border and Cross-Border Regions, which reflects the ongoing development tendencies.

Despite its limitations, the Outline Convention also represents an important step in shaping the status of the local government in the Council of Europe's legal space. It gave rise to a discussion on the recognition of the right of local governments to enter cross-border cooperation, which was reflected in the European Charter on Local Self-Government, a kind of European constitution of local government, the material scope of which is extremely broad and covers the main issue discussed here. The principle in Article 10 mentions "the right of local communities to associate", and in Section 3 it stipulates: "Local communities may co-operate with communities of other states under the conditions laid down by law".

The right to cross-border cooperation was particularly emphasised in the European Charter of Regional Self-Government, adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the 4th session held on 3–5 June 1997 in Strasbourg, which was accepted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe but has not received the approval of the Council of Europe's most important decision-making body, the Committee of Ministers. The provisions of Article 8 concern interregional and cross-border relations and stipulate that, in the areas of their competence, regions should be entitled to engage in interregional or cross-border cooperation in accordance with procedures imposed by domestic law. This cooperation should be conducted in accordance with domestic law and the state's international obligations. While respecting the provisions of all the legal systems concerned and international law, regions forming part of a cross-border area may establish joint executive or legislative bodies. Legislative acts issued by these bodies should be subject to the procedures of competent courts to the same extent as those enacted by regional bodies, in accordance with the rules laid down in the existing treaties governing these matters. Interregional and cross-border relations of the regions should be subject to international agreements in their scope of application.

In relation to Article 1 of the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, the regulations of the charter mentioned above are much less ambiguous, although they do not in themselves recognise the right of local governments to cooperate across borders. The explanatory report to the European Charter of Regional Self-Government points out

that individual, direct cooperation with local communities in other countries should also be possible, although the rules for such cooperation must comply with the legal provisions in force in each state and must not go beyond the competences of the communities concerned. In this respect, reference was also made to the provisions of the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, which were considered particularly relevant in this context.

In the meantime, the Declaration on Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe was adopted in Vienna on 6 October 1989 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which recognised that there was a general consensus among those politically responsible for territorial authorities on the need to cooperate with neighbours in a spirit of cooperation, good-neighbourliness, openness and solidarity and to encourage the progressive removal of all kinds of barriers (administrative, legal, political and psychological) to the development of cross-border cooperation.

An analysis carried out in 1991 by the Council of Europe Secretariat of the solutions contained in the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities and, in particular, the use of the model inter-state agreements and the outlines of memoranda, statutes and agreements concluded by local authorities in the field of cross-border cooperation, showed that the latter are used neither by the states that have ratified the Outline Convention nor by the local governments of those states. The provisions of the Outline Convention themselves have not been effectively applied in actual cooperation (Implementation of the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, Secretariat Memorandum prepared by the Directorate of the Environment and Local Authorities, Strasbourg 1991 (LR-R-CT (91) 2).

Therefore, the heads of states and the governments of the member states of the Council of Europe adopted the Declaration in Vienna on 9 October 1993, which highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation in the activities of the Council of Europe and its commitment to further activities in this field. At that time, it was also decided to draw up an Additional Protocol to the Outline Convention. It was opened for signature on 9 November 1995 at the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg (Additional Protocol to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, European Treaty Series (ETS) No. 159).

The content of the Additional Protocol is significant and quite unambiguous. Article 1(1) already states that each

contracting party recognises and respects the right of local governments and territorial authorities under their jurisdiction and mentioned in Articles 1 and 2 of the Outline Convention to conclude, in areas of shared competence, territorial cooperation agreements with local governments and territorial authorities of other states in accordance with the procedures laid down in their statutes, domestic laws and in compliance with the Party's international obligations. The Additional Protocol recognises the right of local and regional authorities (within the limits of their own competences) to establish cross-border relations. Local and regional authorities no longer have to wait for the commitment of states to "facilitate and promote" cross-border cooperation but can legally develop such cooperation on their own initiative. The Additional Protocol also contains a number of specific provisions, but above all it adopts conflict-of-law rules. For instance, according to Article 2, decisions taken under the memorandum of cross-border cooperation should be implemented by the local or regional authorities within the framework of their own state's legal system and in accordance with national law. The implemented decisions shall be deemed to have the force and effect of the legal acts of these local governments or authorities within their state's legal system. The Explanatory Report introduces the principle according to which a decision taken by advisory bodies has no legal force or effect, but it must become the subject of a legal act of each of the local government or territorial authorities that are party to the agreement so that it is "transposed" into the legal system of the country of the given local government, while respecting the applicable procedural rules).

The Additional Protocol also contains provisions, *inter alia*, on the possibility of establishing joint bodies for cross-border cooperation. Articles 3 to 5 indicate that cross-border cooperation agreements concluded by local governments or territorial authorities may serve to establish cross-border cooperation bodies, whether or not they have legal personality, with the legal personality being determined by the law of the state in which this body is established. Such a body may be governed by public law since its actions have the same legal force and effects in the legal system of each contracting party as actions taken by the local government or territorial authorities that concluded the agreement.

In this respect, to some extent, it adopts the provisions of Article 8 of the European Charter of Regional Self-Government.

According to Article 2(1) of the Outline Convention, its spatial scope is limited, and the principles of cross-border cooperation developed within the Council of Europe apply only to neighbourhood relations and not to relations between local governments that are not in immediate geographical proximity. On 5 May 1998, the second protocol (Protocol No. 2 to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities concerning interterritorial co-operation, European Treaty Series (ETS) No. 169) was opened for signature in Strasbourg by the members of the Council of Europe. It aims to extend the principles to non-neighbourhood cooperation. Article 1 defines the concept of "territorial cooperation" as "any agreement aimed at establishing contacts between the territorial communities and authorities of two or more contracting parties, other than contacts in the context of cross-border cooperation of neighbouring communities". Adopting the quantifier "territorial", this definition is broad, which has its advantages in that it covers the activities of many towns and metropolitan areas, but this also has its limitations in that it does not include local government units other than territorial authorities, such as the French Community of Belgium. Article 3 states that the contracting parties shall apply the Outline Convention, *mutatis mutandis*, to territorial cooperation.

After a series of consultations, it was decided in 2004 to draw up a third Protocol to the Outline Convention on Euroregional Co-operation Groupings. It was intended to provide an exhaustive legal basis for the establishment of Euroregions in a new legal form covering the whole of Europe, in particular by defining the status of Euroregions in the form of specific provisions of international law and references to complementary national legislation. The aim was to establish a cooperation body with general competences to promote, support and develop good neighbourly relations between its members for the benefit of society. It was an elaborate regulation that contained self-executing provisions.

The work on the draft of the third protocol evolved into studies on a new convention. The fruit of this work was a draft of 27 April 2006, entitled "Revised Preliminary Draft of the European Convention establishing a Unified Law on Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (UWT)" (DOC CDLR (2006) 17). In the absence of consent by all states to be bound by the new convention, the idea of a third protocol to the Outline Convention was revised. The third protocol was opened for signature in Utrecht on 16 November 2009 (Protocol No. 3 to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communi-

ties or Authorities concerning Euroregional Co-operation Groupings (ECGs), ETS No. 206).

In this respect, Poland signed and ratified on 19 March 1993 the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (21 May 1980), and subsequently promulgated it on 19 June 1993 (Dz.U., No. 61, item 287). Poland has not acceded to the Additional Protocol and the Second and Third Protocols (Jóskowiak, 2008). Poland is also a party to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, drawn up in Strasbourg on 15 October 1985, which it ratified on 22 November 1993 and promulgated on 9 December 1994 (Dz.U., No. 124, item 608).

It is worth noting that the Outline Convention is referenced in the earlier Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on the main principles of cross-border cooperation of 24 April 1992 (unpublished) and the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Russian Federation on cross-border cooperation of 2 October 1992 (unpublished). However, there is no such reference in the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of Ukraine on Inter-Territorial Cooperation of 24 May 1993 (unpublished). Earlier agreements with countries which Poland does not border were also concluded with reference to the Outline Convention, e.g. the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on cooperation between regions and local governments of 1 July 1992 (unpublished), Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Estonia (which is not a party to the Outline Convention to this day) on cooperation between regions and local governments of 2 July 1992 (unpublished), Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Georgia on interregional cooperation of 20 April 1993 (unpublished). References to the Outline Convention are present in later agreements with Poland's neighbours: the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Czech Republic on cross-border cooperation of 8 September 1994 (unpublished), Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Slovak Republic on cross-border cooperation of 18 August 1994 (unpublished), Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on Cross-Border Cooperation of 16 September 1995 (unpublished).

The Outline Convention is also invoked in cooperation agreements concluded by all types of local government units in Poland, especially voivodeships.

As it can be seen, the standard of the Council of Europe arising already from the Outline Convention itself and consolidated by the provision of the European Charter of Local Self-Government provides a good basis for the development of international cooperation by the Polish state and local government units. It ensures a minimum level of harmonisation of solutions with foreign partners.

1.2.3 Determinants of international cooperation between local governments under the EU law

The concept of “cross-border cooperation” itself appears in the text of Article 307 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, p. 1).

Cross-border cooperation is important from the perspective of economic, social and territorial cohesion since cooperation between countries and regions is a fundamental element of the European Union’s cohesion policy. Therefore, cross-border cooperation cannot be reduced to a supplementary activity carried out by selected local and regional governments to the extent necessary to meet the expectations of people living in border regions and experiencing difficulties due to their proximity to the border. A different approach to spatial planning is evident, in which the cross-border context and local and regional economic development beyond the national area become significant. At the same time, financial constraints have often prevented the establishment of joint bodies to coordinate such activities.

Articles 174 and 176 of the Treaty mentioned provide that the European Regional Development Fund is supposed to help reduce the main regional disparities in the EU and is to contribute to reducing the gap between the levels of development of the various regions and the extent to which the least privileged regions are lagging behind, among which particular attention should be paid to regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as the northernmost regions with very low population density or islands, cross-border areas and mountain regions. First of all, it should be pointed out that in accordance with Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1260/1999, the “Europe-

an territorial cooperation” is broadly defined as aiming at strengthening cross-border cooperation through joint local and regional initiatives, strengthening transnational cooperation by means of actions conducive to integrated territorial development linked to Community’s priorities as well as strengthening interregional cooperation and exchange of experience at the appropriate territorial level. In this respect, actions under the European territorial cooperation objective are to be financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Pursuant to Regulation (EU) No. 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European Territorial Cooperation goal (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 259), in order to promote harmonious development of the territory of the EU at different levels, the Fund should support cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation under the European Territorial Cooperation Goal. And in accordance with Regulation (EU) No. 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1080/2006 (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 289), under the European Territorial Cooperation goal, the Fund may also support the joint use of facilities and human resources and all types of cross-border infrastructure in all regions.

These regulations and any acts adopted on their basis applied to programmes and operations supported by the Fund during the 2014–2020 programming period.

The rules concerning the financing of European territorial cooperation in the period 2021–2027 are stipulated in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Fair Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and the financial rules for these Funds and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159), in Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 60) and, most importantly, in Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions concerning the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European

Regional Development Fund and the external financing instruments (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 94).

To this end, the tool used on the ongoing basis is the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, operating on the basis of Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC) (OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 19), as amended by Regulation (EU) No. 1302/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 amending Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC) as regards the clarification, simplification and improvement of the establishment and functioning of such groupings (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 303).

The provisions of the Regulation require their implementation into the national legal system. The provisions implementing the regulation in Poland are contained in the Act of 7 November 2008 on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (Dz.U. of 2021, item 1219). However, it is worth pointing out that the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation are structures that local and regional governments of EU Member States can also use to carry out cross-border and interregional cooperation outside of EU funding. This is a valuable alternative to the forms of international cooperation envisaged by the Council of Europe standards (Levrat, 2007).

The participation of Polish local government units in European economic interest groupings may also be of some importance for the development of international cooperation between local governments (Nitschke-Szram, 2017). The legal basis for their operation derives from Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2137/85 of 25 July 1985 on the European economic interest grouping (Official Journal of the EC, 1985, No. L 199/1, p. 83). The provisions of this regulation were implemented by the adoption of the Act of 4 March 2005 on the European economic interest grouping and the European company (Dz.U. of 2022, item 259). It is there that one must look for direct references to Polish partners.

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As it could be read in the Joint Declaration of the European Union Member States located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia on the Three Seas Initiative of 25 August 2016, the Three Seas Initiative is an informal platform for gaining political support and organising decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional

projects of strategic importance for the States involved in the energy, transport, digital communications and economic sectors in Central and Eastern Europe. The basic pillars and objectives of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) are expressed most fully in the Joint Declaration of the Seventh Summit of the Three Seas Initiative, held in Riga on 20-21 June 2022. These are: to enhance economic development; to strengthen EU cohesion, including through the modernisation of infrastructure in the region; to enrich transatlantic partnerships; and to ensure that the Three Seas Initiative meets the needs of society for better connectivity between the countries participating in the 3SI connectivity projects. Therefore, it can be assumed that, in international legal terms, the Three Seas Initiative is not a structure that is parallel to existing cooperation mechanisms. It can be considered a forum for political and economic cooperation, ensuring communication between the 3SI states and the focus and coordination of efforts on common issues, without taking the form of an international organisation (Surmacz, Stępniewski, Gołębiowski, 2022; Orzelska-Stączek, Ukielski, 2020; Popławski, Jakóbowski, 2020; Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019; T. Stępniewski, 2018; Stępniewski, 2018). In addition to presidential, parliamentary and intergovernmental cooperation, local government cooperation conducted directly by local and regional governments is increasingly developing. This initiative facilitated the development of broad international cooperation between local governments, not only between the regions from the 3SI area but also between the less important local governments. An expression of deeper inter-regional cooperation is, for instance, the establishment of the Network of the Three Seas Regions as a cooperation platform for the implementation of joint initiatives, which may take the form of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation. No less important is the establishment in 2018 of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund, the main objective of which is to raise funds for the implementation of various types of cross-border projects.

1.3 Establishing international cooperation by local government units in light of national law

The foreign contacts that local government units establish and maintain are an expression of their aspirations to participate in the international community. They are complementary to the central government's foreign policy, supporting, deepening and sustaining the directions

and objectives set by the state government in the area of foreign relations (Malinowska, 2012; Trzcielińska-Polus, 2015). The international activity of local government units has been described as a “natural vehicle for international cooperation” due to the multiplicity of their contacts, which creates a dense network of international ties on a national scale, also due to their long-term nature, providing an opportunity to establish closer relationships based on mutual trust and due to the prospect of establishing contacts between different actors – entrepreneurs, NGOs, artists, athletes, schoolchildren, cultural institutions etc. (Jarosz, 2016).

The importance of international cooperation between local governments is evidenced, for example, by the fact that the authorisation to establish and conduct such cooperation is found in the Polish Basic Law. Article 172(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (Dz.U., No. 78, item 483, as amended) provides for two types of powers of local government units in the sphere of international cooperation: the right to join international associations of local and regional communities, and the right to cooperate with local and regional communities of other states. Furthermore, these rights are derived directly from ratified international agreements which are sources of universally binding law in Poland, including the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Madrid Convention. The legislator can specify the content of these rights (Article 172(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland). At the same time, the Constitution contains an important limitation to a local government activity in the field of international cooperation, stipulating that it cannot violate the sovereignty of the Republic of Poland, the integrity of its territory or the unity of the state (Articles 3 and 5). This derives from the fact that local government units are not sovereign and independent from the state; they are not entitled to independently conduct international policy, which is the domain of the legislator (Articles 89–90 of the Constitution) and central executive bodies (Articles 133, 146(1) and (4)(9–10) of the Constitution).

The international cooperation of local government units is carried out in accordance with national law, the foreign policy of the state and its international obligations, within the limits of the tasks and competences of each unit, and in the case of the local government at the level of voivodeship – also in accordance with the “Priorities of foreign cooperation of the voivodeship”. The constitutional authorisation to establish and maintain international cooperation by local government units has been implemented in each of the three acts regulating the operation of local governments: in the Act of 8 March 1990 on Commune

Government (Dz.U. of 2022, item 559, as amended, henceforth: ACG), in the Act of 5 June 1998 on District Government (Dz.U. of 2022, item 1526, henceforth: ADG), in the Act of 5 June 1998 on Local Government in Voivodeships (Dz.U. of 2022, item 2094, henceforth: LGV), as well as in the Act of 9 March 2017 on the Metropolitan Association in the Silesian Voivodeship (Dz.U. of 2022, item 1709, as amended), in the Act of 15 September 2000 on the Principles of Accession of Local Government Units to International Associations of Local and Regional Communities (Dz.U., No. 91, item 1009, as amended) and in the Act of 7 November 2008 on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (Dz.U. of 2021, item 1219). The basic features of international cooperation between local government units are voluntariness, including both the undertaking and the choice of the form of cooperation, and partners’ equality (Czarnow, 2000).

An entity assisting in the coordination of international policy of local government units with state policy is the Joint Commission of the State Government and Local Government, established by the Act of 6 May 2005 on the Joint Commission of the State Government and Local Government and on the Representatives of the Republic of Poland in the Committee of the Regions of the European Union (Dz.U. No. 90, item 759, as amended). Its task is to consider problems connected with the functioning of local governments and state policy towards local governments, as well as matters concerning local governments that are within the scope of activity of the European Union and international organisations of which the Republic of Poland is a member (Article 2(2) of the Act). The Commission deals with matters regarding widely understood international cooperation of local government units, especially within the framework of the EU regional policy.

According to the domestic law, each local government unit is authorised to establish and conduct international cooperation. At the commune level, such cooperation is regulated by Article 7(1)(20) of the ACG, which includes cooperation of the commune with local and regional communities of other countries within its own tasks, i.e., in order to satisfy the collective needs of the local community. This demonstrates the importance of international cooperation of the local government at the level of the commune. The ACG contains only one more regulation in this area, entrusting the commune council with the adoption of resolutions on cooperation with local and regional communities of other states and on accession to international associations of local and regional communities (Article 18(2)(12a)), while referring to separate

provisions on the matter of the commune's accession to such associations (Article 84a).

The same model of regulation was adopted in the ADG, which in Article 12(9a) includes in the exclusive competence of the district council the adoption of resolutions on cooperation with local communities in other countries and joining international associations of local communities, while referring to separate provisions on the principles of the district's accession to such associations (Article 75a).

International cooperation between local governments has been regulated most holistically at the level of the voivodeship government. Unlike other acts on local governments, the LGV contains a separate Chapter 6, entitled "Foreign Cooperation", dedicated to this issue. The voivodeship government has been granted the right: 1) to co-operate with international organisations and regions of other states, especially neighbouring ones, when formulating the development strategy of the voivodeship and implementing its development policy (Article 12(1) and (2) of the LGV); 2) to participate in the international activities of regional institutions (the voivodeship is represented in them on the principles defined in an agreement concluded by national organisations associating local government units – Article 76(2) of the LGV; these include, *inter alia*, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, the Chamber of Regions forming part of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe and the Committee of the Regions); 3) to join international associations of regions on the principles laid down in separate regulations, as well as other forms of regional cooperation, on the basis of a resolution of the voivodeship assembly (Article 18(14) of the LGV). The LGV is the only one among the acts regulating local governments that directly assigns a task from the area of international cooperation to the executive body of the voivodeship. Pursuant to Article 41(2)(5) of the LGV, the competences of the voivodeship executive board include organising cooperation with regional government structures in other countries and with international associations of regions. Thus, the legislator entrusted the voivodeship executive board with the implementation of the resolutions of the voivodeship assembly concerning international cooperation.

The voivodeship assembly is obliged to adopt "Priorities of foreign cooperation of the voivodeship" (Article 18, item 13 of the LGV), on the basis of which the voivodeship government establishes and maintains the aforementioned international relations. The legislator defined the elements of the content of this document, including the main objectives of foreign cooperation, geographical priorities of

future cooperation and intentions to join international regional associations (Article 75 of the LGV). The priorities are an act of internal executive board, and as a consequence, they are only binding for entities within the organisational structure of the voivodeship government (Klyszcz, 1999; Leoński, 2006; Właźlak, 2010). A resolution on their adoption is passed by an absolute majority of the statutory composition of the voivodeship assembly with the consent of the minister responsible for foreign affairs, and subsequently sent by the voivodeship marshal to the minister responsible for foreign affairs and the minister responsible for public administration (Article 77(2) and (3) of the LGV). The same procedure applies in the case of foreign initiatives, in particular draft agreements on regional cooperation, undertaken by the voivodeship government.

With regard to the establishment of international cooperation between local governments in the form of international associations of local and regional communities, the acts on local governments refer to separate provisions. These provisions are contained in the Act of 15 September 2000 on the Rules of Accession of Local Government Units to International Associations of Local and Regional Communities. Associations are conceived as organisations, unions and societies established by local communities of at least two states in accordance with their internal law (Article 1(2)). Associations are not international organisations because such organisations bring together only states, not local authorities. Furthermore, associations are not extraterritorial in the sense that the constituent local government units do not transfer their competences to this form of cooperation. By virtue of the concluded agreement, these entities do not become a unit of public authority in Poland, and thus the territory covered by the cooperation is not excluded from the competence of the state (Blicharz, 2017). Associations have the status of national law organisations and, as a result, are subject to the national law of the respective states that are parties to the agreement (Mik, 2013). The above-quoted statutory definition of an association does not exclude the formation of organisations of a mixed nature, bringing together both local government units (as public law entities) and private law entities created by these units (e.g., foundations or companies), as well as private entities that are not local and regional authorities, such as educational or environmental organisations. The Polish legislator only requires that the international association to which the Polish local government is to accede be established by local or regional communities; however, such entities do not have to be its exclusive members. Therefore, the presence among the members of an international association of local gov-

ernments of an entity that is not a local government unit does not prevent a Polish local or regional community from joining it (Ostrowska, 2019).

A local government unit may co-found an association or join an already existing association. Joining an association requires the consent of the minister responsible for foreign affairs, expressed in the form of an administrative decision. Such a decision is binding, which means that if the local government unit meets all the conditions for joining the association set out in the act, the minister is obliged to give his consent. Placing this sphere of local government activity under the supervision of the chief body of government administration derives from the fact that it concerns the external relations of the local government and therefore also the affairs of the state. The minister's supervision is a tool for ensuring that local and regional policies are in line with national foreign policy (Jońkowiak, 2003). On the other hand, the existence of such far-reaching supervisory competences of the Minister of Foreign Affairs concerning the approval of accession/co-foundation of associations demonstrates unnecessary centralism and excessive bureaucracy, which raises objections among local government officials (Strubińska, 2000). Ministerial oversight is perceived as a centralised, external constraint on the integrated system of administering regional development (Szewczak, 2016).

A resolution of the local government's decision-making body to join the association, adopted by an absolute majority of the statutory membership of the council/assembly, is subject to the minister's approval. Adoption of the resolution in the absence of the minister's consent renders the resolution legally invalid (Articles 4 and 5). As the right of local government units to associate is an element of their independence, which in turn is subject to judicial protection, the minister's decision refusing to grant consent may be challenged by the local government unit before an administrative court. The minister competent for public administration announces in the Official Journal of the Republic of Poland "Monitor Polski", through a notice, a list of local government units that joined, co-founded or withdrew from an association in the previous calendar year and a list of dissolved associations to which these units belonged (Article 9). Given the purely informative value of this announcement, it does not constitute a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the entity's accession to an association.

Joining the association cannot entail any transfer to the association or to any of its members of the execution of public tasks of the acceding local government unit,

or of real estate or intangible property rights vested in that unit (Article 3). The provision cited is a guarantee of protection of the state's interests, serving as – on the one hand – a safeguard of the constitutional protection of state sovereignty, and – on the other hand – a narrowing of the spectrum of activities undertaken within the association to activities of a promotional or postulatory nature, related to the exchange of experience and information, the development of common standards of operation (trainings, internships, exchanges) (Kisala, 2012; Ostrowska, 2019). The violation of any of the indicated conditions renders the resolution to join the association null and void (Article 5).

Each resolution of a local government body, and thus also a resolution on joining or co-founding of an international association of local or regional communities, is subject to the voivode's supervision regarding the criterion of legality, under the principles set out in acts regulating the local government system (Article 91 of the ACG, Article 79 of the ADG, Article 82 of the LGV). Should the resolution violate the law in a material way, the supervisory authority declares it invalid, as a result of which the act loses its binding force from the moment of its adoption (*ex tunc*).

Another form of international cooperation of local government units, regulated by the Polish legislator, is the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). The purpose of the grouping is to facilitate territorial cooperation and strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the European Union member states. The rules for the establishment and functioning of the EGTC are set out in Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European grouping of territorial cooperation (OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 19), as amended by Regulation No. 1302/2013 of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund under the European territorial cooperation goal (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 259). Due to the specific nature of the EGTC, it was necessary to issue regulations at the level of national law to supplement the EU regulation or to introduce derogations from the standard solutions adopted in the regulation. These are contained in the Act of 7 November 2008 on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation. In matters that are not regulated by either the Act or the EU Regulation, the provisions on associations apply accordingly.

The EGTC is voluntary and purposive in nature. It is an instrument that facilitates the development of cooperation between institutions from different EU Member States. It can be used by public bodies operating at different levels of administration (local, regional, central authorities). The

subsidiarity principle guiding the idea of EGTCs shows that these bodies are intended to bring together, first and foremost, local government units and to strengthen their autonomous competences. The introduction of this form of international cooperation was intended to overcome the barriers hitherto encountered by joint ventures of a cross-border, transnational or interregional nature. These included, in particular, the difficulties arising from the diverse legal and institutional systems in individual member states (which were supposed to be prevented by giving the EGTC legal personality), as well as the insufficient financial resources of some local government units, the lack of experience and know-how in cross-border cooperation and cultural barriers (Grosse, 2012). One of the reasons for the introduction of EGTCs was the belief that the capacities of Euroregions, which were established as a form of cross-border cooperation between regions of the EU member states and candidate countries and regions of the neighbouring countries, were limited relative to growing expectations (Szewczak, 2016). Among the tasks carried out by EGTCs are the promotion of entrepreneurship, the protection of natural and cultural resources, the development of links between urban and rural areas, increasing access to transport, information and communication services and networks, the creation and development of scientific and research networks, as well as cooperation in the area of health, culture, tourism, education, employment development, human resources and infrastructure for development research. Tasks carried out within the framework of the EGTC must not increase the constitutional powers of the entities participating in the cooperation (e.g., the powers of local government units), and must not involve police, regulatory (legislative), judicial or foreign policy powers.

The aim of most groupings is to take advantage of the EU aid funds, especially those available under European territorial cooperation. The trend mentioned is noticeable especially among the EGTC involving actors from Central European countries. Some differences can also be observed between the approach of Western and Central European groupings in their approach to future activities. Western groupings focus more on scientific and research cooperation, educational activities and those related to EU energy and climate policy. By contrast, the groupings in Central and Eastern Europe intend mainly to integrate communication lines, cooperate in the sphere of tourism and on educational and social projects.

Pursuant to Articles 8(1) and 7(1) on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, a grouping having its registered office on the territory of the Republic of Poland

is subject to entry in the register kept by the minister responsible for foreign affairs. On the day of its entry in the register, it acquires legal personality (Article 8(2)). As a result of the above, the EGTC acts as an independent entity with its own budget, capable to draw on EU funds (European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund or Cohesion Fund) to implement integrated territorial cooperation projects, capable to acquire or dispose of assets, employ staff and act as a party in legal proceedings. A local government unit joins the grouping by virtue of a resolution of the decision-making body, adopted by an absolute majority of the statutory membership, which enters into force after obtaining the consent of the minister competent for foreign affairs in agreement with the minister responsible for internal affairs, the minister for public finance and the minister for regional development, expressed by way of an administrative decision (Article 5(1) in conjunction with Article 6(1)).

The minister responsible for foreign affairs is the supervising authority for groupings with a registered office in the territory of the Republic of Poland and for the participation in groupings with a registered office outside the territory of the Republic of Poland with their members acting under Polish law (Article 20). As part of his supervisory powers, the minister may call upon the grouping to cease its activities in breach of national provisions on public order, public safety, public health, public morals or in breach of the public interest, or even remove the grouping from the register (Article 13 of Regulation No. 1082/2006 in conjunction with Article 21 of the Act). Similarly, as in the case of associations of local and regional communities, the supervisory competences of the minister responsible for foreign affairs with regard to EGTC are subject to severe criticism of scholarship (Karpiuk, 2016). Placing this form of cooperation under strict supervision by a governmental body was dictated by the fear of many governments of losing control over local government units which could encroach on foreign policy areas without their knowledge. There was also concern regarding the financial consequences (e.g., for national budgets) of the operation of the groupings, especially if they were unable to meet their financial obligations.

Poland is a member of four groupings. The first – the EGTC Tritia – was established on the Polish-Czech-Slovak border in 2013. In the same year, also on the southern border, the EGTC Tatra was established. To date, the activities of both groupings have focused on projects related to tourism, culture and training. By contrast, the EGTC Central European Transport Corridor is of a different nature; its members include local government units from Sweden,

Poland, Hungary and Croatia. The main objective of the grouping, established in 2014, is to promote transport cooperation within the aforementioned corridor (the first of its kind in Europe). The fourth EGTC-NOVUM, established in the Polish-Czech border area with the participation of both regional governments and Euroregions, mainly carries out tasks in the fields of tourism, transport and environmental protection. All these groupings are based in Poland (Ostrowska, 2019).

The national legal basis for international cooperation of local government units is assessed by some as clear, transparent and appropriate for establishing cooperation (Zięba-Załucka, 2008), while others express criticism over it, claiming it does not take account of new forms of international cooperation and thus does not fully satisfy contemporary needs (Szewczak, 2016). However, it should be borne in mind that in the field of international cooperation, where state sovereignty is at stake, the legal provisions cannot precisely regulate every formula of cooperation. Besides, this is such a dynamic sphere that it is inexpedient, if not in fact impossible, to put it into a rigid legal framework. For instance, despite the fact that Article 172(3) of the Polish Constitution delegates the enactment of law regulating two issues – the accession of local government units to international associations of local and regional communities and cooperation with these communities – the Act of 15 September 2000, issued on the basis of this delegation, only regulates the issue of accession of local government units to international associations of local and regional communities, but does not regulate cooperation with them. This is a deliberate measure, as the principles of direct cooperation between local and regional communities are regulated by the Madrid Convention; furthermore, the specificity of such cooperation requires the conclusion of separate agreements between entities (Woźniak, 2005). Moreover, the Madrid Convention, which is an act regarded as the basic source of international law in the area of international cooperation of local government units, does not contain an exhaustive catalogue of different forms of such cooperation, stating explicitly that “it is not excluded that the Contracting Parties [...] apply other forms of foreign cooperation” (Article 3(3)).

Polish legal regulations do not pose an obstacle to the establishment and intensification of international cooperation between local government units. Importantly, the Polish legislator provides a “legal framework” for international cooperation between local governments, making it possible to undertake more and more activities – both formalised and non-formalised (Żukowski, 2016). The above thesis is confirmed by studies in which

the respondents do not indicate national law, or law in general, as the main barrier to international cooperation between local government units.

1.4 Networking as a form of implementing international cooperation at the regional level

The growing aspirations of local government units to operate internationally contribute to the growing importance of horizontal organisational structures, which complement and sometimes even replace hierarchical structures. Polish legislation provides a wide range of opportunities for local government units to establish and maintain international relations. They may be realised both in the forms provided for directly by the law and through informal exchanges. One form of local government cooperation, also in the international context, is networking. Network structures are a permanent and pervasive element of our modern world (Internet, social media, mobile phone networks, power grid etc.) (Olechnicka, Płoszaj, 2010). The development of the global economy, changes in communication, competition and cooperation between different types of entities, including administrative bodies, institutions or entrepreneurs, has shaped the current world, in which individual entities or links are dependent upon each other, creating a vast, complex and dynamic network structure (Szczepaniak, 2014). “The dominant functions and processes of the information age are increasingly organised around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, while the proliferation of networking logics is fundamentally changing the functioning and outcomes of the processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Castells, 2007).

A network is defined as a system consisting of elements (nodes) and connections between them, which is characterised by the flow of information between nodes and by joint actions taken by all or only some of the nodes – depending on the needs (Książek, Pruvot, 2011). A way to understand the nature and purpose of a network is to understand the essence of a social network, which is a moral relation based on trust holding between a group of individuals sharing non-formal norms or values beyond those that prove necessary for ordinary market transactions (Szczepaniak, 2014). The first component of a network constitutes the structure created by the nodes (entities) and their connections, while the second – the social nature of these connections, which take the form of interactions, relationships and bonds (Olesiński, 2010).

Interactions (contacts), which signify the interaction of one entity with another, are a lower-order concept with regard to relationships, which are created as a result of these interactions and are more permanent in nature. Superior to these two is the concept of bond, which implies a positive emotional relationship that generates long-term commitments. In the context of organisations, these social ties are complemented by hierarchical and market ties (contractual – defined by formally established rules of cooperation; quasi-contractual – determined by generally applicable regulations; non-contractual – non-formalised), organisational ties (power relations, financial and advisory support mechanisms) and cognitive ties (related to the creation, use and sharing of knowledge). Social networks are seen as the underlying construct that determines the realisation of the organisation's goals, operating not only within the organisation's boundaries, but also linked to the wider environment (Sworowska, 2013; Czakon, 2008, cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). A particular form of network is a cooperation network based on interdependence, collaboration and trust. One of its characteristic features is its focus on long-term goals. It involves going through different stages of this cooperation – from informal contacts to advanced partnership. In the first of these stages, representatives of the entities interested in cooperation initiate contacts, get to know each other and share the idea of cooperation (information exchange). In the next stage, the entities build an atmosphere of trust and undertake the first joint ventures, which usually do not pose a high risk for them but may bring common benefits (planning of activities and conflict management). In the last stage, a formal agreement is signed, by virtue of which the partners carry out jointly defined tasks and take joint risks regarding their results (Furmankiewicz, 2002). Network development is thus aimed at creating a long-term environment of trust between equal partners, from the informal cooperation stage to advanced partnership (Furmankiewicz, 2002; Książek, Pruvot, 2011).

The process of building a cooperation network requires active involvement of three sectors – science, administration and business (the so-called triple helix theory, Etzkowitz, Leyesdorff, 1998), and even additionally the fourth one – civil society (the so-called quadruple helix theory, Etzkowitz, Leyesdorff, 1998; Łącka, 2018). According to the first theory, optimal network cooperation can occur when three types of entities are involved – scientific and research centres together with their supporting institutions (science), enterprises (industry), and state government or local governments (regulatory authority). These three subsystems pool resources, share knowledge and skills, jointly

conduct innovative projects, which fosters increased entrepreneurship and the emergence of hybrid organisations (spin-offs, start-ups, technology parks, clusters). As a result of this cooperation, economic growth is accelerated, and regional and local communities develop. The role of the science sector encompasses three functions – educational, research, and transfer and commercialisation of knowledge and technology. The sector provides an appropriately prepared workforce for the economy and provides knowledge that scientists can use to create and launch innovations. The industrial sector analyses and reports the need for new solutions and knowledge. It creates, implements and offers its innovations to others and provides financial capital for innovation activities. Administration, in turn, prepares innovation strategies implemented via national and regional innovation systems, formulates the principles of economic policy (including innovation policy) at a certain regulatory level, finances scientific research (basic research and development works) and education through public funds, raises the level of knowledge and quality of the human capital, financially supports innovative projects carried out by scientists and entrepreneurs (grants, subsidies) or their joint teams, creates solutions facilitating inventiveness and entrepreneurship, including academic entrepreneurship, exerts influence on growth and economic development and the standard of living of the residents of a given territory, which affects the innovative potential and the propensity to absorb new solutions (Łącka, 2018). In the quadruple helix model, there is also an element of civil society that initiates and evaluates innovation processes, thereby co-creating new knowledge, services and products (Szczepaniak, 2014). Network cooperation provides an opportunity for multiple actors from these three/four spheres to cooperate on projects that could not be implemented by any of them alone due to lack of sufficient financial resources, knowledge or experience. Networks operating in the knowledge economy would not exist without physically connecting their participants via information and communication technology networks and embedding them in a specific social framework (Chodyński, 2012).

There are no predetermined criteria regarding the type and number of members, the territorial coverage or the organisational structure of a cooperation network. A cooperation network can have different organisational forms, depending on its objectives and the expectations of its members (Szczepaniak, 2014; Knop, Olko, 2008). Although, in the case of networks, their diversity is strongly emphasised, a catalogue of common features has been formulated in the literature, with the reservation that they do

not have to be present comprehensively in each network (Książek, Pruvot, 2011; Olech, Speer, 2022). These characteristics include: 1) common goals uniting the members and guiding the scope of the network; 2) communication channels allowing for information exchange and mutual learning; 3) network members (a definition of a network member that is recognised by all partners while allowing other actors to join); 4) network structure – this is present even if the network is not formalised (there may be hierarchical elements, e.g. concerning network coordinators or different categories of members, sub-networks may emerge); 5) joint activities undertaken by network members; 6) common network resources contributed by members to the network or jointly obtained, e.g. material resources, cooperating experts, know-how; 7) a unit animating network activities – this role may be taken by the network founder, sponsor or coordinator, e.g. a specially established unit within the network in the form of a secretariat or an office, whose main task is to collect and disseminate information about the network and its members, maintain the network's resources and act for the network's development; 8) cooperation principles – with various degrees of formalisation; 9) cooperation tools – methods of cooperation facilitating the partners' activities, their coordination and interaction with the environment (e.g. information portal, trainings, conferences, fairs, trade exchanges). An ideal network is characterised by mutual trust among partners, long-term relationships, redundancy (more than necessary duplication of competences and types of activities so that it can continue to operate if a link is lost), lack of hierarchy, openness, dynamism and flexibility, competition between partners, independence of partners, voluntariness and willingness to cooperate, and achieving economies of scale through cooperation (Koschatzky, Kulicke, Zenker, 2001).

Cooperation networks, including networks associating local government units, may be multilateral or bilateral, may lead to different degrees of integration, may set different objectives, while units in the network may form dispersed or spatially compact structures. The cooperation of local government units, including regions, within networks constitutes a common space for the exchange of goods, knowledge and experience, based on the specific relations of the connected entities (Skrzypek, 2017). "Operating in networks is both a prerequisite for sustainable development and a basis for building an autonomous and competitive region. In order for a region to maintain its independence and not find itself on the periphery of socio-economic activity and backwardness, it must have elements that interact in a network with elements of other

regions. In the globalised world, the functioning and competitiveness of a region is determined by its ability to join a network" (Fic, Fic, 2013).

For the network partners, being part of the network entails a number of benefits, the most important of which include: 1) more efficient flow of information; creation of links not only between regional authorities, but also between entrepreneurs and scientists, mutual learning; 2) more efficient use of public funds through elimination of unnecessary duplication of activities; 3) multiplied effect of the impact of services and instruments financed from public funds through more efficient reaching the target groups with a coherent offer, reflecting the potential not only of the nearest centre, but of the whole system; 4) better accessibility of financial support from public funds to target groups (e.g. entrepreneurs from peripheral areas of a given region); 5) limited operational risk and costs of business operations (Książek, Pruvot, 2011).

International cooperation within network structures involving public administration bodies from individual countries, research centres, entrepreneurs and non-governmental organisations brings tangible benefits to countries, whose ties – owing to this cooperation – will be strengthened not only in the scientific and economic field, but also in the sphere of countering external threats, which is particularly important at a time of intensified global and regional armed conflicts.

1.5 Network of the Three Seas Regions as a tool for cooperation of Central and Eastern European countries

The Network of the Three Seas Regions was established at the initiative of the Local Government of the Lubelskie Voivodeship. The Network was inaugurated in 2021 during the First Local Government Economic Congress of the II Forum of the Three Seas Regions.² The Network was

² The Local Government Congress of the Three Seas Initiative was organised for the first time in Lublin in 2021. The idea behind the event was to create a space for an international discussion on the future and directions of cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative, and to discuss economic issues relevant from the perspective of international and regional cooperation. Organised by the Local Government of Lubelskie Voivodeship, the Institute for the Development of Local Government and the Lublin Conference Centre, the congress has become a cyclical international economic event bringing together representatives of central government and local government administration, the scientific and business sectors from the 12 member states of the 3SI (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania,

extended to include new members in 2022 during the second edition of the event entitled the Local Government Congress of the Three Seas Initiative Economic Forum.³

The Network of Three Seas Regions was developed as a platform for direct cooperation between local governments from the twelve countries of the Three Seas Initiative. The cooperation platform is open to NUTS2 and NUTS3 level regions from the 12 countries of the 3SI area (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). Its participants can meet periodically in Lublin in order to exchange experience and establish relations for the implementation of joint projects.

The Network is intended to complement the activities conducted by the central governments of the 3SI states with the involvement of local governments and to stimulate the multi-faceted development of local and regional communities.

Slovakia and Slovenia), representatives of strategic partners (European Union, United States, and Germany) and partner regions from Central and Eastern Europe.

The first edition of the event in June 2021 gathered over 730 people. The 81 panellists included leaders of key sectors of the Polish and foreign economy, political figures, as well as representatives of public administration and local governments.

During the two days of intensive exchange of knowledge and experience, 18 panels addressed topics relevant to the development of the Polish and foreign economies, such as diplomacy, energy, finance, economy, innovation, science, agriculture, transport, digital transformation, tourism, inter-regional and cross-border cooperation of the 3SI area.

The meeting resulted in the signing of the Lublin Declaration, which laid the foundations for a lasting and stable partnership of local governments located in the area covered by the Three Seas Initiative. This act will now constitute one of the most important tools for establishing and maintaining regular contacts and undertaking many joint initiatives.

The second edition of the event, organised on 6–7 June 2022, once again brought together representatives of the world of politics, science and business from all 3SI states. Due to the geopolitical situation, the issue of international security and the possibilities of developing cooperation under the circumstances of the armed conflict in Ukraine occupied a special place in the discussion. The deliberations took place in 16 thematic blocks, during which issues such as transport infrastructure, the Network of the Three Seas Regions, energy, digital science, European funds and agriculture were discussed. For the second time the event was accompanied by an Economic Forum, which included seminars, B2B meetings and study visits to establish business contacts. All in all, the second edition of the Local Government Congress of the Three Seas Initiative brought together foreign delegations from 25 countries, a total of over 1,000 stationary and 150 online participants. As in the previous year, the event was held under the honorary patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda.

³ Ibid.

The main objective of the network is to deepen cooperation in the 3SI area at the regional level. Other objectives encompass:

- reducing the infrastructure gap in Central and Eastern Europe as compared with Western Europe,
- building inter-regional cooperation based on local government component of the Three Seas Initiative,
- providing a developmental boost to local governments through cooperation and building sustainable links in the areas of infrastructure, transport, digitalisation and innovation,
- creating tools for better use of European Funds, national resources and the 3SI Investment Fund,
- participating in the dynamic process of economic reconstruction and the development of infrastructure connecting the 3SI regions (such as Via Carpatia, Rail Baltica, Rail-2-Sea) and new projects (e.g., Rail Carpatia),
- supporting entrepreneurship, in particular the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and international trade,
- supporting the development and mutual exchange in the areas of culture, arts and tourism.

The declaration on the creation of the Network, referred to as the Lublin Declaration, was signed in the presence of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, during the Local Government Economic Congress of the II Forum of the Three Seas Regions. The signatories were fifteen regions from five countries, including five Polish voivodeships: Lubelskie, Mazowieckie, Podkarpackie, Podlaskie and Świętokrzyskie, the Lithuanian districts of Alytus and Marjampolė and the city of Panevėžys, the Prešov Region from Slovakia, the Hungarian Hajdú-Bihar County and the five Romanian counties of Călărași, Caraș Severin, Dolj, Maramureș and Timiș. So far, the network has not had a formalised structure, however, it is being currently considered to establish a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation called the “Economic Network of the Three Seas Regions” with its seat in Lublin. The legal basis for that provides Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC), as amended.

A year later, on 6 June 2022, during the second Local Government Congress held in Lublin, representatives of three further regions, including two regions from Ukraine (Lviv and Ternopil Oblasts) – as associated partners, and one from Romania (Regional Development Agency “Centru”), submitted declarations of accession to the Network to the Marshall of the Lubelskie Voivodeship.

THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT

Methodological support is essential when the best expert proposals are sought. Scientific research relies on many theories, methods and tools. As well as taking into account individual studies, it makes use of both source and empirical material.

2.1 Methodology of the research process

The research process in the social sciences involves several stages. Also, it often entails the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the issue.

It is essential to formulate the objective clearly. For this report, we believe it is crucial to present areas of possible cooperation, as well as opportunities and challenges existing in the Three Seas countries. Of special importance here are local governments and their cooperation within the network of 3SI regions.

The research questions were formulated based on the adopted objective and premises. They address fundamental problems in the area in question. 1. What are the determining factors of the international cooperation between local governments? 2. What are the prospects for regional cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative? 3. What conclusions and recommendations follow from the research and analyses undertaken?

For the research process, an assumption was made in the form of a hypothesis: *The increased involvement of actors in the Three Seas Initiative implies an increased awareness of the direction and needs of cooperative development.*

The issue of cooperation between the 3SI states is having a growing presence on scientific, research, and expert agendas. This subject area involves a multifaceted approach to the opportunities and challenges in this field.

Surveys are conducted not only in each of the 3SI states, but also in non-3SI research and analytical circles. They concern such areas as: geopolitics (Dobija, 2019; Orzelska-Stączek, 2019; Gizicki, Moose, 2018; Górka, 2018; Kurečić, 2018), national perspectives of this cooperation (Sprūds, Vargulis, 2022; Wojtaszek, 2020), multidimensional sectoral cooperation (Bajda, Orzelska-Stączek, 2021; Lorek, 2021; Pawłuszko, 2021; Baziur, 2018), and international cooperation (Borówka, 2020; Grochmalski, Lewandowski, Paszak, 2020; Krzymowski, 2020; Chojan, 2019; Dahl, 2019; Dziewiałtowski-Gintowt, 2019).

The research and analyses undertaken in these and other studies clearly show the relevance of the issue of cooperation between the 3SI states. The Initiative is not intended to intensify and institutionalize political cooperation. This follows from the official statements of most 3SI politicians, a situation which, perhaps, is advantageous for the current political agendas of individual countries and does not create the impression that the Three Seas Initiative is competitive to, for example, the European Union. However, this does not seem realistic and accurate. In fact, the 3SI countries do undertake political cooperation. Decisions on the scope and form of this cooperation are political. The Initiative is not being developed with the purpose of competing or being an alternative to the EU, but as an opportunity for essential support, or perhaps as a reform of European integration as well – under the EU banner in times of crisis. Publications clearly indicate the need to intensify cooperation in security, infrastructure and energy sectors. These are core areas of concern for the Three Seas countries.

The present report relies also on the outcomes of empirical research, both existing studies and our own. They contain important information on directions of development, challenges and opportunities within the cooperative framework of the 3SI countries.

As regards existing data, reports worthy of notice are those on economic issues (Polish Development Fund, 2021; Polish Economic Institute, 2020; Spotdata, 2018⁴), cybersecurity (The Kosciuszko Institute, 2018) and strategic data (*What future for the Three Seas Initiative*, 2021; *Regions of the Three Seas Initiative*, 2021; *The Three Seas Initiative: A fascinating story*, 2021). They cover both statistical data as well as conclusions and recommendations in the area of relevance.

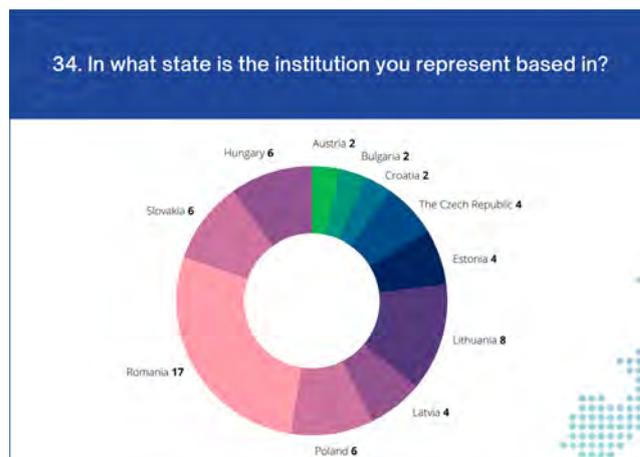
The own research was devised as a survey based on Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing. This was a standardized survey administered to respondents electronically (via the Google Forms platform). It was addressed to various regions of the Three Seas Initiative. A database with names of institutions was provided by the Marshal's Office of Lubelskie Voivodeship. Information about the survey was posted on the Office's website and at www.congress.lubelskie.pl (dedicated to the Three Seas Local Government Congress). The survey was conducted in October and November 2022. The participants were local government units with competences corresponding to those of Lubelskie Voivodeship, and the survey covered 225 regions. Only 61 questionnaires were returned, which was no doubt affected by the short time allocated for the survey, the large number of respondents and their geographical dispersion. This study inaugurates more research in the area in question, the scope of which is going to be extended in the near future. Nevertheless, the material gathered so far is abundant enough for an analysis of several areas. It presents opinions held by the institutions that decided to respond to the problem tasks of the survey.

The survey comprised 36 closed-ended questions. Several questions could be answered using only two options, so the data in some of the charts does not add up to 100%. Questions were presented in content areas covering geopolitical, environmental, local government, and education issues. These areas are presented in greater detail later on in the report.

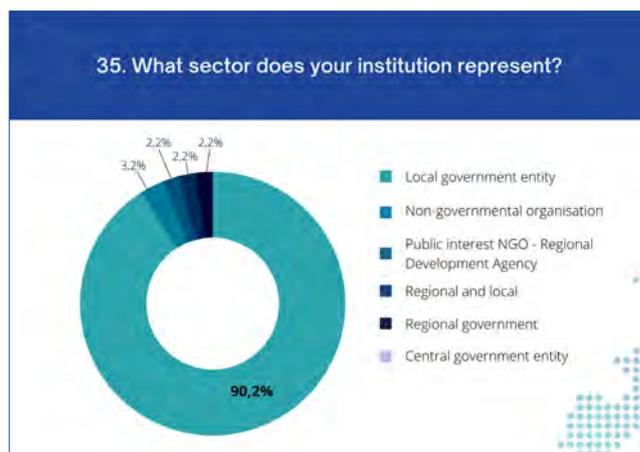
The study area featured three key variables: (a) country of origin, (b) type of operational sector, (c) size of the region.

Concerning the country of origin (Question 34), the results show the high engagement of institutions from Bulgaria (27.9%). This reflects the experience of cooperation to date within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, where Bulgarian entities have been very active. The second state with the highest return rate was Lithuania (13.1%). Nearly

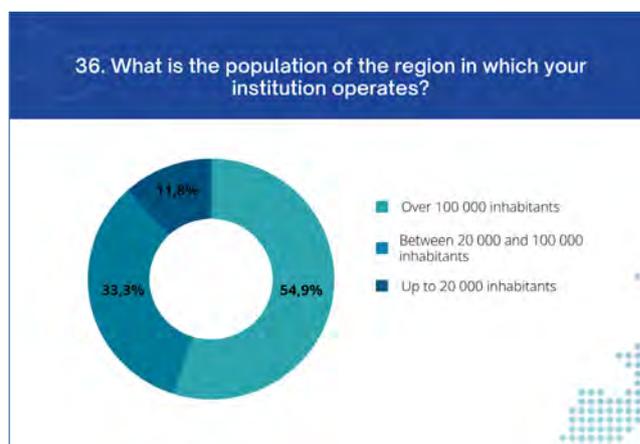
10% of questionnaires were returned by Austria, Poland and Latvia.



Overall, the participating entities varied slightly in terms of the sector represented. These were overwhelmingly local government institutions (91.8%). No central government units were represented, and several of the institutions were NGOs (Question 35).



The subjects who responded to an invitation to participate represented medium-sized (42.8%) and large regions (47.5%). Smaller units, with a population of less than 20,000, account for merely 9.8%, which is self-evident



⁴ *Perspectives for infrastructural investments in the Three Seas region: A Special Report*, Spotdata 2018.

given the unique status of regions of Central Europe and the opportunities that arise from the potential of medium-sized and large operators (Question 36).

2.2 The condition and assessment of the international cooperation of local governments within the Three Seas Initiative

Regional cooperation is one of the major goals of European integration within the EU. This concerns both organizational and financial support for ongoing and (especially) cross-border initiatives. Various entities, including local governments, eagerly and effectively apply for and use funding dedicated to the cooperation undertaken and to improving the well-being of people inhabiting those regions.

However, one might get the impression that this cooperation is extremely effective in a bilateral model, at the level of local governments or partner cities, especially neighbouring ones. In this connection we may ask this: how feasible is this cooperation in a network embracing large regions or, as a result, in the network of Three Seas countries? First steps have been made vis-a-vis organisation and consultation, such as the organisation of the Three Seas Local Government Congress in Lublin (Poland), starting in 2021. The next obvious step is to pursue operational cooperation at multiple levels.

It is of particular relevance to the Initiative owing to the territorial and demographic potential of the area. The Initiative brings together twelve Central European countries that are both NATO and EU members. This region is inhabited by more than 112 million people, representing about a quarter of the total EU population. This considerable capital can greatly enhance the growth of the whole area, effectively supporting EU integration reforms. At the same time, we must consider the key importance of all states and Central Europe for processes of international and regional security, including those involving the U.S.A. This is very important in view of Russia's aggression and war in Ukraine, and the resultant energy crisis.

The Three Seas states are not second-rate members of NATO and the EU, nor are they new members. It is twenty-three years since NATO welcomed Czechia, Poland and Hungary, among other states. Most of the 3SI countries have been EU members states for more than eighteen years. Each has conducted economic reforms and reduced their budget deficit, debt and unemployment rate. Their

standard of living has increased quite perceptibly. Each country is deeply involved in integration processes, acting as an important link supporting them. The 3SI members are not forfeiting their responsibility for integration processes in the transatlantic area in putting the Initiative's foundational premises into practice: economic growth and enhanced transatlantic cohesion. It appears that this contribution of the 3SI states to the system should also be understood by the EU founding states in particular. This fact is often overlooked or misunderstood in Western Europe, leading to problems with integration and consistency of the whole process.



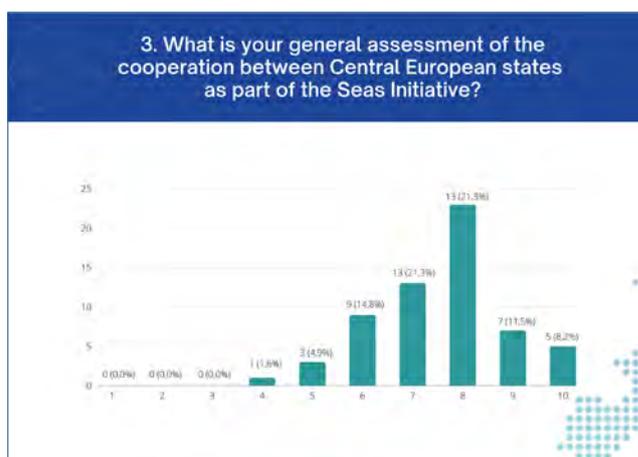
The research provides very interesting outcomes as regards the opinions of respondents on individual problems related to international cooperation, also at the local government level. Considering their replies to Question 1, it is noteworthy that the interest shown by business partners is rated high (60.7%). This factor elicited slightly more responses than availability of funding. It can be concluded, then, it is pivotal for business partners to show mutual belief in the reasonableness of cooperation. If the parties show a strong commitment in this respect, other issues are perfectly feasible, including financial ones. When further joint activities are verified and possibly planned, it is vital to be convinced of the validity and effects of the actions taken (45.9%). Results are important not only in respect of the necessity of meeting the assumed project targets, but above all they show the sense of further activities. The social and cultural affinity of the 3SI countries is an extremely powerful determinant of their cooperation. The common heritage and the historical, religious and civilisational legacy favours the building of a common future. This was reflected in respondents' opinions (18%). Significantly, respondents do not need definitive support from central institutions (only 4.9% of responses). Joint initiatives can be planned through agreements at regional, local and self-governmental levels. However, some respondents

think organizational and legal support is useful, too (18%). It seems that the related expectations are based on clear strategic and formal assumptions in each country.

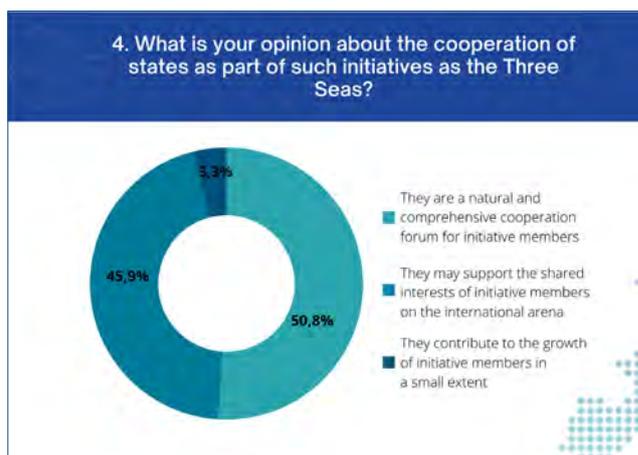


Respondents also indicate problems and difficulties in establishing and maintaining international cooperation. These are diverse issues. Unlike shown above, financial problems come first (57.4%). This seems very relevant for things like planning one's participation in projects, with own contribution or when funding is missing from carefully planned local and regional government budgets. However, local governments are aware of this problem and they seem to be tackling such issues. This is reflected by the number of project applications registered and actions implemented. Understandably, cooperation runs into problems when partners show no interest (44.3%) and when there are no visible results of cooperation (36.1%). This, apparently, can be overcome by new partnerships or forms of cooperation. Speaking of obstacles to cooperation, organizational and legal issues give rise to greater problems (32.8%). Problems at the central level are also noticeable (9.8%). Slightly surprising are the opinions on social and cultural barriers (19.7%). They may result from different expectations of the communities within the reach of the cooperating regions and local governments. Specific problems may necessitate different solutions. This can be overcome, as it seems, through systematic cooperation, emphasis on similarities and education, especially of the younger generation.

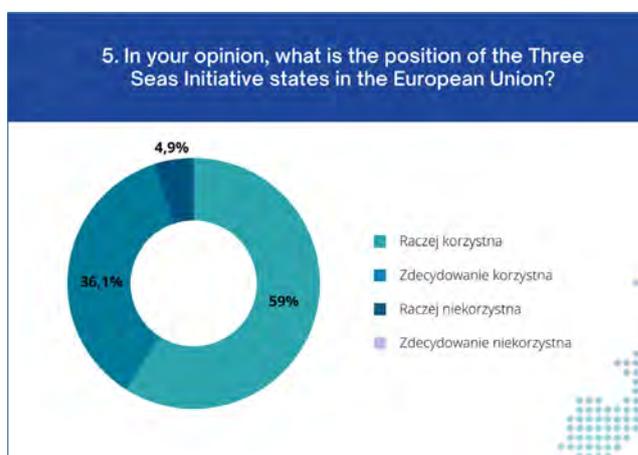
In view of the genesis of and the growing cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative, it came as no surprise that respondents were very positive about its establishment. Indications greater than 7 on the scale (this result can qualify as very good) account for as much as 78.7%. Considering the analysis above and Central Europe's inhabitants' awareness of their place in Euro-Atlantic cooperation, this result should be regarded as optimistic yet predictable. If we undertake cooperation, keep it growing and see the profits it brings, we believe that this project makes sense.



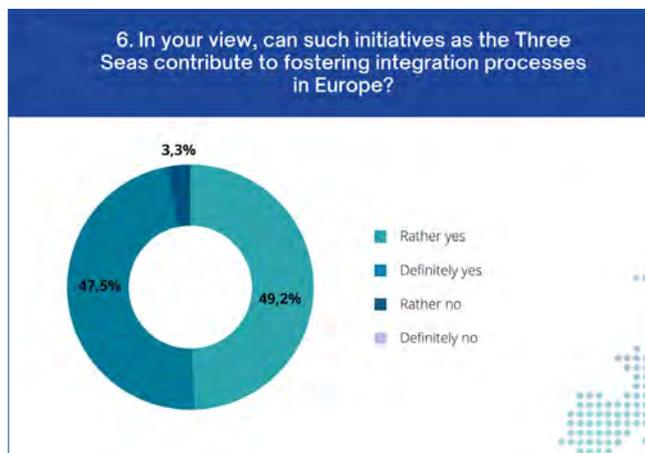
This thesis is borne out by respondents' opinions of the nature of international cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative (Question 4). The responses were uniformly positive (96.7%), indicating that such initiatives contribute to international cooperation. Most of those surveyed (50.8%) say launching them is only natural, and cooperation takes place on many fronts.



Respondents also have no doubts about the position of the 3SI states in the EU. The perception of this is clearly positive (95.1%). This tallies with earlier studies showing the stable position of Central Europe in the integration



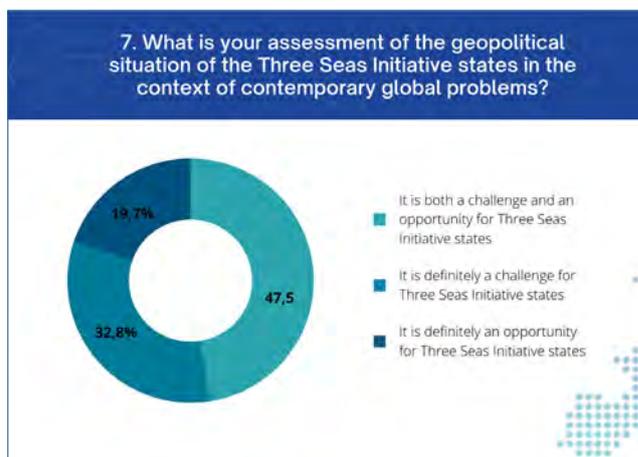
processes and the awareness of not only the rights but also of the resultant obligations. In this respect, respondents do not feel any inferior. This is crucial in the context of the issues the EU is facing, including leadership crisis, a vision of further integration as well as the deepening and extending of it.



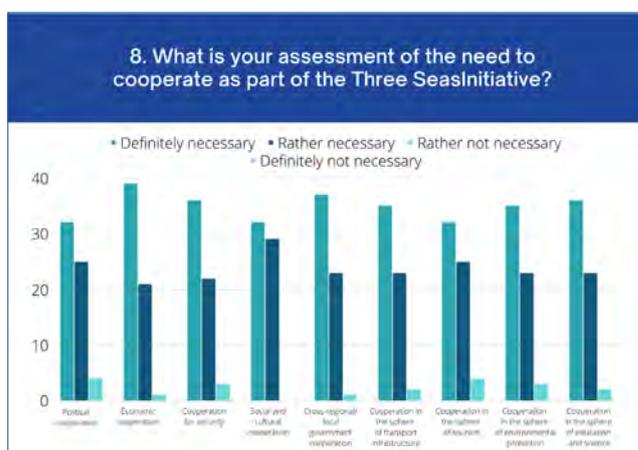
The states of Central Europe uniformly point to the need to support integration processes, to return to the essence and roots of integration, and to allow for the integration of new states, for example, some of the Balkan countries and Ukraine. It is not the Central European states – contrary to the views held by some EU member states or institutions – that hinder processes occurring within the EU forum.

This is evident from respondents' belief in the possibilities of supporting EU integration processes, including the 3SI states' right and duty to do so. There are no differences of opinion in this regard, with respondents being absolutely clear on this (96.7%). Therefore, it is necessary to pursue a wise policy of supporting integration initiatives, including EU reforms regardless of the problems and popular opinions articulated in various circles, also in the Union itself. Responsibility for Europe's future rests with all European actors, states and nations.

The geopolitics of the Three Seas Initiative is complex, not just in a historical context. Its members states lie between Russia, with its authoritarian, regime-like approach to its close neighbours, on the one hand, and Germany, which is quite openly voicing its desire to prevail in the EU, on the other. Some states are actors with small territories and populations. The current global situation is still engendering domestic and external problems. The time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's military aggression in Ukraine make it necessary to intensify joint efforts. Respondents approach this issue reasonably and positively. Most of them point to the combination of both geopolitical opportunities and challenges (47.5%). Opportunities (32.8%) visibly dominate



over challenges (19.7%). Once again, this confirms earlier assumptions about the importance of Central Europe for integration processes and a changed balance of power due to the greater empowerment of the Central European states and region within the processes occurring in the Euro-Atlantic area. Importantly, there is a prevailing conviction about the existence of capabilities and instruments that can support many initiatives and policies, especially those related to integration.



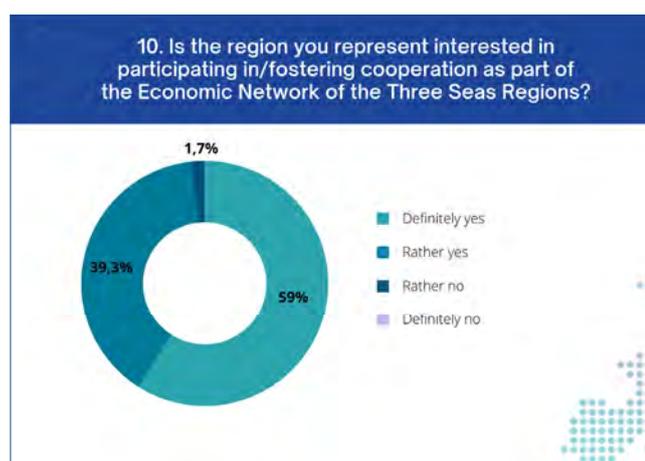
International cooperation, also under the Three Seas Initiative, is quite real but conditioned by several factors. They are crucial not only for the states, the region, but most importantly for local communities and each inhabitant. In all of the areas surveyed, respondents' opinions are generally positive (over 50%). This is also true for political cooperation, which is a very delicate sphere. It is important not to ignore it. It is very interesting that the only area that did not elicit scepticism was social and cultural cooperation, which is understandable in light of the above argumentation. The local community and the nations of Central Europe share centuries of history, including difficult experiences; they also have a common heritage, identity and religion.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE THREE SEAS COUNTRIES

Cooperation of local governments, such as within multidimensional networks, requires diagnostic, strategic and operational activities. Compilation of information gathered from cooperation to date helps to make it well-structured and more effective.

3.1 Prospects for the development of international cooperation between local governments

As part of the presented research, respondents representing the individual regions of the 3SI countries were asked to give opinions on their participation in the instrument addressed to local governments – the Network of the Three Seas Regions (see Question 10).



More than 60% of responses to Question 10 demonstrate a strong willingness to participate, whereas over 35% state they would be rather willing. Their positive assessment shows the potential of the instrument dedicated to local governments and predicts development within this framework of participation.

The next step in the research was to find out more about how willing the regions' representatives are to participate in the Three Seas Local Government Congress, a periodical event organized by the Local Government of Lubelskie Voivodeship. Respondents were asked about their interest in participating in future editions of the event, which also contributes to the development of the Three Seas Network of Regions and enhancement of local government international cooperation. The overwhelming majority of respondents are interested in taking part in next editions of the event. 47.1% of those surveyed express a strong interest, and another 47.1% would rather take part. The answers given point to the great potential inherent in an event of an international character, which enables the meeting of representatives of the Three Seas countries.

3.2 Prospects for developing cooperation in light of this study results

Under this research project, the focus was on strategic prospects of development considering the assumptions of the Three Seas Initiative, such as infrastructure, energy and environment, science and education, digitization, and economic cooperation. The outcomes of this research made it possible to delineate prospects for development in the indicated areas towards regional cooperation of the 3SI countries.

3.2.1 Infrastructure

The development of broadly understood infrastructure is one of the main goals of increasing cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative. Negligence in this area over the last three decades is obvious, having its ramifications. The initiatives undertaken here are being met with

positive responses. However, they need to be implemented systematically, fast and well. Geographical accessibility, speed and comfort of covering the distances separating the regions influence readiness, possibility and effectiveness of cooperation. It also favours mutual understanding between societies and nations. It is also a very important developmental factor in terms of investment opportunities. This is necessary both horizontally and vertically. In this connection, the growth of a north-south transportation grid is a priority. This is because the legacy of the Cold War, lasting until 1989, was a greater under-investment.

The main challenge in this area is the need for strategic decisions at the state level. Regions and local governments have relatively little impact, especially with regard to funding large infrastructural projects, but they can highlight and promote the need for on-site decisions. Nevertheless, this must be achieved with consideration for social and environmental needs.

Infrastructural needs are one of the main areas of funding under the Three Seas Investment Fund, mainly in relation to transportation, energy sector and digital projects. The Fund's resources, essentially, must be supported by the budgets of the EU, each of the Three Seas countries, and even private capital. The process of reducing infrastructural deficiencies will certainly take another decade or so.

Moreover, the sustainability of investments in transportation is an important issue. The 3SI countries have been effectively investing in road infrastructure. Much smaller investments have been made in the railway sector. Catching up on this is one of the priorities. Long-distance and high-speed collective transport is extremely important for the economy (cargo) and the social sphere (travel). There is the rail infrastructure, but it calls for investments to improve its accessibility, speed and comfort. This is essential for rail links between major cities, especially capitals. Travelling, for example, from Warsaw to Budapest, Bucharest or Sofia must not be such a big problem in the future as it is today – considering the fact that a decade or so ago direct rail services operated along those routes. Also, existing infrastructure should be used and made available, and transport areas that have been excluded for years should be restored; for example the railway line from Warsaw to Budapest and the Balkans via Slovakia (calling at Tarnów, Nowy Sącz, Košice, Miskolc), which has been popular for years, needs refurbishing by way of concrete decisions and modernization. Planning alone is not enough, not only in this case but in several other areas, too. Such a practical solution, for example, is Rail Baltica, a high-speed rail network connecting Europe via

Poland to the Baltic States. However, there are several similar railways in the area of the Three Seas Initiative. All of them are an important aspect of the accessibility of individual cities and regions in Central Europe.

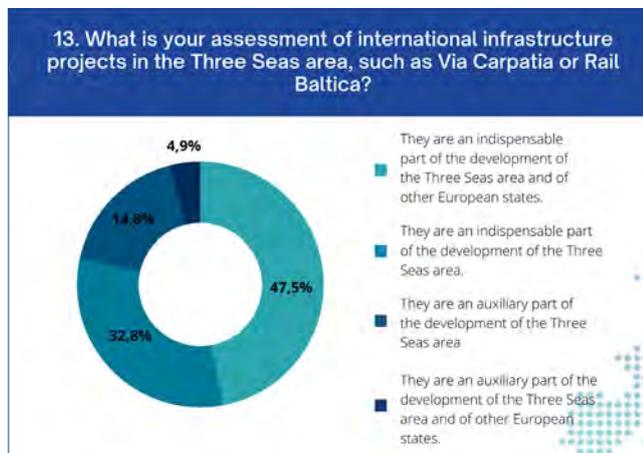
As regards road investment, the flagship project in Central Europe is Via Carpatia linking Klaipėda with Thessaloniki. A large section of it runs across Poland, notably through the Lublin and Podkarpackie Regions, providing opportunities for the development of communication routes, also eastwards, especially to Ukraine. This route, along with the other major road project, Via Baltica, running from Tallinn to Warsaw, is the most important component of the north-south transport system. Building new road links in the Three Seas countries is a difficult task, as the region extends across the Carpathian Mountains. The landform features largely determine the feasibility of investment projects. For this reason, it is important to use existing links and maximize their road capacity in several directions, also for heavy transport vehicles, which is not possible in every section (also for environmental reasons). In this case, also from the Polish perspective, it does not seem reasonable to invest in new roads with increased tonnage, for example, along the Poland–Slovakia route (e.g., the Mníšek nad Popradom border crossing). This would adversely affect the quality and comfort of life of local inhabitants and make environmental protection harder. Via Carpatia provides an opportunity to distribute transport vertically, thus making individual horizontal routes easier to build. This solution is optimal.

Road and rail infrastructure is key in serving energy needs. In view of Russia's aggressive stance, transporting diversified raw materials is a fundamental opportunity and challenge. An additional element in this regard is the construction of energy links, interconnectors (similar to those between, e.g., Poland and Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania). Energy market volatility and the growing demand for energy from residential and industrial users are happening now. It is therefore of key importance to maximize cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative so that energy crisis does not prevent the region from developing.

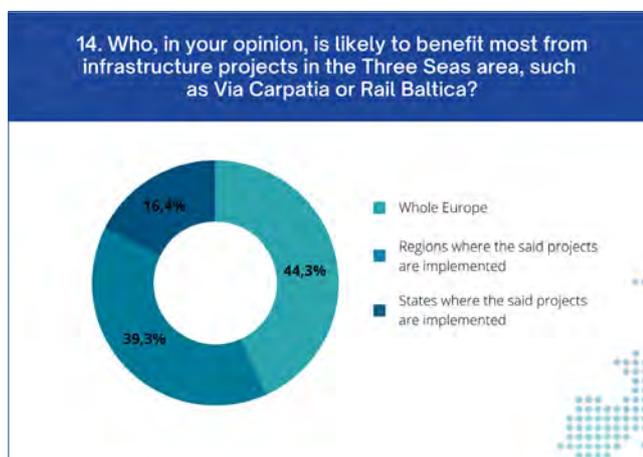
The third element of infrastructure development is digitization. This phenomenon affects almost all areas of life. People became more aware of its importance but also its limitations during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Public administration, the economy, and tourism are but a few areas that are increasingly dependent on digital solutions. Consequently, supporting them is essential not only at the national but also the international level, also

with respect to counteracting disinformation, manipulation, and cybercrime.

Respondents have no doubts about the importance of investing in key infrastructure in Central Europe, and their opinions are unanimous here (Question 13).



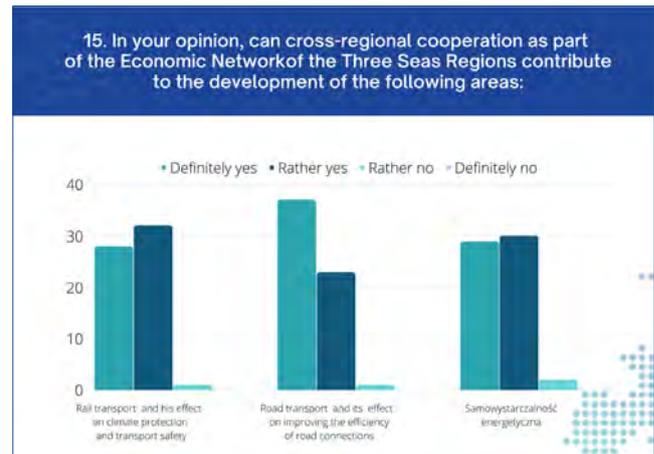
Investments in this sector are essential for the development of primarily the Three Seas region (32.8%) or both the Three Seas countries and whole Europe (47.5%). This thinking comes as no surprise. In all countries of the Initiative, communication accessibility and improved road, rail and air infrastructure are elements building their status and cooperation in many fields, including the economy and social life.



The respondents' attitude to the benefits of major infrastructure investments follows from their responses analysed above. This thinking is instrumental in allocating own budgetary resources in each Central European country and gaining support from the common EU budget. There is an awareness of sustainable development, economic support, and trade exchange, as reflected in respondents' opinions. Most of them assess these investments from an overall European perspective (44.3%). Even if the other opinions concern benefits for the region (39.3%) or indi-

vidual countries (16.4), this can be seen in the context of the whole EU. This is because both states and regions are inseparable parts of integration processes. However, it is impossible to carry out Euro-Atlantic cooperation without the involvement of states and regions. Importantly, states are subjects of international relations and they express their desire to participate in various processes on a voluntary basis. This possibility stems from their sovereignty.

Cooperation in Central Europe is multidimensional (Question 15).



Such cooperation envisages support for processes at each level, where possible and necessary. This concerns particularly road, rail and energy infrastructure, being one of the basic tenets of cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative. Naturally, first and foremost, this calls for individual states getting involved by making appropriate decisions at the central level. However, a state's vision and strategy must be supported by way of consultation involvement of regional and local governments. Respondents are positive about the role of the Network of the Three Seas Regions, among others, with respect to this support, with more than 60% positive indications at each of the levels. Overall, it seems that these issues should receive more attention in the agenda of future consultation activities, for example, during the Network's congresses and seminars.

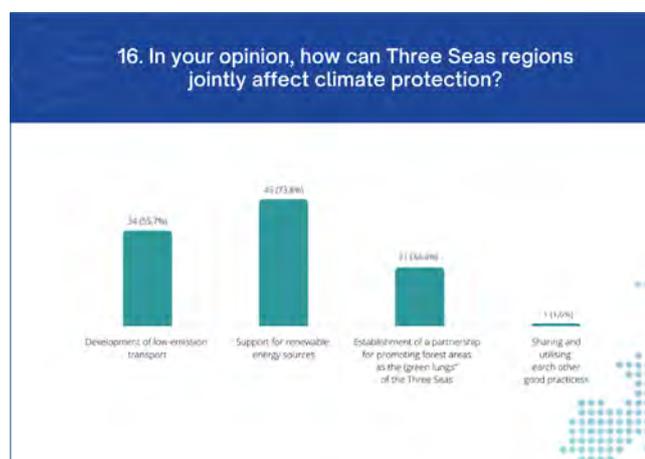
3.2.2 Energy security and the sustainable use of environmental resources

As a result of current and future climate change, a transformation of ecosystems is happening now and will continue in the future. This process is a burning issue of concern for scientists, managers, societies, but it will also impact policies. These changes will also affect biodiversity and ecosystem services [Jackson 2021]. Apart from this, the context of climate change in the 21st century will have an effect on energy security and sustainable economic

development of various countries. According to some sources, energy security is defined as access to energy at all times and in all quantities, in various forms and at the right price. This definition should also include the political, economic and environmental context [Bochaczek-Trąbska and Sterczewska 2019].

Energy security is motivated politically and secured by international agreements and contracts for the supply of energy resources. The supply of raw materials is tied to long-term commitments, and this calls for drawing plans and implementing complex strategies. The economic context that affects energy security is meeting energy demand and balancing supply and demand as far as possible. In the context of environmental protection, energy production is closely linked with the environment and has a strong impact on it [Bochaczek-Trąbska, Sterczewska, 2019].

The results of the survey, the 3SI regions can jointly shape climate protection (Question 16) by supporting the use of renewable energy sources (73.8%), developing low-carbon transport (55.7%), and creating partnerships for the promotion of forest areas as the “green lungs” of the Initiative (34.4%).



For energy security, many national governments are investing in new energy production solutions, and this is closely linked to environment protection. Energy production related to the demands and challenges of climate protection is associated with the new category of energy-climate security [Młynarski, 2017]. Energy security, however, became an important component of many national policies only in the latter half of the 20th century. This was due to increasing oil prices, caused by the OPEC members states. Between 1973 and 1983, oil prices quadrupled, and this caused a noticeable crisis [Bochaczek-Trąbska, Sterczewska, 2019].

The European energy industry of the past two decades has been seeking a balance between market demands

and national regulations. To this end, specific countries must create legal environments that would enable the operation of energy markets and, simultaneously, implementation of energy policies. Documents developed by the European Commission serve to support national energy policies [Borgosz-Koczwara, Herlender, 2008]. In this way, the European Commission, which is in charge of the climate policy, is also strengthening the internal energy market. One of the goals pursued by the European Union is to provide renewable energy from renewable sources and, importantly, energy interconnections. Another goal of the EU is to increase the share of renewable sources of energy up to 40% [https://ec.europa.eu/info/topics/energy_pl].

Due to the increased energy demand and the need for heightened energy security, many countries are pursuing strategies leading to [Bochaczek-Trąbska, Sterczewska, 2019]:

- energy savings,
- increased production with a reduced consumption of energy resources,
- development of infrastructure and renewable energy production,
- creation and maintenance of “economic solidarity” between states,
- improved energy efficiency,
- growth of competitive fuel markets,
- reduced impact of the energy sector on natural environment.

Renewable energy sources are mainly energy from water and wind, solar radiation, geothermal energy (earth energy) or biomass. Biomass is used for energy generation by burning solid biofuels (e.g., wood, straw), gaseous fuels (biogas), and also after turning into liquid fuel (e.g., alcohol, oil). Wind energy is created if weather conditions are favourable and the wind blows fairly regularly. The best conditions for obtaining energy from wind are coastlines [Borgosz-Koczwara, Herlender, 2008].

The Earth's fuel-energy balance helps to save energy resources and improve the efficiency of their use if the share of RES is increased. As a result, the increased use of RES lowers the emission of harmful compounds into the atmosphere, water and soil, as well as a reduction in waste. Therefore, increasing the share of RES in the energy balance improves the environment. The EU as a whole and individual member states are now facing an important challenge: to support and develop RES [Borgosz-Koczwara, Herlender, 2008].

Since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in RES; in this period, the global use of solar energy has doubled,

while wind energy generation has quadrupled. This increased use of renewable energy sources over the past 30 years is non-stop and further progress should be assumed. This state of affairs is due to economic benefits and increased regional and national energy security, job creation or regional energy development. The benefits for the environment are mainly a reduction in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions and improving air quality by reducing particulate emissions [Borgosz-Koczwara, Herlender, 2008]. Developing new RES technologies give these “natural” sources an enormous potential for electricity production. Developing technologies are making energy production increasingly cost-effective [Tomaszewski, Sekściński, 2020].

Reduction of air pollution in cities is being promoted by introducing low-emission transport systems. Electric cars and buses are now being promoted, but it is not certain that electromobility will only apply to electric-powered vehicles. Another solution can be drive systems based on HVO100 liquid fuel. This propellant is a synthetic and renewable oil fuel with chemical properties similar to diesel fuel. Animal fat, fish processing waste, cooking oil production waste, or used cooking oil, among others, are used to produce HVO100 [Kopta, 2018].

Global conditions mean that petroleum-based fuels used in motor transportation carry the growing risk of being less abundant and more expensive. For this reason alternative fuels must be sought [Motowidlak, 2016]. Hydrogen fuel cells are also a possible application here. Cells of this type generate electricity in the process of fuel oxidation. In the most common scheme, hydrogen releases electrons in oxidation, and these electrons react with oxygen, thus producing electrical energy. The side effect of this process is solely water vapour. The use of hydrogen makes this chemical element highly attractive, as it is the most abundant in nature. Of all known fuels, it has the highest energy efficiency for unit mass. For comparison, hydrogen can be about three times more efficient than petrol [Sciążko et al., 2018]. In the next 30 years, the share of hydrogen as a fuel in cars will increase to about 60% (Figure 1).

Creating a partnership for the promotion of forest areas as the “green lungs” of the Three Seas region means building a network of forest areas that are crucial for carbon accumulation and oxygen production. Some forests of this type are classified as protection forests, but their impact goes much further. Forests of this kind protect the soil from erosion and depletion, regulate water ratios and also serve as surface and groundwater storage. Overall, forests are also a gene bank, plant and animal sanctuary,

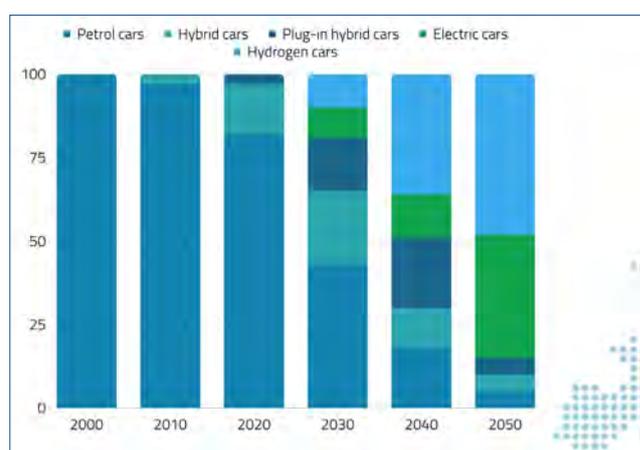
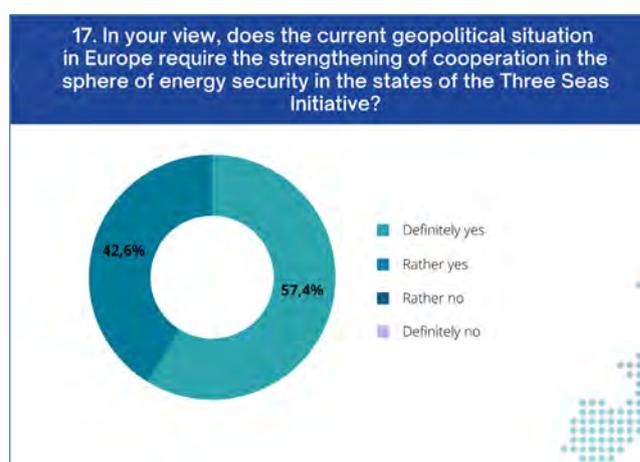


Fig. 1 Projected market share of passenger cars by type of drive [Sciążko et al. 2018].

having a scientific value and playing an important role in state defence, national and state security [Nowakowska, Orzechowski, 2018].

The current geopolitical situation in Europe requires greater cooperation towards energy security of the 3SI countries – most of the respondents are aware so their answers were *definitely yes* (57.4%) or *rather yes* (42.6%) (Question 17).

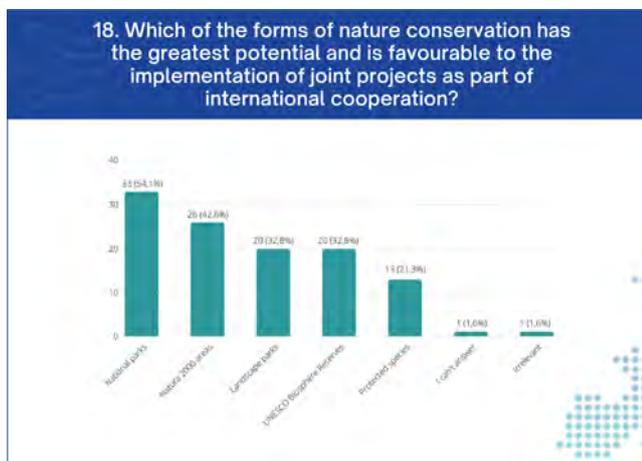
Energy security is embedded in the political, economic and



environmental context, being an important component of the economic security of any country. Energy security in the 21st century is one of the most important elements of national policies, due to an increased energy demand and hence the increase in the price of energy resources. Energy is an important factor shaping international relations, not only by states influencing each other, but also by influencing states through international organizations and corporations [Misiągiewicz, 2019]. That is why dialogue and a common energy security strategy for the Three Seas zone are so important. The following are of a strategic importance [Wojcieszak, 2018]:

- the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline (“The North Gate”), which enables resources to be acquired from Norwegian deposits,
- the construction of three LNG terminals: Klaipėda, Świnoujście, and Krk Island,
- the use of the existing gas storage facilities and construction of new ones,
- the construction of gas infrastructure and the use of gas deposits recently discovered on the Black Sea,
- investments in and improvement of energy infrastructure by means of interconnectors linking the 3SI states, such as the ones between Poland and Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia, and Poland and Czechia,
- building and developing a power energy spot market,
- building an oil transmission network leading from north to south to connect with the Czech system; this will provide a link to Hungary or Croatia, and the construction of the missing transmission network (only around 160 kilometres) will make it possible to transport oil from the Baltic to the Adriatic,
- development of electricity grids.

The expansion of the existing and the creation of new energy infrastructure is an important factor in the strengthening of 3SI security. Another important aspect is guaranteeing gas supplies from the USA [Wojcieszak, 2018].



Of the various forms of nature conservation that can be found in the 3SI states, the following have the greatest potential fostering the implementation of joint projects under international cooperation: national parks (54.1%), Natura 2000 areas (42.6%), landscape parks (32.8%), UNESCO International Biosphere Reserves (32.8%), and protected species (21.3%).

The role of national parks in the countries of the Three Seas Initiative cannot be overestimated due to their share in the protection of natural resources, their sustainable use in tourism – all of these enhancing the development

of many regions. The primary form of tourism in national parks is hiking, biking, skiing, or canoeing. Therefore, one of the most important factors in the tourist development of national parks are hiking trails and bicycle paths. In addition, it is vital to develop accommodation facilities, such as hotels, hostels (also in the mountains), and campsites. Besides, it is necessary to connect national parks by means of cross-border trails, as has been done in the Tatra National Park featuring five cross-border trails in Poland and Slovakia. Similarly, there are three cross-border trails in the Karkonosze National Park, both in Poland and Czechia. Visitors coming to national parks in large numbers (e.g., about 6 million tourists in the Karkonosze National Park on the Czech side) give a substantial boost for local development. As regards benefits provided by national parks, it is necessary to create joint cooperation strategies, unify trail markings, prepare multilingual information, design a common logo for publications and guides, organize joint events, joint workshops and scientific conferences, joint projects, cooperation on tourist access, green education, promotion, and a common system of geographic information [Kozyra, 2013].

Natura 2000 areas not only support nature conservation in the whole European Union but play a major role in sustainable development. In this context, sustainable development is understood as an aspiration of communities inhabiting specific regions or countries to have access to a safe natural environment that abounds in biodiversity [Radziwon, 2015]. Natura 2000 means acting towards sustainable development with the following ideas in mind [Radziwon, 2015]:

- Interference with the environment must account for its susceptibility and immunity to transformation and pollution.
- Human interference must not reduce the ability to restore natural resources.
- The use of natural renewable resources should be preferred.
- Biological and landscape diversity must be protected.
- Implementation of sustainable development is a form of environmental security.

Man and Biosphere (MAB) is a UNESCO international programme implemented continuously since 1971. UNESCO is a UN organization that aims chiefly at international cooperation in the areas of culture, arts and science. The goal of the Man and Biosphere programme is sustainable development and building relationships between human beings and the biosphere. This idea is implemented by creating an international network of national or international UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. Such reserves have

been established in as many as 134 countries to protect biodiversity, and foster research in environmental change on Earth. Besides, the goal is to increase public awareness in terms of understanding the links between biodiversity and the cultural conditioning of human life [https://www.unesco.pl/nauka/czlowiek-i-biosfera-mab]. Reserves of this type are not a form of nature conservation; their purpose is to protect biodiversity and monitor its condition globally. UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have a conserving role, protecting landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic diversity. Besides, they influence economic development and local communities. Further, they serve an educational function, they support research and monitoring (https://www.unesco.pl/nauka/czlowiek-i-biosfera-mab).

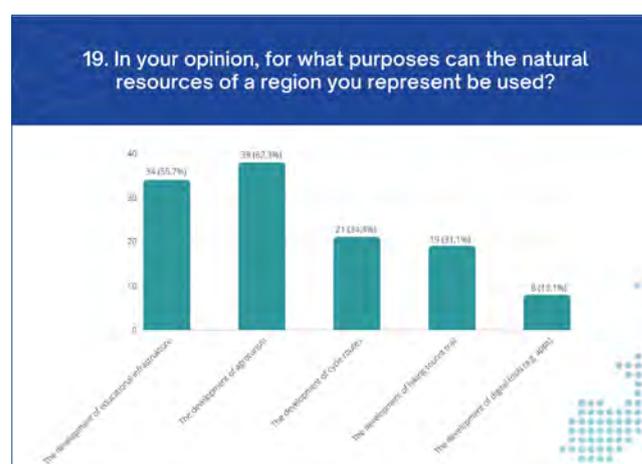
Biosphere Reserves are established by national governments. To be recognized as such they must meet specific criteria, such as preservation of genetic resources and species, maintenance of ecosystems and typical landscapes. Besides, they must support sustainable economic and human development,

as well as logistical, scientific projects or those connected with environmental education. The functioning of Biosphere Reserves involves specific goals [Jeżyska, Paszuszko, 2021]:

- Strategic Goal 1: Protect biodiversity, restore and enhance ecosystem services, and promote the sustainable use of natural resources.
- Strategic Goal 2: Contribute to building sustainable, healthy and equitable societies, economies, and prosperous human settlements in harmony with the biosphere.
- Strategic Goal 3: Facilitate learning about biodiversity and sustainability, education for sustainable development (ESD) and building potential.
- Strategic Goal 4: Support the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and other aspects of global environmental change.

The natural resources of the 3SI countries can be exploited and developed, but it is also necessary to develop infrastructure. For respondents, the most important are: development of agritourism (62.3%), development of educational infrastructure (55.7%), development of bicycle trails (34.4%), development of hiking trails (31.1%). Of lesser importance is the development of digital solutions, such as mobile applications (13.1%).

The qualities of the natural environment play a role and they affect the number of agritourism farms. Apart from the adequate standard of buildings and their surroundings, the availability of proper tourist and recreational equip-



ment is important. Recreation on agritourism farms is an old product that has been advertised for years [Cichowska, 2011]. Therefore, it is essential to build a network of agri-tourist farms in the Three Seas region and develop an agritourism brand for this area. The network should be developed by experts, according to common criteria, so that potential tourists can enjoy similar standards of recreation and have the opportunity to spend time actively thanks to environmental resources. Catchphrases like "The Land of Three Seas," "The Three Seas Land of Natural Abundance," "The Three Seas go natural" can be product or common brand names.

The criteria to be considered when developing an agritourism product include [Strzembicki, 1995; Ciepiela, 2016]:

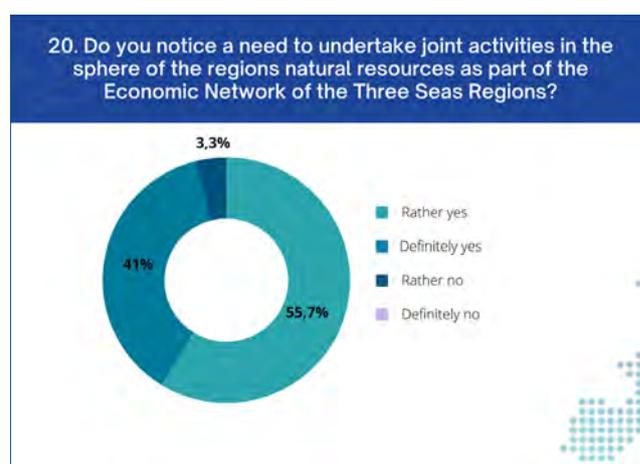
- the location of the farm,
- accessibility by road, rail or air,
- a well-tailored offer,
- equipment and facilities for the guests' leisure,
- hiking trails, nature trails, available on the farm and in close vicinity,
- accessibility of commercial, service and social infrastructure facilities,
- proper technical condition and safety,
- natural and cultural attractions,
- possibilities to do active farm work as a tourist attraction and an opportunity to increase practical skills.

When building an agritourism brand and offer, it also seems important to establish tourism clusters, which enhance the conditions for development. Such aggregations create better conditions for the development of especially small entities, such as agritourism farms. A combination like this enhances competitiveness but makes it possible to offer a richer and more diverse range of products. The cluster is a base of shared knowledge and skills, a space for sharing experience, expanding capabilities but also monitoring the quality of services and products [Ciepiela, 2016].

The development of agritourism in the Three Seas countries should have regard for the welfare of the beneficiaries. As the survey shows, tourists who choose to rest on agritourism farms are guided mainly by the lower cost of accommodation, as they are middle-income people. It appears that there is a relationship between tourists' income and their participation in agritourism. Also, when choosing, they are guided by the natural quality of the locations chosen, good accommodation base, "ecological" food, and possibilities of physical recreation. Taking advantage of agritourism farms in their natural setting is also the result of environmental education, thanks to which awareness of their impact on health increases. That is why it is so important for agritourists to engage in active recreation while in contact with natural, clean and unpolluted nature, especially in forest areas, and surrounded by landscapes of scenic beauty. Besides, aesthetic and intellectual values are also important. In addition, being in contact with the hosts and enjoying traditional hospitality, staying individually or in small groups are also important factors when choosing a holiday stay on agritourism farms. The wealth of regional folklore and culture is also a factor in the development of agritourism [Ciepiela, 2016].

The development of agritourism can also greatly benefit from a system supporting individuals starting and running agritourist activity, and the possibility of using low-interest loans and credits. Competitiveness creates the need for training and further educating agritourism farm owners as well as supporting them through advertising, for example, in social media. The local self-government also has a vital role to play in developing agritourism by providing technical and recreational facilities, protecting the tangible and intangible assets of culture, and effectively promoting the region. Such activities can also be supported by local leaders who, being local, have a better understanding and motivation for the sustainable use of natural assets of the area. Such individuals can initiate and support entrepreneurship on their own farms, but they also initiate and promote team activity [Ciepiela, 2016].

When asked about the need for joint activities within the Three Seas Network of Regions to take advantage of the regions' natural resources, most respondents indicate *definitely yes* (41%) or *rather yes* (55.7%). Nature tourism is a type of cognitive tourism, motivated by the desire for contact with "nature" in the widest sense, which offers its curiosities and extraordinary natural phenomena. The growth of this type of tourism provides an opportunity to develop protected areas, and this is particularly important in developing countries where well-preserved natural resources still exist. The potential of nature tourism is also visible in the content of



educational programmes and children and youth education [Mika, 2007]. A new use of natural resources is audio tourism [Bernat, 2011, 2014], which can be developed in many untransformed areas of the Three Seas countries.

Bicycle tourism figures prominently in the sustainable development of the Three Seas areas, bringing diverse benefits, such as, first and foremost, better health from doing physical exercise in the open, or the possibility of mental health improvement thanks to visual, auditory or olfactory sensations. Tourism of this kind also implies a friendly way of being in the natural environment – no exhaust fumes or noise. Thanks to growing bicycle tourism local potential and entrepreneurship is enhanced as bicycle tourists need to be serviced [Pisarska, Pisarski, 2012].

The 21st century is seeing the rapid growth of bicycle routes [Dziedzic, Trojanowski, 2021] due to significant public acceptance of public expenditure on bike paths. In addition to regional and local self-governments, bike routes are initiated and created by national park authorities, landscape park boards, and the state forest authority. The 3SI countries should invest in the development of bicycle tourism taking into account [Pisarska, Pisarski, 2012]:

- the routing of bike paths through protected areas, thus increasing their appeal,
- cooperation of local and supra-local communities in the creation and implementation of integrated networks of bicycle routes,
- joint execution of tasks related to improved cycling safety,
- coordination and effective management of infrastructure and tourist traffic in protected areas, and areas managed by local self-governments,
- active involvement in bicycle traffic management of associations, local communities, and economic entities,
- effective promotion of bicycle paths through the media, periodic radio and TV programmes, preparation of maps, brochures and guides and mobile applications.

One of the important elements of utilizing the regions' natural resources can be ornithological tourism with its values and threats [Grzywaczewski, 2015, 2018, 2019; Grzywaczewski, Bojar, 2015]. Also, it is possible to develop nature tourism based on valuable plant species and animal species other than birds. Species that can help to grow nature tourism include: the European bison, elk, wolf, chamois, white stork, crane, shorebirds (e.g., Eurasian curlew, great snipe, black-tailed godwit), woodpeckers (e.g., three-toed woodpecker, white-backed woodpecker), owls (e.g., great grey owl, eagle-owl), aquatic warbler, and scare large blue (butterfly). Among the plant species and habitats that are attractive for nature tourists are mountain and peatland plants, plants growing in fresh meadows and deciduous forests, among others.

The development of educational infrastructure helps to create the base of human capital [Kozera-Kowalska, Nowotarska, 2019]. Nature education itself provides an opportunity to present ways of protecting the environment; it develops the skill of observing specific phenomena and objects, develop the ability to assess the consequences of changes in natural phenomena and human impact. The final stage of nature education is the formation of positive attitudes towards individual species and natural habitats, and consequently proper respect for the natural environment [Graja-Zwolinska et al., 2018].

Properly implemented environmental education can play a role in developing ecotourism. The core concept of ecotourism combines the needs of tourists and local communities with the sustainable use of the environment. This form of tourism is linked to sustainable agriculture, processing, handicrafts and traditional forms of handicraft, among other things. Besides, in rural areas with such important assets as nature, landscape and regional heritage there is the opportunity of developing ecotourism, and thus it can be an important stimulator of local development [Zaręba, 2018].

Ecotourism is a form of active sightseeing, combined with exploring natural, scenic and cultural areas. This type of tourism enhances the protection of natural heritage, accumulated by the forces of nature, but also respect for cultural heritage of mankind. Properly implemented ecotourism development strategy reinforces the identity of local communities and boosts the effectiveness of nature education. Besides, this form of tourism is part of sustainable local and regional development. Tangible benefits include (green) job creation and the increased income of local (also rural) communities. As a result of the sustainable use of environmental resources, tourism

improves the quality of life of people in naturally valuable areas [Zaręba, 2010].

Ecotourism encompasses other related forms of tourism: sightseeing tourism, agritourism, culinary, adventure, active, specialized, heritage, and spa tourism, etc. [Zaręba, 2010]. The interdependence of natural resources and cultural potential forms the platform for the emergence of ecotourism. The sustainable use of environmental resources in this form contributes to the awareness of its value. It also has a positive effect on nature conservation, including the preservation of landscape qualities and protection of cultural heritage. By developing ecotourism and improving quality of life organizers (local communities) and participants (tourists) ensure the protection and continuity of natural resources [Zaręba, 2010]. Many forms of tourism combined increase the potential and can be an innovative element of the development of the Three Seas region, and at the same time a way to enhance the preservation of natural heritage.



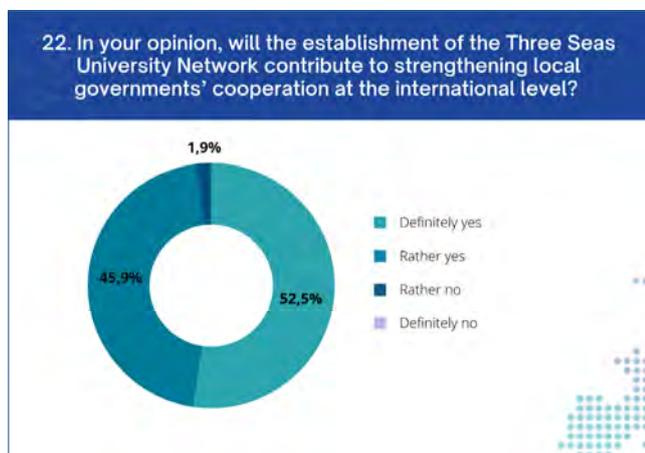
Fig. 3. Connection between ecotourism and other forms of tourism [Zaręba, 2018].

According to Zaręba [2018] ecotourism is linked to other forms of tourism and defined as sustainable tourism, for which nature education is of great relevance. Education can be considered as:

- learning, discovering, deepening knowledge about the visited place, region, country (this applies both to tourists and local tourism organizers, who should provide such knowledge and make it available to visitors; this is especially important in the context of ecotourism development and the concepts included in the definition);
- interpretation of the heritage of the place – its history, nature, landscape, cultural legacy, etc. (ecotourism destinations should place special emphasis on modern and interactive methods of presentation, "telling stories" about the uniqueness of the place, diversity, etc., aimed at different audiences and age groups).

3.2.3 Science and education

Another areas covered by this research was science and education. The research mainly focused on academic cooperation. Based on the results, an outline was made of cooperation between the universities of the 3SI states.

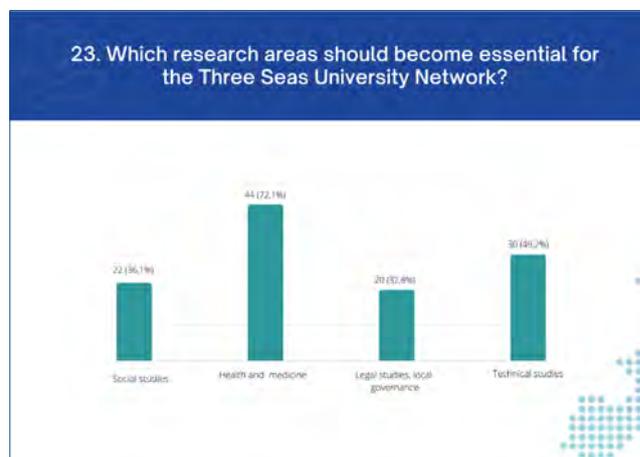


In response to Question 22 the answers were *definitely yes* (52.5%), *rather yes* (45.9%), while only 1.6% of respondents answered *rather no*. A total of 98.4% of respondents were positive about the establishment of the Three Seas University Network and the role of the network in the process of bringing local governments together in terms of international cooperation. Issues related to international academic cooperation were the main points of discussion during the two editions of the Three Seas Local Government Congress in Lublin (in 2021 and 2022). In 2022, during the panel "Cooperation between universities of the Three Seas Initiative" proposals were made concerning the establishment of the Three Seas University Network.⁵ It is worth noting that the contemporary development of universities depends, among other things, on the process of internationalization, both of the scientific-research and the teaching process. The region of the Initiative need support in the areas of intellectual development, exchange of scholarly staff or conducting joint studies. It should be noted that similar initiatives are called into being in various academic circles, for example, Collegium Carpathicum, which links the University of Warsaw, the East European Higher School in Przemyśl, the Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk, University of Prešov, University of Ostrava, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, and Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest,⁶ or

⁵ <https://scienceinpoland.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C92606%2C-czarnek-universytety-obszaru-trojmorza-poteczny-potencjal-intelektualny.html>.

⁶ <https://observatorium.pnu.edu.ua/pl/category/collegium-carpathicum>.

the Lech Kaczyński Via Carpatia Polytechnic Network.⁷ However, the growth of the Three Seas Initiative provides a platform for the creation of a comprehensive network of universities, based on the Three Seas Network of Regions, serving as an interface between the science sector on the one hand and local government and business on the other.



Responses to Question 23 covered health and medicine (72%), technical sciences (49.2%), social sciences (36.1%), and legal and administrative sciences (32.8%). The results clearly show that issues associated with medical sciences and health issues are fields that should be part of the Three Seas Network of Regions in the first instance. The data is in line with the discussion held in Lublin at the Three Seas Local-Government Congress in 2022, panel "Cooperation between universities of the Three Seas Initiative,"⁸ and the response of the academic community to the growth of medical studies, that is, the establishment of a medical faculty at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.⁹ It should be underscored that other research areas, too, especially in the new geopolitical environment, are crucial for the development of university cooperation, also with Ukraine.¹⁰

In reply to Question 24 respondents rated as first mobility of academic staff and joint research projects, 39.3% each. Student mobility was ranked second (36.1%). Training courses for academic staff were regarded as the most effective for international cooperation in the field of higher education by 34.4%. Joint e-learning studies were mentioned by 19.7%, and issues related to the training of university administrative staff elicited two lowest in-

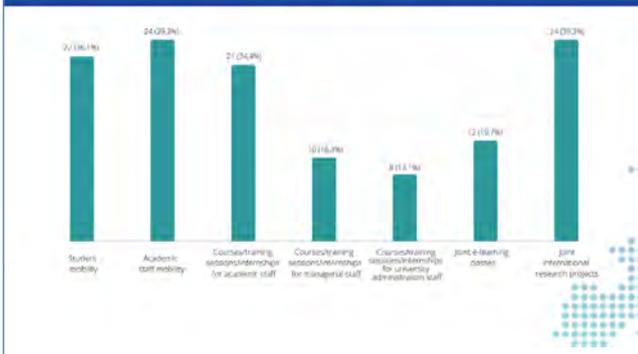
⁷ <https://wz.prz.edu.pl/aktualnosci/politechniczna-siec-via-carpatia-im-prezydenta-rp-lecha-kaczynskiego-911.html>.

⁸ <https://radio.lublin.pl/2022/06/przemyslaw-czarnek-universytety-obszaru-trojmorza-to-poteczny-potencjal-intelektualny>.

⁹ https://www.kul.pl/wydzial-medyczny-kul-zainaugurowal-dzialalnosc,art_100380.html.

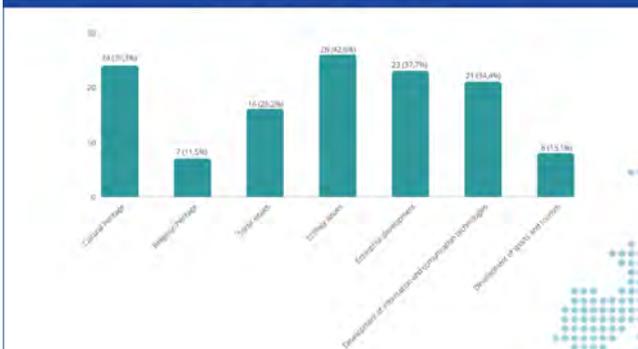
¹⁰ https://www.kul.pl/prorektor-kul-mamy-bliskie-relacje-z-naukowcami-z-ukrainy,art_100923.html.

24. What activities do you consider to be the most effective for international cooperation in the sphere of higher education?



indications: training managerial staff (16.4%) and training administrative staff (13.1%). Summing up the responses, the crucial aspects here are activities related to mobility and research projects, which implies that these two areas are the most attractive for the entities involved, but also from the point of view of the regions to which they travel or with which they carry out joint projects. This can also be a possible goal for the potential Three Seas University Network, which could be supplied with a fund to support mobility activities or joint projects with. The results also illustrate the need to show the possibilities how the fund could support the academic sector within under the Three Seas Investment Fund.

25. What subject matter do you consider to be the most necessary for international cooperation in the sphere of higher education?



In response to Question 25 our respondents first indicated green issues (42.6%), followed by the issue of cultural heritage (39.3%), and the question of developing enterprise (37.7%). These were followed by: development of information and communications technology (34.4%), social issues (26.2%), sports and tourism (13.1%), and religious heritage (11.5%). The results show that the scope of academic cooperation is consistent with the essential paths of development of the Initiative, taking into account the numerous issues related to common, international cultural heritage of Central and Eastern Europe.

26. What initiatives do you consider to be the most necessary for international cooperation in the sphere of science and research?



For Question 26, respondents indicated as first regular application for research and innovation projects (47.5%). Then came two areas: regular organisation of conferences and symposia as well as creation of institutionalized forms of cooperation (both at 36.1%), and then research staff mobility (32.8%). Other indications were regular cooperation with the socio-economic sector (29.5%) and digitization of science (13.1%). The results highlight the continuity of activities as an extremely important factor in the context of international cooperation in science and research. It seems that the biggest shortcoming of international academic cooperation is the lack of continuity and regularity. Tasks executed from time to time, even if high quality, cannot replace synchronized initiatives that systematically support the development of academic international cooperation. It is therefore extremely important to institutionalise this cooperation in the form of the Three Seas University Network, which having its own budget or using other funding opportunities, including a dedicated fund under the Three Seas Investment Fund, could establish international academic cooperation on a permanent basis. On the other hand, it is important to underscore respondents' strong emphasis on developing research mobility and organizing conferences and symposia.

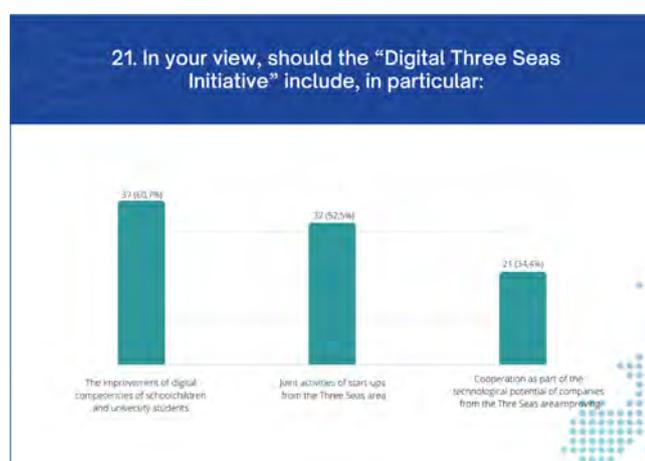
27. In your opinion, what are the main barriers of international cooperation in the sphere of education and science?



For this question respondents pointed to insufficient funds (67.2%), excessive bureaucracy (49.2%), and sociocultural differences (29.5%). This was followed by a low level of interest shown by beneficiaries (26.2%), lack of support from government authorities (11.5%), and a lack of support from local authorities (4.9%). The results demonstrate the biggest issue – the lack of funding. It is extremely important to be able to use all available funding as efficiently as possible, for example, EU funding, but also create new financial opportunities, including the area of the Three Seas Initiative. Further, problems with excessive bureaucracy were indicated. It may be linked to the negative experience of international cooperation so far. For this reason, it would be useful to provide specialized and efficient administrative service. Importantly also, promotion should be enhanced so that potential beneficiaries may take interest in developing international cooperation, both in research and education.

3.2.4 Digitization

Digitization was another area covered by the survey. The research mainly focused on raising digital competence, cooperation between organizations and enterprises, also in respect of increasing technological potential, so that the research results can help to outline preferred courses of action (Question 21).



The respondents gave priority to the need to improve digital competencies among university and school students, as well as the joint activities of start-ups in the Three Seas area. Next came the need for cooperation in raising the technological potential of 3SI companies.

In sum, endeavours to expand digital infrastructure must consider not only cybersecurity but also a successive reduction of the impact of human activity on the natural environment, as well as improving the quality of life for customers and consumers by implementing commercial

and public electronic services. Very importantly, efforts to improve digital competencies among university and school students as well as joint activities of start-ups should use the potential of NGOs, simultaneously tightening cooperation to increase the technological potential of businesses and other economic and social actors of the Three Seas area.

3.2.5 Economic cooperation

One of the Network's founding principles is the creation of strong and sustainable economic ties between entrepreneurs from the member states and the so-called third sector (creation of a business environment combined with the development of intellectual and social capital with a view to expanding cooperation not only to transport, digital and energy infrastructure projects, but also to create an economically competitive region). At the same time, this is one of the biggest and most challenging tasks for the Network's regions. It follows that the implementation of the idea of developing international cooperation of regional business is an attempt to overcome the long-term effects of the adverse political and economic phenomena, currently faced by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These phenomena include: (1) demographic problems and the associated lack of labour reserves (since 2004 the population of the Three Seas countries has shrunk by almost 3%); (2) considerably more expensive labour, which may quickly trigger transferring jobs to other, "cheaper" countries; (3) EU climate policy forcing concerns from Central and Eastern Europe to reduce CO2 emissions; (4) the so-called "glass ceiling" – the limit to technological progress manifested in the inability to create a national system of innovation generation, which would otherwise make it possible to develop own specialist solutions and sell final products and services based on knowledge – hence the inability to offer more complex products and services (global Western companies dictate their terms to subcontractors from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and strictly control the level of innovation of subsidiaries located in the region); (5) China's technological expansion and the growing China–U.S. rivalry; (6) the crisis of the Eurozone, which has laid bare the division within the EU into the richer north and the poorer south; (7) fears of German-French economic hegemony in the EU among the other member states (Popławski, Jakóbowski, 2020). The above-mentioned barriers to growth pose the risk of Central and Eastern European countries remaining on the economic periphery relative to countries of the European West (Popławski, Jakóbowski, 2020).

The most frequently cited benefits of international cooperation for entrepreneurs include gaining new markets (geographic expansion), access to the knowledge and experience of foreign partners that can be used in new products and services, consolidation of the competitive edge, expanding the product range and improving product quality, gaining access to research and logistics infrastructure (e.g. pilot facilities, live laboratories), access to consulting and highly qualified employees, increased chances of obtaining funding for joint projects, increased bargaining power vis-à-vis suppliers and customers (market pressure), as well as raising the status of the entrepreneur (Plawgo, 2005; Gorynia, Jankowska, 2008; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2011; as cited in Lisowska, 2016; Rogula, 2013). Entrepreneurs operating internationally are more competitive than ones active only on the domestic market since they benefit from access to skills and technology, greater productivity, and better competence by gaining access to difficult markets and exploiting the advantages of cutting-edge technology. Due to greater market integration, entrepreneurs can play an important role in global value chains (European Commission, 2007). Cooperation between entrepreneurs and those in the business environment also means benefits for the region, such as access to potential foreign investors, greater competitiveness, better position and increased exports, higher levels of external funding for initiatives implemented, and higher returns on investments made under EU programmes (Rogula, 2013).

The basic platforms of international cooperation between entrepreneurs include exchange of knowledge and experience, joint sales of products and services, joint use of logistics infrastructure, joint purchase of new technologies, joint participation in trade fairs, international exhibitions, trade missions, conferences and seminars, and commissioning of expert opinions, studies and analyses (Lisowska, 2016). In principle, the objectives of international cooperation between entrepreneurs can be reduced to two aspects: financial gain and development achieved through the exchange of knowledge and business experience, as well as diversification of markets and business operations (Mazur, 2011). On these planes, international business cooperation qualifies in terms of two main categories: cooperation, in which entrepreneurs pursue a single common goal, and collaboration, which is "looser" than cooperation, where each business partner learns from the other and thus pursues its own goals more effectively (the collaborating entrepreneurs enjoy autonomy).

International cooperation of business operators and those in the business environment is now facilitated by globalization phenomena, such as: lowering of trade barriers around

the world, improvement of logistics and communication systems (increased availability of cheap flights, regional airports, road and rail infrastructure); the IT revolution, which has paved the way to exchange technology and knowledge on a larger scale (the Internet and mobile telephony have accelerated the exchange of information and reduced business costs); the emergence of new types of economic transactions (e-commerce leading the way), as well as the emphasis on studying foreign languages and innovative management methods; and the exchange of students and scholars (Rogula, 2013). The phenomenon that has no doubt positively impacted the establishment and development of existing contacts with foreign countries is Poland's EU membership, including, first and foremost, the abolition of customs borders, Euro-certificates and the resultant considerable simplification, acceleration, as well as reduction of costs and risks (including currency risk) involved in intra-Community transactions (European Commission, 2014). It should be noted at this point that the Three Seas Initiative does not seek to isolate the constituent countries as a body alternative to the European Union. The Three Seas Initiative is not a project competitive to the EU; its main task is to strengthen economic cooperation between the countries of the region, which are also EU members (Stępniewski, 2020).

Despite the opportunities offered by globalization and the broader EU single market, entrepreneurs of the Central and Eastern Europe continue to operate mainly on their domestic markets. It appears that in these countries there is no shortage of serious barriers to establishing and conducting international cooperation between entrepreneurs. These barriers can be classified, in principle, into three categories: financial, social and organisational. The first category encompasses the following factors: the lack of innovative branches of industry, difficulty obtaining funding that does not come from European funds, or the lack of financial programs supporting internationalization, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as the high cost of legal support. The social barriers include demographic problems, a defective system of higher education, the lack of a modern system for vocational training, no models for international cooperation, the passivity of entrepreneurs and NGOs in the field of establishing contacts with foreign countries, not knowing foreign languages, different business cultures, and different legal systems (*Wnioski z debaty zorganizowanej przez Regionalny Ośrodek Debaty Międzynarodowej w Kielcach w dniu 9 września 2013 r.*, quoted in Rogula, 2013). The broadest catalogue of barriers to international business cooperation relates to organizational issues and includes:

- inadequate use of forms of international cooperation by local government units, which often do not consult entrepreneurs about their choice of partner regions,
- lack of structured information on the needs related to internationalization of business operators and international cooperation, including information on foreign markets,
- lack of a structured, cost-effective model for meeting with potential international partners and establishing contacts with them,
- lack of convenient, virtual and real, infrastructure for easier conduct of joint operations,
- insufficient coordination of activities aimed at supporting international entrepreneurial operations,
- very little involvement of public administration in serving foreign partners (*Wnioski*, quoted in Rogula, 2013).

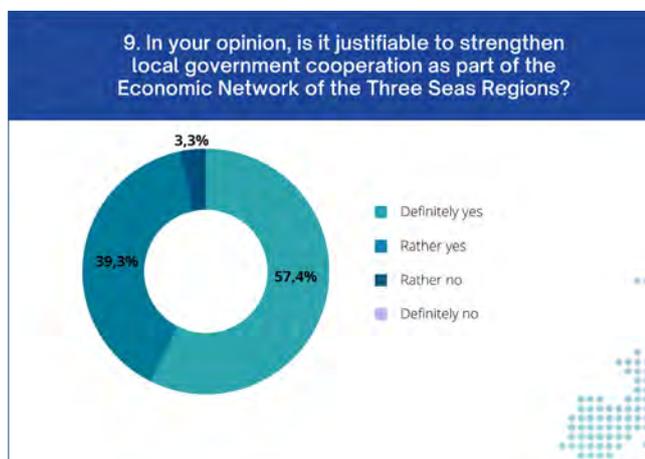
It should be noted that as many as two of the above-mentioned barriers directly relate to insufficient support of public sector entrepreneurs, including local government units. However, entrepreneurs themselves, too, generally are passive about seeking trade partners, posting only offers on their websites. Frequently, the first contact is initiated by a foreign partner to whom someone recommended a Polish supplier or found its offer on the Internet. More active in this respect are entrepreneurs whose employees have taken part in training in international business, are beneficiaries of some form of consulting, and/or have participated in international fairs, exhibitions, or trade missions (*Determinanty rozwoju współpracy międzynarodowej beneficjentów funduszy strukturalnych na poziomie Narodowej Strategii Spójności*, 2008).

The Three Seas Economic Network will allow local governments, entrepreneurs, scientific and research entities, as well as NGOs to cooperate more closely, resulting in joint applications for funding, the creation or management of joint projects, lobbying in the EU, and, most importantly, the expansion of economic relations between entities in the Three Seas region. The establishment and activities of the Initiative make a space for connecting business and social actors, coordination of joint initiatives and their funding. In this case, the chief goal of applying networked solutions is to ensure economic growth in a sustainable environment, establish mutual contacts, and enhance the competitiveness of the region (Olech, Speer, 2020). The economic initiatives of the entities operating in the 3SI regions will be a clear sign that the eastern group of European states endeavour to be a distinct group betting on joint undertakings, also those that go beyond the EU scope.

Now, the system supporting business is perceived as one of the main factors propping the growth of international cooperation of entrepreneurs (Lisowska, 2016). After all, building strong and lasting business connections at the international level is a long-term, labour-intensive and risky process. It requires decent and thorough preparation on the part of potential partners. This risk, however, should be taken by any entrepreneur who wants his or her products or services to be competitive in a globalised economy in both domestic and foreign markets. To this end, one needs to have a very good understanding of the situation in a particular sector in the countries with which the entrepreneur intends to cooperate (prices, technologies, overall economic situation, availability of raw materials). It is also necessary to find out about the legal regulations applicable in these countries and the market demands, as well as cultural differences and language barriers between prospective trade partners. To this end, it is often necessary to use professional assistance that can be provided to entrepreneurs under the Three Seas Network of Regions. The Network is likely to become a forum for the exchange of knowledge and experience serving to identify and solve problems perceived by entrepreneurs as major barriers to their internationalization. This assistance can be financial and non-financial. The main platform of financial support is the Three Seas Investment Fund, part of which can be used to bolster entrepreneurship and initiatives based on network cooperation (the role of the Fund is discussed in section 4.2). Forms of non-financial support include: assistance in finding business partners in other countries; analysis and presentation of information on business opportunities in a foreign market, including the creation of a database of regulations translated into English and the languages used in the Network states (especially tax, customs and labour regulations); or presentation of information on legal norms and bureaucratic rules in a foreign country. This assistance can also have the following forms: organizing international trade fairs, workshops, trade missions, exhibitions or conferences; creating platforms (e.g., online) designed to coordinate cooperation between entrepreneurs and entities known in their environment (specific business sectors); maintaining a joint schedule of events related to entrepreneurship; creating databases with information about specific markets; supporting the creation of export consortia, producer groups, business accelerators and incubators (Jarosz, 2016; *Determinanty rozwoju współpracy międzynarodowej*, 2008). The said instruments have a promotional and informational character, and can be collectively defined as soft support instruments. It should be noted, however, that the authorities of regional self-governments of the

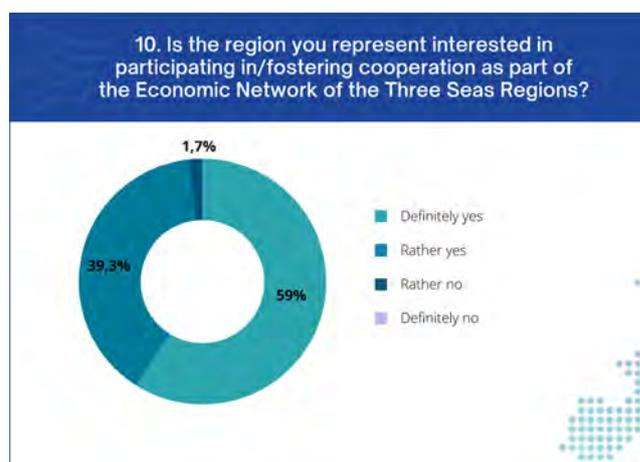
Network states can support the business sector and entities operating in business environment in establishing international contacts only within the scope of their own competence, not infringing the competence of government administration.

The Three Seas region, highly networked and with the opportunities it brings, can become attractive to foreign investment, and thus occupy an increasingly robust position in global supply and value chains. In many sectors, entrepreneurs from Central European countries already have the advanced technology and human capital to create specific final product components. However, these skills are typically integrated by the largest beneficiary: Western European corporations. Networked with resources, economic operators from the Initiative region can also act as investors or expand their current scope of activity, which could make the Three Seas region productive and innovative (Question 9).

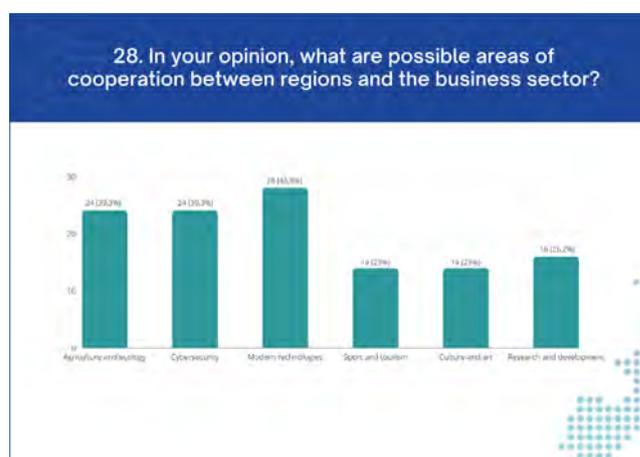


When asked whether it makes sense to strengthen local government cooperation within the Network of the Three Seas Regions, as many as 57.4% of respondents answered *definitely yes*, while *rather yes* was chosen by 39.3%. According to 3.3% of them this is rather unreasonable. None of them believe it is definitely unjustified to strengthen local government cooperation within the framework of the newly established Three Seas Network of Regions.

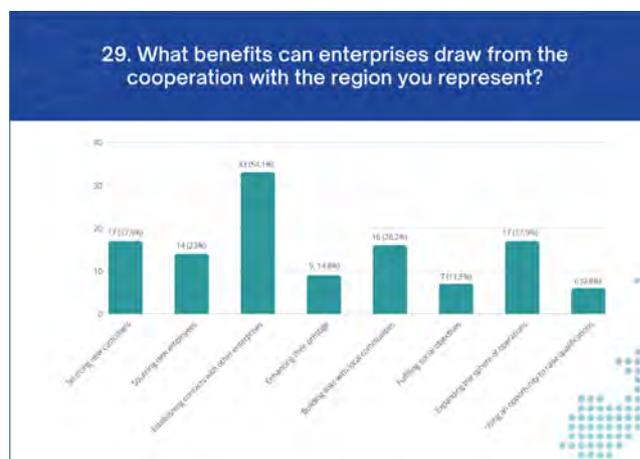
Question 10 elicited as many as 59% of *definitely yes* answers, which means that even those respondents who did not answer *definitely yes* to the previous question about the reasonableness of a tightened cooperation of local governments under the Three Seas Network of Regions are interested in cooperation within the Network in question. According to 39.3% of the surveyed, the region they represent is rather interested in participating/developing cooperation in the Network, while only 1.7% answered that the region they represent is not really interested in



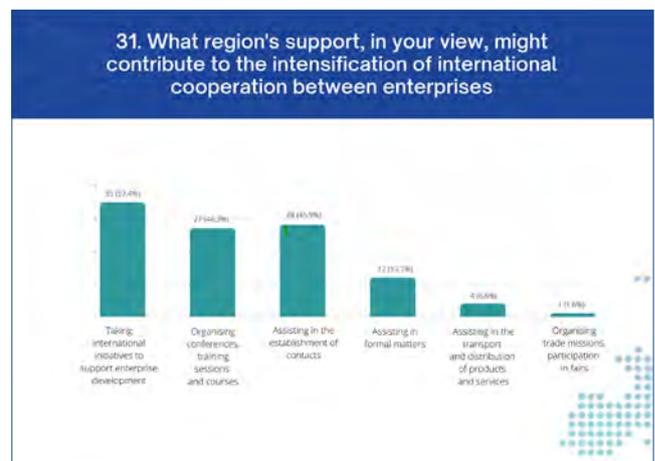
this cooperation. Again, none of the respondents chose the *definitely not* option.



In reply to Question 28, new technologies was the most indicated option, chosen by 45.9% of the subjects. This was followed by agriculture and ecology and cybersecurity (both 39.3%). R&D was chosen by 26.6% as a possible area of cooperation. Other such areas are sports and tourism, culture and the arts (both fields were indicated by 23% of respondents). Other areas of cooperation were not indicated.



In reply to Question 29, the largest percentage of respondents pointed to establishing contacts with other entrepreneurs (54.1%). Gaining new customers and the opportunity to expand the field of business both elicited 27.9% of the answers. 26.2% of the surveyed see building ties with the local community as a benefit. The benefits for entrepreneurs from cooperating with the region include the acquisition of new employees (23%). 9 respondents (14.8%) chose the benefit of raising their own prestige. Only 11.5% see the attainment of social goals as a benefit for entrepreneurs in their cooperation with the region. Only 9.8% chose the benefit of being able to improve their qualifications. None of the respondents indicated any benefits other than those for businesses cooperating with the region.



of conferences and training, while 19.7% chose assistance with formal matters. Only 6.6% regarded assistance in shipping and distribution of services and products as effective support, while only one respondent (1.6%) indicated organization of trade missions and participation in trade fairs as useful. No other forms of support from the region were indicated other than those mentioned above.



As regards obstacles (Question 30), bureaucracy was indicated as the main factor that makes it difficult for entrepreneurs to engage in international cooperation. As many as 22 responses (36.1%) favoured this option. Other barriers are the lack of knowledge of the foreign market (32.8%) and the lack of experience in international cooperation (32.8%). This was followed by a language barrier (24.6%) and not knowing the legal system (24.6%). In contrast, 21.3% of our respondents cited a financial barrier. Only 9.8% of them perceive geographical distance and the unstable political and economic situation as barriers. Only 4.9% consider cultural differences as a factor that makes it hard for entrepreneurs to engage in international cooperation. No other factors were indicated as hindering such cooperation.

Finally, when asked about the forms of regional support that could enhance international cooperation between business operators (Question 31), the most respondents indicated undertaking international initiatives to support the development of entrepreneurship (57.4%). This was followed by assistance in establishing mutual contacts (44.3%). 44.3% of the respondents indicated organization

THE PROSPECT OF BUILDING A NETWORK OF REGIONAL COOPERATION UNDER THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE

As a Central European cooperation initiative, the Three Seas Initiative embraces several key areas. The necessity of working together within multidimensional networks can contribute to better effects.

4.1 Networking as a form of international cooperation between the regions of the Three Seas Initiative

The implementation of tasks of international cooperation between the regions of the Three Seas Initiative can be greatly enhanced through the use of network administration solutions. Administrative networks are created and operate in the areas of various European Union policies as existing needs dictate, and it is this practice that qualifies in doctrine as network administration development (Supernat, 2006, 2016). Thus, it seems indispensable to introduce the concept of network administration with regard to processes shaping regional development (Szewczak, 2013; Wieczorek, Szewczak, 2018).

The emergence in the public space of the concept of the Three Seas Initiative, functioning at the international level implies the need for bottom-up macro-regional solutions to support the development of the Initiative. In the legal doctrine of local government, a view has emerged pointing to the interaction of the Industry 4.0 concept with the growth of the Three Seas Initiative based on the process of public administration networking (Szewczak, 2020). A modern instrument could be the Network of the Three Seas Regions, which would combine aspects related to the process of administrative networking and the development of Industry 4.0 (ibid). The development of the Network of the Three Seas Regions reflects the opinion that "transferring activities associated with the growth of the Three Seas Initiative from the presidential

level to the regional level will considerably influence the possibility of using legal forms of international cooperation between local governments, and also will affect the implementation of joint transnational projects" (Szewczak, 2021, 461). Undoubtedly, thanks to the Network, there will be a "streamlining of the implementation of the macro-regional concept of regional development of the Three Seas area. The Network will become a legal instrument of international cooperation between local governments, thus facilitating contacts between regions and allow the implementation of joint activities" (Szewczak, 2021, 462). The indicated theoretical and legal foundation made it possible to carry out some legislative activities, which led to the development of the 3SI regional component in the form of the Network.

It is necessary to indicate the intentional declaration made by the assembly of Lubelskie Voivodeship, whereby the purpose of the Network will be partner cooperation in the field of sustainable and responsible economic development of the 3SI regions with a view to: (a) reducing the infrastructure gap in Central and Eastern Europe resulting from the experience of economic transformation; (b) building interregional cooperation, which is the local government and local component of the Initiative; (c) providing a significant development impulse for local governments through cooperation and building durable links in the areas of infrastructure, transport, digitization and innovation; (d) providing a tool for better use of EU programmes for Central and Eastern Europe and the Trilateral Fund.¹¹ Next, activities were carried out leading to the signing of the Network agreement and its further development.

It is worth pointing out that the established and functioning Network of the Three Seas Regions is the only instrument

¹¹ Uchwała Sejmiku województwa Lubelskiego nr XIV/237/2020 z dnia 24 lutego 2020 r. dotycząca Deklaracji Lubelskiej w sprawie powołania Sieci Gospodarczej Regionów Trójmorza.

of its kind in the 3SI area from a macro-regional perspective, thanks to which the 3SI networking process was used at the Three Seas summit in Sofia (Wilczek, Rudowski, 2021) to develop a network supporting cooperation and innovation. It is worth noting that Ukraine was invited to participate in the Three Seas Initiative in 2022. At the Three Seas Local Government Congress held in Lublin on 6 June 2022, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared that there will be no Three Seas Initiative without a free and sovereign Ukraine.¹² The Congress organizers invited Ukrainian regions to participate, which was a very important thing to do. The participants of the summit in Riga, held on 20–21 June 2022, pledged to welcome Ukraine as a partner state of the Initiative, stressing that this presence could contribute to its political and economic revival. In addition, the participants stressed their willingness to engage Ukraine in the implementation of 3SI regional infrastructure projects.¹³ To sum, we can say that the project of creating a macro-regional instrument, which is the Network of the Three Seas Regions, is a legitimate initiative that effectively fosters the Initiative's regional component. Its further progress depends on financial support, which is why it is extremely important to take advantage of the funding allocated to the EU cohesion policy within the framework of European Territorial Cooperation and the funds dedicated to strengthened cooperation and improved infrastructure in Central Europe within the framework of the Three Seas Investment Fund.

4.1.1 The Three Seas Investment Fund

Tasks and projects run under the Three Seas Initiative are funded chiefly by the Three Seas Investment Fund. It was established for the purpose of reimbursing 3SI commercial infrastructure investments in three sectors: energy, transport and digital technologies. The Fund rests on two premises: (1) infrastructure investments are expected to be a key prerequisite for further economic development of the region, (2) the Three Seas region has enormous potential, which is still not fully exploited by investors, both internally and from non-3SI countries. The Fund aims to attract new private investors from all over the world to the region, which is expected to raise additional funds for investments in infrastructure, thus increasing GDP and living standards in the region (Wilczek, Rudowski, 2021).

¹² <https://www.gosc.pl/doc/7605357.Premier-Nie-bedzie-Trojmorza-bez-wolnej-i-suwerennej-Ukrainy>.

¹³ Joint Declaration of the Seventh Three Seas Initiative Summit, Riga 2022, p. 3, <https://3seas.eu/about/joint-declaration-of-the-seventh-three-seas-initiative-summit?lang=pl> (accessed 10.11.2022).

It should be highlighted that the signing of the letter of intent regarding the establishment of the Fund occurred during the Business Forum accompanying the Three Countries Summit in Bucharest (September 2018).¹⁴ The founding states of the Fund were Poland and Romania, represented by Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK) and Banca de Export-Import a Romaniei (Eximbank Romania), respectively. The founders pledged contributions totalling 520 million euro, with 500 million declared by the BGK. Now it is still the Fund's largest shareholder. However, the subscription agreement, that is, a formal commitment to pay, was not signed by the two institutions until 26 February 2020 in Riga (Wilczek, Rudowski, 2021). On 16 September 2020, the first regional investors (apart from the founding states) were the Estonian Ministry of Finance and Latvia's Attīstības finanšu institūcija Altum (ALTUM). On 19 October, the BGK announced at the summit in Tallinn that it intended to increase its contribution to the Fund by 250 million euro, totalling 750 million. To date, this is the only increase in an investor's contribution. On 3 December, Hungary's Magyar Export-Import Bank (Eximbank Hungary) and Slovenia's Slovenska izvozna in razvojna banka (SID banka) joined the Fund. On 15 December 2020, the Fund was joined by Bulgaria's Българска банка за развитие (BDB). On 29 January 2021, the Fund was joined by the last two regional investors: Lithuania's Viešųjų investicijų plėtros agentūra (VIPA) and Croatia's Hrvatska banka za obnovu i razvitak (HBOR).¹⁵

The Fund's objectives are in particular: (a) accelerate the economic growth of the 3SI countries by providing modern infrastructure and expanding existing infrastructure; (b) improve connectivity and cooperation throughout the region along the North-South axis; (c) promote investment in long-term assets critical to supply chains; (d) increase the amount of available funds for investment in the region; (e) increase the share of private capital in financing infrastructure investment; and (f) accelerate economic recovery from the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These objectives are pursued by the Fund, which executes the following tasks: (a) invest in commercial infrastructure projects in the Three Seas region; (b) invest in cross-border projects; (c) invest in critical infrastructure; (d) attract as many countries of the region as possible to contribute to the Fund; (e) acquire additional investment funding from private investors from within and outside the region, as well as from international financial institutions, which will supplement existing state

¹⁴ The letter of intent was signed by six states: Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

funds and EU funds; (f) promote the region's investment potential and make investing in it easier for actors not yet present in the region.¹⁶

The Fund makes investments in projects that, in particular: (a) improve 3SI connectivity and cooperation, (b) accelerate the region's economic development by expanding modern infrastructure, (c) address long-term assets critical to supply chains, d) enhance the region's security and support its energy transformation. Implementation of individual projects calls for meeting some specific criteria.

A project must:

- be commercial: the project must have the potential to profit investors;
- be geographical: the project must be located in a 3SI region (i.e., within one of the twelve countries of the Initiative);
- be cross-border: the project must have a positive impact on at least two 3SI countries. It is possible to invest jointly with countries from outside the region, but the project still has to affect more than one 3SI state;
- fit into a priority investment sector: the project must target at least one of three sectors: energy, transportation or digital infrastructure;
- have an appropriate degree of completion and have development potential; investments are allowed in projects that are developed from scratch but ready for implementation (greenfield), and in existing projects (brownfield), provided that they have the potential for development (expansion) or considerable capital expenditure (for modernization); investments in projects that are being developed are not possible,
- have business potential: the project should have a clear revenue model, predictable in the long term and indexed for inflation, as well as limited susceptibility to economic cycles;
- have a high-level management model: the project should be managed by a team of experienced development-oriented managers and advisors;
- be characterized by sustainability: the project should comply with the ESG criteria (environmental, social and corporate governance) and take a particularly responsible stand on environmental issues.¹⁷

The above-mentioned criteria are accompanied with extra parameters that are intended to impact the development of the entire Three Seas Initiative in a sustainable manner:

- uniform geographical distribution: projects should be located throughout the region as far as possible;

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

- preference for north-south connectivity, especially for transportation and energy projects;
- even distribution across sectors: 40 percent of funding should go to transport projects, 40 percent to energy projects, and 20 percent to digital projects; more digital investment is being considered owing to the increased importance of this sector during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- preference for greenfield investments: most of them should be for projects that will create new infrastructure.¹⁸

The fund makes long-term investments in three sectors: energy, transport and digital infrastructure, in particular: (a) transport: roads, railroads, rolling stock, marine and river ports, airports; (b) energy: RES, gas pipelines, LNG, gas production, distribution networks; and (c) digital technologies: fibre optics, 5G, data centres.¹⁹

At the moment, under the Fund, 91 projects are at various stages of implementation: Croatia (17), Hungary (17), Poland (12), Lithuania (11), Latvia (11), Slovakia (8), Slovenia (7), Romania (7), Estonia (6), Bulgaria (4), and Czechia (1). 48% of them address transport, 38% – energy, and 14% – digitization.²⁰

It should be underscored that the Three Seas Investment Fund supports chiefly large sectoral projects, connecting the 2SI states, also supporting international and even military security.²¹ Their implementation will perceptibly influence the socioeconomic development of the entire region. It is important to point out, however, the need to support projects that are international in their scope but relevant for the macro-region. Therefore, it seems crucial that within the framework of the Fund there should be a dedicated fund to address smaller projects, for example, in the areas of education, social or environmental issues.

4.1.2 Supporting Three Seas projects with EU funding

Countries of the Three Seas Initiative are members of the European Union, which implies the possibility of supporting the developed and implemented projects with

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁰ <https://projects.3seas.eu/report>.

²¹ For example, the Via Carpatia expressway. Its construction is beginning to affect the infrastructural connection of the NATO's eastern flank countries; see K. Jaronczyk, W. Przybylski, Poland: regional leadership stunted by governance dilemmas, in A. Spruds, M. Vargulis (eds.), *Three Seas Initiative. Mapping National Perspectives*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022, p. 132.

EU funding. International cooperation of regional actors within the European Union includes the implementation of four components: (1) cross-border cooperation between regions to promote integrated and harmonious regional development between neighbouring and maritime border regions (Interreg A); (2) transnational cooperation over larger transnational territories or around sea basins, involving national, regional and local programme partners in Member States, third countries and partner countries and OCTs, with a view to achieving a higher degree of territorial integration (Interreg B); (3) interregional cooperation intended to reinforce the effectiveness of cohesion policy (Interreg C) by promoting exchange of experience, innovative approaches and building a capacity focused on policy objectives; (4) cooperation of the remotest regions, among themselves and with neighbouring third countries or partner countries or regional integration and cooperation organisations or several of them, to facilitate regional integration and harmonious development in their neighbourhood (Interreg D).²² The three above-indicated areas of cooperation – cross-border, transnational and interregional – can and should be put into practice within the 3SI framework, including cooperation with Ukraine as an invited country. The scope of funding opportunities is very wide, and for the purposes of this report the most relevant issues will be outlined, particularly relevant for the development and operation of the Network of the Three Seas Regions.

4.1.3 Interreg Europe

The territorial reach of the Interreg Europe programme includes all 3SI countries. Thanks to the implementation of the programme's objectives, "interregional cooperation can contribute to a smarter Europe, by enabling European regions to improve their innovation and R&D policies and programmes, particularly their smart specialisation strategies [...]. The exchange of experience and policy learning will enable regions to accelerate and improve the implementation of their regional development policies in key areas, such as: skills development for smart specialisation and entrepreneurship, digitalisation of the economy and society, digital connectivity, the uptake of advanced technologies, innovation in SMEs, and non-technological

innovations (organisational, social, etc.)."²³ These areas are of strategic importance and have to be developed and supported under the Three Seas Initiative.

In addition, "interregional cooperation can support European regions to deliver a greener, climate-neutral and resilient Europe, in line with the European Green Deal, by enabling them to integrate successful experiences and policies from other regions into their own regional programmes in areas such as promoting the transition to a circular economy, climate change adaptation, water management, pollution prevention, risk prevention and disaster resilience, energy efficiency measures, biodiversity restoration, nature-based solutions and green infrastructures, and sustainable urban mobility."²⁴ The current geopolitical situation and the energy crisis cause matters related to improving energy efficiency and environmental issues to gain strategic importance, and addressing them under the 3SI framework can greatly contribute to the Initiative's development.

It should also be pointed out that "interregional cooperation can contribute to a Europe closer to citizens by supporting key areas for the development of effective integrated place-based strategies and policies, which could cover issues like local cooperative digital platforms, bottom-up/local green deal strategies dealing for instance with energy poverty, among other themes [...]. Experimentation in terms of building governance networks and structures is an important aspect of efficient cooperation structures, and capacity building is a key precondition for efficient territorial policies. Interreg Europe could help to ensure that integrated territorial strategies are concretely implemented on the ground."²⁵ Particularly, the issue of building a networked administration under the programme can add great value in terms of sharing good practices.

The programme's objective has been defined thus: "To improve the implementation of regional development policies, including Investment for jobs and growth goal programmes, by promoting the exchange of experience, innovative approaches and capacity building in relation to the identification, dissemination and transfer of good practices among regional policy actors."²⁶ To achieve the above objective requires the implementation of two tasks. First, the programme will "support interregional cooper-

²² Cf. Article 3 of the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of June 24, 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments, OJ L 231/94, 30.6.2021.

²³ Interreg Europe 2021-2027, Cooperation Programme Document, p. 8, https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2022-07/Interreg_Europe_2021-2027_CP.pdf.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

ation projects between regional policy actors, dedicated to exchange, capacity building and transfer of good practices and innovative approaches with the specific aim of preparing the integration of the lessons learnt from cooperation into regional policies and actions.” Second, “the programme will continue to facilitate policy learning services and capitalisation of good regional policy practices on an ongoing basis – in line with the policy learning platform approach – to enable regional level actors from across the EU to tap into relevant experiences and practices whenever they need them to strengthen their policies.”²⁷ The indicated areas of project implementation are in line with the mission of developing the Three Seas Initiative, also in terms of its macro-regional growth.

The programme’s target group includes national, regional and local authorities, as well as other competent institutions in charge of defining and implementing regional development policies. The program is also addressed to other categories of relevant entities, provided they can demonstrate their relevance and competence with respect to regional development policy, such as business support organizations. These could include: “development agencies, innovation agencies, chambers of commerce, clusters [...]; environmental organisations (e.g., environmental agencies, energy agencies, NGOs); educational and research institutions (e.g., universities, research centres); other organisations of relevance to regional development policies (e.g., Local Action Groups, social partners).”²⁸ It is worth noting that the target group is very wide, hence the diversity of stakeholders involved.

In summary, it seems that using the potential of the Interreg Europe programme can positively impact the development of macro-regional cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative, in particular of the Network of the Three Seas Regions, by using, for example, good practices in the development of macro-regional strategies in the European Union.

4.1.4 Interreg Central Europe Programme

The Interreg Central Europe programme addresses the most pressing common challenges at the heart of Europe, as per political demands. The Programme envisages “a united central Europe that cooperates – to become smarter, greener and better connected together [...]. The programme mission is to bring regions and cities together beyond borders to find fitting solutions for their citizens

in a fair and equal way everywhere. It encourages and supports transnational cooperation to make regions more resilient to common challenges that know no borders and which cannot be solved alone.”²⁹

Priority I of the Programme addresses issues related to cooperation for the development of a smart Central Europe. “The aim is to improve policy learning, strengthen the capacities of innovation stakeholders and to increase collaboration in and between regional innovation systems. Where applicable, actions supported should be coherent with the relevant smart specialisation strategies of the participating regions. Possible cooperation actions include the development and implementation of strategies, action plans, tools, training, pilot actions and related solutions. All actions should strive for better economic resilience of CE regions, emphasising greening and sustainability aspects and considering the low carbon economy as well as climate change adaptation [...]. More concretely, Interreg CE will fund actions in the following fields (non-exhaustive list):

- Green economy, bio-economy
- Industry 4.0, robotisation, mechatronics, digital technologies, key enabling technologies
- Cultural and creative industries and tourism
- Health (care) innovation
- Silver economy
- Social innovation
- Technology and innovation transfer
- Interregional partnerships along value chains
- Innovative schemes for financing innovation.”³⁰

“Examples of actions supported [...]:

- Improving capacities of and cooperation among innovation stakeholders at different governance levels (e.g. public, private, national, regional) to help SMEs to better integrate digitalisation in their sustainable transition to industry 4.0
- Exchanging good practices on green economy trends and standards and implementing pilot actions to support SMEs in taking these up
- Fostering technology and innovation transfer from research to business and new cooperation along value chains in order to support the roll out of innovative solutions
- Enhancing support services for SMEs and entrepreneurs to improve their access to research and technological innovations

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁹ Interreg Central Europe Programme 2021-2027, p. 20, available at https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/discover/programme21-27.html#Documents_&_Publications.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

- Strengthening transnational innovation networks and clusters and enhancing cooperation among innovation hubs in different territories
- Enabling cross-sectoral cooperation to help businesses (e.g. from traditional economic sectors, cultural and creative industries, tourism, health care or silver economy) to sustainably integrate digital technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, Internet of Things) into product and service development
- Improving collaboration along value chains of sustainable innovative products and services in coherence with smart specialisation strategies
- Enhancing transfer and upscaling of proven green solutions to open up business opportunities
- Developing and implementing transnational value chain concepts based on regional potentials and resources. Concepts should strengthen sustainability and reduce external dependency of value generation (e.g. by strengthening regional competences for lost/new value creation or introducing short food supply chains). They should also help increase regional resilience to external impacts such as ruptures of supply chains
- Fostering innovation strategies to reduce the environmental footprint of production processes, e.g. by facilitating decentralised and demand-responsive production systems
- Reducing innovation gaps in non-urban areas by e.g. making villages smarter and improving access to innovation support services for rural businesses focused on smart specialisation and technology priority areas
- Strengthening linkages between the public and private sector and finance institutions to encourage the design and setup of structures and services that facilitate access to innovation financing
- Promoting innovative actions that make the economy more just and help the economic and social integration of disadvantaged population groups (e.g. persons with disabilities, migrants, elderly, youth)
- Supporting the establishment of Living Labs, test-beds and ecosystems that bring together the demand and supply sides to promote the development and actual use of innovative solutions for public sector needs [...].³¹ It is worth noting that this extensive list of actions is not exhaustive.

Priority 2 envisages cooperation for a greener Central Europe. Support granted under the Interreg Central Europe programme will be used “to support transnational cooperation to increase energy efficiency, reduce energy

consumption and develop framework conditions for the sustainable production and use of renewable energies across the programme area. Possible cooperation actions include the joint development and implementation of strategies and action plans, tools, trainings, pilot actions and related solutions. Actions should improve energy-related policies and capacities and help central European regions and cities to implement affordable sustainable energy solutions that fit their specific territorial settings [...]. More concretely, the programme will fund actions to improve the situation in the following thematic fields (non-exhaustive list):

- Smart integration of carbon-neutral solutions across sectors
- Renewable energy sources
- Energy efficiency of buildings and public infrastructures
- Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from industry and other sectors
- Energy planning at local and regional levels
- Energy demand management and behavioural change
- Financing schemes for energy efficiency and renewable energy investments
- Energy poverty.

Examples of actions supported (non-exhaustive list):

- Supporting the development of coherent policy frameworks at local and regional level for the transition towards a climate-neutral economy and society in central Europe
- Improving capacities of relevant stakeholders and fostering the exchange of knowledge and good practices on climate change mitigation at local and regional levels, especially between regions with similar territorial characteristics regarding the practical implementation of climate action plans
- Supporting cost-effective measures and pilot actions that increase energy efficiency and improve the integration of sustainable renewable energy sources in SMEs and in different sectors (e.g. in the building and construction sector, industry, agriculture, forestry)
- Implementing pilot actions to test innovative and climate-neutral solutions through e.g. taking up and exploiting R&D results for the energy efficient renovation and heating and cooling of buildings (including cultural heritage buildings)
- Developing and implementing smart city and smart regions approaches, including energy efficiency improvements of district heating networks (e.g. waste heat recovery, heat storage), to foster carbon-neutral societies and territories

³¹ Ibid., pp. 33–34.

- Pilot testing the production of decentralised renewable energy, and supporting the empowerment of renewables self-consumers and communities, especially in rural areas, considering, for example, the sustainable management of end-of-life solar panel
- Improving energy demand management and fostering behavioural changes of consumers for reducing energy consumption and a resource-efficient and sustainable use of energy
- Promoting the production and use of advanced biofuels, notably the second (produced from non-food crops, such as cellulosic biofuels and waste biomass) and third generation biofuels (algal biomass)
- Supporting policies and strategies to overcome barriers for deploying carbon capture, utilisation and storage solutions in order to reduce GHG emissions
- Developing and introducing new or improved incentive schemes that encourage the reduction of industrial GHG emissions on local and regional level and strengthen the sustainable usage of renewable energy sources (including hydrogen) and energy storage solutions
- Fostering the introduction of corporate climate change mitigation targets and embedding them into existing business management tools (e.g. analytics) and decision-making (e.g. product development)
- Mobilising investments, in particular private funds, to implement energy efficiency measures and make use of renewable energy sources in different sectors, including the industrial, service and residential sectors
- Fostering the collection of integrated data on energy management and the interoperability of data through digital technologies and the coordination of standards and regulatory aspects.³²
- Sustainable land management and landscape planning that optimize human activities with biodiversity protection and enhancement measures
- Ecosystem services (e.g. production of food and water, clean air, recreational benefits)
- Restoration of degraded ecosystems
- Sustainable tourism and the valorisation of natural heritage Examples of actions supported (non-exhaustive list):
- Improving policy frameworks for biodiversity and implementing strategies at local, regional and transnational level to conserve and restore ecosystems and to protect wildlife
- Improving skills and competences of stakeholders on all policy levels through the exchange of knowledge and best practices to foster the integrated management of natural resources such as air, water and soil as well as nature based solutions for infrastructure investments
- Fostering the implementation of policies and strategies for the protection of cultural landscapes and integrating biodiversity protection interests into landscape management
- Linking green and blue infrastructures in a coordinated way to create and strengthen ecological corridors and protected sites at local, regional and transnational level, which will help to reduce landscape fragmentation and improve the transboundary connectivity of habitats
- Testing in pilot actions innovative technical solutions for the restoration of degraded ecosystems (e.g. rivers, high-diversity landscapes, forests) and upscaling these approaches at a wider territorial level
- Fostering and testing solutions to evaluate and enhance ecosystem services and to raise the awareness of policy makers on the local and regional value of ecosystems, considering also their function for improving public health and well-being through e.g. nature access, outdoor sports and recreation
- Strengthening the transnational coordination of environmental management and nature protection in the frame of multilateral cooperation initiatives and structures such as the Green Belt Initiative
- Developing transnational approaches to sustainable land use in order to prevent urban sprawl and testing through pilot actions novel approaches for the remediation and reuse of polluted brownfield sites as well as the regeneration of degraded peri-urban areas
- Promoting innovative solutions, considering also applicable regulatory arrangements and incentives, to advert soil degradation (including soil compaction) and enhance the soil properties, e.g. increasing the organic matter content of the soil

Under the priority mentioned above, the goal will be to enhance the protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reduce all forms of pollution [...]. More concretely, the programme will fund actions in the following thematic fields (non-exhaustive list):

- Biodiversity conservation and recovery, including urban green spaces
- Protection of natural heritage, ecosystems and valuable areas incl. Natura 2000 sites
- Reduction of environmental pollution (air, water, soil, noise, light etc.) and their human health impacts
- Integrated environmental management and sustainable use of natural resources

³² Ibid., pp. 45–46.

- Developing and testing integrated environmental action plans (e.g., on monitoring and reducing pollutants) on the local and regional level as a basis for pollution prevention and remediation measures
- Building capacities for an integrated management of water ecosystems (e.g. by harmonising the implementation of water management plans to improve transboundary water quality in transnational river basins, or by applying innovative water treatment technologies)
- Sharing good practices and applying innovative solutions that address, among others, invasive alien species, and strengthen sustainable environmental management practices (e.g. for agriculture and forest management, lakes, pollinator-friendly management, sustainable food chains)
- Developing and implementing strategies and solutions for sustainable tourism that valorises central Europe's natural heritage (e.g. protected areas, wetlands, landscapes) through participatory approaches and that avoids usage conflicts.³³

Another priority under the Programme are activities designed to improve the system of managing cooperation in Central Europe. Support will be granted to carry out transnational activities aimed at improving multi-sectoral governance processes at all territorial levels, particularly in the face of complex challenges associated with digitization, demographic change, public services of general interest (e.g., health care, education, social services), tourism, including culture. "Actions should follow a cross-sectoral approach and foster the horizontal and vertical cooperation of relevant actors of the public and, where appropriate, the private sector. Furthermore, actions should also strengthen capacities of public authorities to prepare integrated territorial development strategies [...]. More concretely, the programme will fund actions in the following thematic fields (non-exhaustive list):

- Reduction of administrative barriers, better policymaking and cooperation beyond borders
- Participatory decision-making processes (e.g. citizen involvement)
- Multi-level and multi-sector governance among areas with functional ties beyond borders
- Integrated territorial development strategies, e.g. addressing demographic change, climate change, public services of general interest (such as health, education, social services) and tourism and culture
- Digital governance Examples of actions supported (non-exhaustive list):

- Identifying and reducing barriers to cooperation in territories with functional ties (e.g. improving cooperation between stakeholders across administrative units and sectors to implement joint solutions)
- Exchange of experiences and building capacities of authorities to prepare territorially integrated initiatives such as Community-led local development (CLLD) strategies and Integrated territorial investments (ITI) by fostering cooperation between urban-rural partnerships or on sustainable urban development (SUD)
- Fostering and testing participatory governance models at local and regional level to increase participation of citizens in decision-making and to strengthen civic engagement and equal opportunities in public governance
- Exchanging knowledge and good practices on managing participatory approaches, including the testing of digital solutions for further rollout at territorial level
- Developing and implementing integrated development strategies for territories with functional ties addressing demographic change challenges and including high quality public services of general interest (such as health, education, social services)
- Developing and implementing integrated tourism strategies beyond borders, based on the shared central European identity and joint historical and cultural heritage
- Fostering new territorial governance models by e.g. a better integration of new biodiversity governance frameworks based on the 2030 EU Biodiversity Strategy (through, for example, more effective stakeholder dialogues)
- Strengthening cooperation and policy integration in cross-border and transnational territories with functional ties, especially across the former Iron Curtain, by establishing new or capitalising on existing structures for cooperation governance (e.g. EGTCs, EUREGIOs, macroregional initiatives), including joint decision making processes and coordinated action plans as well as by supporting cross-border public services
- Developing smart city and smart region strategies and supporting their integration into local and regional policies and governance systems
- Further strengthening digital governance solutions to create efficient public services that facilitate interaction between administrations and citizens and businesses (e.g. e-governance solutions, digital public services, e-participation)

³³ Ibid., pp. 63–64.

- Testing, adapting and deploying smart digital services for better cooperation and coordination beyond administrative borders (e.g. in the health sector).³⁴

The above-presented scopes of actions supported by Interreg Central Europe clearly show that this is a program that can be successfully used to develop the Three Seas Initiative, primarily in its macro-regional dimension. One important area of institutional empowerment can be the use of the functional Network of the Three Seas Regions to establish a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation.

4.1.5 Programmes for cross-border cooperation

The implementation of cross-border cooperation between the countries of the Three Seas Initiative is a very broad issue. Indeed, it is the most developed component from the field of European territorial cooperation. Poland can implement mutual cross-border cooperation programmes with Lithuania, Slovakia, Czechia and Ukraine. For reasons of space here, we will present only the Interreg Poland–Ukraine programme on grounds of its special importance in view of the development of the Network of the Three Seas Regions.

This programme covers the following subregions in Poland: of Białostocki, Łomżyński, Suwalski, Ostrołęcki, Siedlecki, Białski, Lubelski, Puławski, Chełmsko-Zamojski, Przemyski, Rzeszowski, Tarnobrzegi, Krośnieński; and the following Oblasts in Ukraine: Volyn, Lviv, Zakarpattia, Rivne, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk.³⁵

The program consists of five priorities. Priority 1, titled “Environment”, includes the following specific objectives: (a) to promote climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention and resilience, taking into account the ecosystem-based approaches; (b) to promote access to water and sustainable water management; (c) to enhance protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and to reduce all forms of pollution.³⁶ Priority 2, titled “Health”, has the following specific objective: to ensure equal access to health care and fostering resilience of health systems, including primary care and promoting the transition from institutional to family-based and community-based care.³⁷ Priority 3, titled “Tourism”, concerns the enhanced role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development,

social inclusion and social innovation.³⁸ Priority 4, titled “Cooperation”, as a whole fulfils an important role. It covers the following specific objectives: a) to enhance efficient public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and cooperation between citizens, civil society actors and institutions, in particular, with a view to resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions; b) to build up mutual trust, in particular by encouraging people-to-people actions.³⁹ Priority 5 is titled “Borders” and covers other actions for a safer and secure Europe related to, for example, border crossing management, improving the service at existing border crossings, or preventing illegal migration.⁴⁰ The subject matter of the individual priorities presented above prove that they are part of a complementary approach to the development of Polish-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation. It should be underscored that in today’s geopolitical situation, the border crossings priority is extremely important for the sake of ensuring international security, as well as preventing a food crisis by making solidarity corridors passable. On the other hand, the use of funding for projects under this programme can improve the integration of 3SI regions thanks to supporting investment projects, such as the Zamość–Lviv railway route, academic cooperation, or cooperation for environmental protection (Roztocze Transboundary Biosphere Reserve).

4.2 Recommendations

The Network of the Three Seas Regions has the potential to become a common ground for exchanging goods, knowledge and experience, based on strongly interlinked entities. The main objective of the Network is to increase cooperation between the 3SI countries at the regional level, which its members believe is designed to reduce economic disparities that came about during the period of political and economic transition in Central and Eastern Europe, to get the economy back on track in the context of the negative changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to increase the effective use of the Three Seas Investment Fund and EU Funds in the 3SI region, and to support the implementation of large projects (such as Via Carpatia and Rail Baltica). Given the potential of the Network of the Three Seas Regions as a platform for international cooperation of local governments, based in part on the opinions

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 81–82.

³⁵ Interreg A NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021–2027, p. 1.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 27–57.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 58–68.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 69–79.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 80–100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

as mentioned above, the following recommendations can be formulated, potentially to increase the effectiveness of activities undertaken in the area of this cooperation.

General recommendations

- Clearly emphasise the subjectivity of states, nations and Central Europe as a whole in the area of Euro-Atlantic cooperation.
- Intensify regional cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative through systematic projects, especially sociocultural ones targeting the younger generation.
- Take operational measures to specify strategic assumptions, including those aimed at establishing an institution for cooperation within the Three Seas region.
- Strive to provide a permanent source of funding for 3SI activities oriented targeting macroregional cooperation of local governments in the areas of, among others, academic cooperation, environmental protection, by setting aside a special fund within the Investment Fund to finance the areas indicated. The ring-fenced funds could be distributed along lines similar to those of current strategic projects, but on a smaller scale.

Recommendations for individual areas of cooperation

Infrastructure:

- We recommend that investments be continued to cater for the needs of the entire Three Seas region.
- We recommend that infrastructure investments be made on the basis of sustainable development, taking into account the needs of local communities and the natural environment, in particular.
- We recommend that infrastructure investments be treated as an essential component of building regional and international security.
- We recommend activating 3SI inter-regional cooperation with the participation of the regional authorities of Ukraine on the basis of organizational and financial solutions of the European Union and other legal frameworks based on international standards with a view to strengthening political, economic and administrative efforts to boost the development of the Via Carpatia road route and the construction of a similar link along the rail route, i.e. Rail Carpatia, which will give rise to a comprehensive and modern transport trunk line, making it possible to create and maintain an uninterrupted supply chain, including the carriage of food products, also in cross-border traffic between the European Economic Area and Ukraine.

In this connection, we recommend building a legal model for the Network of Three Seas Regions by establishing a European Grouping of Territorial Cooper-

ation aimed at the development of the Via Carpatia infrastructure, both the expressway with its branches and the rail route, Rail Carpatia, including a connection with Ukraine.

Under the current geopolitical circumstances, this would allow Ukraine to be integrated into the system of European transport networks, economically strengthen the Three Seas region and, above all, provide opportunities for uninterrupted export and import of goods to/from Ukraine, thus minimizing the threat of a food crisis.

Energy, conservation, and sustainable use of environmental resources:

- We recommend increasing energy security by conserving energy; increasing production while reducing consumption of energy resources; developing infrastructure and production of energy from renewable sources. Renewable energy should be obtained from solar radiation, wind and water, geothermal energy, and biomass. Biomass used for energy purposes should be used in the combustion of solid biofuels (e.g., wood, straw), gaseous fuels (biogas), and liquefied fuels (e.g., alcohol, oil).
- We recommend maintaining proper political relations with countries that have raw materials, produce energy, and control transit routes for energy carriers; creating and maintaining “economic solidarity” between countries; improving energy efficiency; developing competitive fuel markets and reducing the environmental impact of the energy sector.
- We recommend strengthening the climate protection of the 3SI area by supporting renewable energy sources, developing low-carbon transport, and creating a partnership to promote forest areas as “green lungs”. We recommend that air pollution is curbed in cities by implementing low-emission transport systems. Reducing air pollution is possible by promoting electric cars and buses using HVO100 liquid fuel and hydrogen fuel cells. Carbon accumulation and oxygen production should be achieved by creating a partnership to promote forest areas as “green lungs”.
- We recommend developing hiking trails and bicycle paths, accommodation base (hotels, hostels, mountain huts, campsites), also in areas covered by nature protection.
- We recommend connecting national parks by cross-border trails (e.g., trails in Poland and Slovakia in the Tatra National Park or trails in Poland and Czechia in the Karkonosze National Park). It is necessary to build joint cooperation strategies, unify trail markings, provide

multilingual information, design a common logo for publications and guides, organize joint workshops, scientific conferences, joint projects promoting tourist, green education, and a common system of geographic information

- We recommend developing agritourism, creating networks and clusters of agritourism farms in the 3SI countries, and develop an agritourism brand for the area; also developing ecotourism, ornithological and audio tourism.
- We recommend using geothermal energy in heat production and, for example, for recreational purposes (bathing centres, balneology), fish farming, agricultural production (greenhouses), or drying agricultural produce.
- We recommend supporting the electromobility system by creating a transport network friendly to electric vehicles, popularizing electromobility among residents (making walking trails, educational trails concerning electromobility, including small architecture; supporting and doing projects for solar panel installations that favour the development of electromobility).
- We recommend developing environmental education in the field of electromobility, consisting, *inter alia*, of systematic educational activities aimed at: (a) children and young people, e.g., school competitions, lessons and thematic workshops; (b) residents and entrepreneurs of the municipality, e.g., information campaigns on discounts and benefits associated with possession of electric vehicles); (c) employees of offices, e.g., study tours, participation in conferences.

Science and education:

- We recommend establishing the Three Seas University Network, collaborating with the Network of the Three Seas Regions.

The former should have stable financing or the possibility of using the 3SI Investment Fund. This would allow the creation of a research and education programme along the lines of the Erasmus programme that would ensure a process related to the mobility of students and academics, implementation of international projects and organization of conferences and symposia. In particular, the supported activities should target medicine, technical sciences and environmental protection. As the macroregional tier of the Three Seas Initiative was inaugurated in Lublin by creating the Network of the Three Seas Regions, the Three Seas University Network should be established in Lublin, as well. This would make it possible to coordinate work within the Network.

Digitization:

- We recommend expanding digital infrastructure, with a view not only to ensuring cybersecurity, but successfully reducing the impact of human activity on the natural environment, and improving the quality of life of customers and consumers with respect to commercial and public electronic services, primarily by focusing efforts on the activities of the “Digital Three Seas”, including raising digital competencies among school and university students and joint operation of start-ups, using the potential of NGOs, with the participation of Ukrainian partners, while increasing cooperation to step up the technological potential of enterprises and other economic and social actors of the Three Seas Initiative.

Economic cooperation:

- We recommend that the Network undertake to organize and fund regular meetings for entrepreneurs from partner regions to make acquaintance and start cooperation. These meetings can be international fairs, conferences or exhibitions, where entrepreneurs can present their offer, learn about the offer of businesses from foreign competitive industries, and share experiences in international cooperation.
- We recommend that the Network create an online database with regular updates on:
 - banks of legal regulations on starting and running businesses in the Network states (including tax and customs regulations), translated into their official languages and English),
 - sample documents and business plans (the so-called bank of good business practices), translated into the official languages of the member states and English,
 - investment offers of entrepreneurs from partner regions.

As of now, entrepreneurs find it hard to access such knowledge sources, as the information is scattered across numerous, hardly accessible websites of many institutions. In addition, the language barrier discourages them from learning. A digital platform would constitute a convenient forum comprehensive information and experience exchange between local authorities and entrepreneurs and those in the business environment. In this way, regional governments could effectively support entrepreneurs wishing to develop business in partner regions by helping them establish contacts.

- We recommend establishing a database of accredited specialists who would conduct trainings and workshops on setting up and running international undertakings, as well as language courses focused on business vocabulary for entrepreneurs interested in establishing such cooperation.

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JANA PAWŁA II