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## CONCEPTS OF REGIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (20–21 CENTURIES)

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### **Abstract**

At the current stage, there is no doubt about the role of the “Three Seas” initiative in the regional schedule. However, it is worth noting that one of the impetuses for its actualization was the world confrontation that arose after Russia’s encroachments on the territory of Ukraine (the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of the war in the East of Ukraine). Today, this idea of unification of states in the space from the Baltic to the Black and Adriatic seas, as it was at its inception, is actively supported by the USA. Over the past eight years, the attitude towards this program on the part of Germany and the European Union has also changed in a positive direction. In fact, from Poland’s attempt to realize its historical Central European ambitions, the Three Seas initiative was transformed into a prototype of the new Eastern Europe as an integral part of the transatlantic community.

The interest of modern Polish politicians in the concept of “Mizhmorya” is a continuation of the tradition and political thought of Józef Piłsudski. First of all, the concept of “Mizhmorya” is closely related to his view of Poland’s foreign policy in the interwar period. However, its origins go back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there were discussions about Poland’s borders and its role in Europe after it gained independence. The main question concerned Poland’s ability to effectively resist the expansion of neighboring states – Germany and Russia.

The actualization of the “Mizhmorya” concept at the current stage and the transformation of the latter into the “Three Seas” initiative began after the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014. In its current version, the concept includes the southern and eastern vectors of integration. This is a qualitative change, since for many centuries Poland’s foreign policy was formed on the East-West axis, paying much less attention to the North-South axis. It is worth noting that the concept of “Mizhmorya”, which in its current version has turned into “Three Seas”, is not considered as an alternative for membership in the EU and NATO. At the current stage, it does not have an independent character, complementing the generally pro-Western orientation of Poland and its other participants.

In connection with the involvement of 12 countries in the “Three Seas Initiative” and the active role of Croatia, Romania and other states in it, it is losing connection with the original concept of the “Midsea”. It is becoming a format of regional cooperation within the EU, but it has quite strong foundations. Its success also depends on external factors: West-Russia relations, US activity in Central and Eastern Europe, and the difficult-to-predict future of the European Union. One can debate for a long time about the functionality and competitiveness of the new association

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in relation to other numerous regional entities, but one thing remains important: the implementation of the “Three Seas” initiative will start the process of building the energy independence of the countries of the Eastern European region from Russia.

At the summit on June 20, 2022, the countries of the “Three Seas” initiative granted Ukraine the special status of a participating partner of the association. It is worth noting that Ukraine’s membership in “Trimory” is part of our country’s path to membership in the European Union. The concept envisages the development of world trade through the creation of new European logistics corridors, therefore it is important for Ukraine to become one of the transitors along these routes.

Several areas of Ukraine’s cooperation with the participating countries of the “Three Seas” should be highlighted: the creation of the trans-European highway Via Carpathia, where Ukraine will play the role of an important logistics center; energy cooperation, Ukraine has one of the largest gas storages in the region and, using the capabilities of the Poland-Slovakia, Poland-Ukraine interconnectors, it is possible to meet the needs of all countries of the Three Seas; the export of Ukrainian electricity can help the countries of the “Three Seas” to become independent from the energy pressure of the Russian Federation; infrastructure and digitalization (countries should work on expanding checkpoints at the borders of Ukraine). Our state can support many infrastructure projects in the field of digitization and strengthen regional digital connections. So, the “Three Seas” initiative is Ukraine’s perspective to take a place on the European market and completely abandon logistical ties with the occupying country.

**Keywords:** Regional association, the Three Seas, Intermarium, Central and Eastern European countries, Three Seas Initiative

## КОНЦЕПТИ РЕГІОНАЛЬНОГО ОБ’ЄДНАННЯ КРАЇН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНО-СХІДНОЇ ЄВРОПИ (XX–XXI ст.)

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### Анотація

На сучасному етапі вже не має сумнівів в тому, яку роль у регіональному розкладі відіграє ініціатива «Тримор’я». Однак, варто зауважити, що одним із поштовхів до її актуалізації стала світова конфронтація, що виникла після зазіхань Росії на територію України (анексію Криму та розпалювання війни на Сході України). Сьогодні ця ідея об’єднання держав у просторі від Балтійського до Чорного та Адріатичного морів, як і за її виникнення, активно підтримується США. За останні вісім років у позитивний бік змінилося і ставлення до цієї програми з боку Німеччини та Європейського Союзу. По суті, із спроби реалізації Польщею її історичних центральноєвропейських амбіцій ініціатива «Тримор’я» трансформувалася в прообраз нової Східної Європи як складової частини трансатлантичного спільноти.

Інтерес сучасного польського політикуму до концепції «Міжмор’я» є продовженням традиції та політичної думки Юзефа Пілсудського. Насамперед, концепція «Міжмор’я» тісно

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пов'язана з його поглядом на зовнішню політику Польщі у міжвоєнний період. Однак її витоки сягають початку ХХ ст., коли велися дискусії про кордони Польщі та її роль у Європі після набуття нею незалежності. Основне питання стосувалося можливості Польщі ефективно чинити опір експансії сусідніх держав – Німеччини та Росії.

Актуалізація концепції «Міжмор'я» на сучасному етапі та трансформація останньої в ініціативу «Тримор'я» почалася після російської агресії в Україні в 2014 році. В актуальному варіанті концепція включає південний та східний вектори інтеграції. Це якісна зміна, оскільки багато століть зовнішня політика Польщі формувалася на осі Схід-Захід, набагато менше уваги приділяючи осі Північ-Південь. Варто зазначити, що концепція «Міжмор'я», яка у поточному варіанті перетворилася на «Тримор'я», не розглядається як альтернатива для членства в ЄС і НАТО. На сучасному етапі вона не має самостійного характеру, доповнюючи загалом прозахідну орієнтацію Польщі та інших її учасників.

У зв'язку із залученням до «Ініціативи трьох морів» 12 країн та активної ролі в ньому Хорватії, Румунії та інших держав вона втрачає зв'язок з первісною концепцією «Міжмор'я». Стає форматом регіонального співробітництва в рамках ЄС, однак має досить міцні підвалини. Її успіх залежить також від зовнішніх чинників: взаємин Захід – Росія, активності США в Центральній та Східній Європі та важко передбачуваного майбутнього Євросоюзу. Можна довго дискутувати з приводу функціональності та конкурентоспроможності нового об'єднання по відношенню до інших численних регіональних утворень, однак важливим залишається одне: реалізація ініціативи «Тримор'я» запустить процес побудови енергетичної незалежності країн східноєвропейського регіону від Росії.

На саміті 20 червня 2022 року країни ініціативи «Тримор'я» надали Україні особливого статусу партнера-учасника об'єднання. Варто зазначити, що членство України у «Тримор'ї» – це частина шляху нашої держави до членства у Європейському Союзі. Концепція передбачає розвиток світової торгівлі шляхом створення нових європейських логістичних коридорів, тому Україні важливо стати одним із транзитерів цими шляхами.

Слід виділити декілька напрямків співпраці України з країнами-учасницями «Тримор'я»: створення трансєвропейської автомагістралі Via Carpathia, де Україна буде відіграти роль важливого логістичного центру; енергетична співпраця, Україна має одні з найбільших сховищ газу в регіоні і, використовуючи можливості інтерконекторів Польща – Словаччина, Польща – Україна, можливо задовольнити потреби всіх країн Тримор'я; експорт української електроенергії може допомогти країнам «Тримор'я» стати незалежним від енергетичного тиску РФ; інфраструктура та діджиталізація (країни мають працювати над розширенням пунктів пропуску на кордонах України). Наша держава може надати підтримку багатьом інфраструктурним проектам у галузі діджиталізації та посилити регіональні цифрові зв'язки. Отож, ініціатива «Тримор'я» – це перспектива України зайняти місце на європейському ринку і повністю відмовитися від логістичних зв'язків з країною-окупантом.

**Ключові слова:** Регіональне об'єднання, Тримор'я, Міжмор'я, країни Центрально-Східної Європи, Ініціативи трьох морів

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**Problem statement.** The transformations that took place in Europe at the turn of the 20–21 centuries played an important role and became pivotal in its history. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new countries on the political stage, which pursued a pro-Western development path, led to the “renewal” of European institutional structures and stimulated the formation of a new system of international relations.

In the context of radical changes in the European Union and intensified globalization worldwide, regional security and local associations begin to play an important role. Currently, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the unification of Central and Eastern European countries becomes an even more relevant prospect. However, there are numerous concepts of uniting the Central-Eastern region, which have been formed throughout the twentieth century.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Considering the numerous ideas of uniting the Central and Eastern European countries, it is difficult to understand why, until now, such concepts of regional association have not been implemented. In this study, we will attempt to analyze the aforementioned concepts and explore the prospects for their implementation in the future.

The historiographical basis in the context of the formulated topic is reflected in the works of numerous Ukrainian and foreign researchers, including Avtushenko I., Asaturov S., Vidnyansky S., Hnyazdovsky M., Demchyshak R., Magda Y., Potulski Y., Stepnevsky T. and others.

**Main thesis statement.** The formation of the concept of “Intermarium” took place in the aftermath of the First World War when Central and Eastern Europe were in a state of crisis. Poland, as a country that had experienced difficult periods in its history, was ready to take on a leadership role in creating a union that would contribute to the restoration and strengthening of the region. At that time, this idea was being developed in research as a component of Polish diplomatic history and was part of the contemporary Polish political thinking. It should be noted that this idea is an integral part of Polish geopolitical tradition.

The origins of this project date back to the Middle Ages when the Jagiellonian concept emerged, uniting four countries under the rule of a single dynasty: Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, and Lithuania in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the “Intermarium” project is a long-term idea based on geopolitical factors that affect this subregion. Modern Polish political thought associates the integration project with J. Piłsudski’s idea of creating a confederation with territories such as Poland, the Baltic countries, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Belarus, and Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

Due to its location between Russia and Germany, J. Piłsudski believed that Poland’s return to the status it had lost as a result of partitions was possible through the implementation of two major concepts: the Promethean plan, which aimed to weaken Russia as a country that posed a threat to all the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe,

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<sup>1</sup> Міщук В. Національні інтереси та альтернативні інтеграційні проекти держав Центральної Європи в межах ЄС у сучасний період. *Науково-теоретичний альманах «Грані»*. 2021. № 24. С. 146.

and the “Intermarium” idea, a plan to unite the nations living between Russia and Germany. In both concepts, Ukraine played a crucial role.

Already in 1920, J. Piłsudski abandoned his concept of a federative Central and Eastern Europe by signing the Riga Agreement, which led to the division of Belarus and Ukraine between Poland and the Soviet Union. After that, the idea of creating a bloc of third forces between Western Europe and Russia, known as the “Intermarium”, emerged following the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire according to the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. However, the Warsaw Treaty of May 1922, which was the last serious effort by Polish diplomacy to create the “Intermarium”, was never ratified<sup>2</sup>.

After J. Piłsudski's death in 1935, Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck continued to develop the “Intermarium” plans by proposing the creation of the “Third Europe” in the late 1930s, a union between Poland, Romania, and Hungary. The initial stage of forming the bloc involved establishing a common border between Poland and Hungary through Carpathian Ukraine and improving relations between Poland and Romania. However, Germany categorically rejected the idea of creating the bloc and Italy, which was not interested, did not help in lobbying for the “Third Europe” project in Berlin. Hungary and Yugoslavia were completely dependent on Germany's economy and were unable to make political decisions contrary to their interests. Unfortunately, the only achievement was the conclusion of the Polish-Romanian alliance. Therefore, for Poland to realize the “Intermarium” concept, it needed to have reliable military and economic potential<sup>3</sup>.

During the interwar period, the camps of Piłsudski and Endeks played the role of antagonists in many important issues, including the future of “Intermarium” and Ukraine within it. However, Adam Doboszynski, a representative of the young Endeks, expressed the idea of creating a “great” nation in the early 1940s, which would include the French, English, Germans, and Russians. He advocated statism and supported the idea of internal imperial tolerance between ethnic groups, which would reduce the differences between Poles and Ukrainians. This vision seemed promising as a theoretical basis for uniting Poles and Ukrainians on the platform of “Intermarium”<sup>4</sup>.

After World War II, the question of the necessity of uniting the nations of Europe into a single entity became particularly relevant. This was necessary to organize intergovernmental relations in a way that would ensure stability and security in the region and to overcome the crisis caused by two world wars as quickly and efficiently as possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Морозова О. Ідея Міжмор'я та її реалізація в середовищі паризької «Культури». *Ольвійський форум – 2022: стратегії країн Причорноморського регіону в геополітичному просторі*: XVI Міжнар. наук. конф. 21 червня 2022 р., м. Николаїв: програма та тези. Чорном. нац. ун-т ім. Петра Могили. 2022. С. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Бойко Т., Галайко Б., Сиротюк Ю. Місія України та національні інтереси в глобалізованому світі: візія націоналістів. *Гяті Бандерівські читання: збірник матеріалів* (9 лютого 2018 р., м. Київ). Київ-Львів: Недержавний аналітичний центр «УССД» - Вид. «Астролябія», 2018. С. 313.

<sup>4</sup> Афанасьев І.Ю. Україна в польських концепціях «Міжмор'я»: 1921-1946 рр. Україна в польських концепціях Міжмор'я: 1921-1946 рр. *Україна в системі змін парадигми світопорядку XX-XXI століть*: тези Міжнародної науково-практичної конференції, 19 березня 2015 р. С. 58.

Already during the interwar period, A. Briand and R. Coudenhove-Kalergi and others expressed the first thoughts on the integration of Europe into a common union<sup>5</sup>.

After World War II, like many other countries in Eastern Europe, Poland found itself under Soviet occupation. Some politicians, such as General V. Sikorski, continued to support the idea of “Intermarium” as a prospective plan for the future. The government in exile, led by V. Sikorski, held negotiations with Greek, Yugoslavian, and Czechoslovak colleagues during World War II, discussing aspects of the post-war order.

After the end of World War II, the main task became limiting the influence of the Soviet Union on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The United States was actively involved in implementing this plan. The National Security Council of the United States was established in 1947 and in March 1948, it made a decision to coordinate a campaign supporting resistance movements in the countries of the region.

The continuity of existence of organizations and personal inheritance was initiated by the anti-Soviet movement during World War II, prolonged by anti-communists during the Cold War, and now is preserved in the minds of American conservatives, playing an important role in modern efforts to revive “Intermarium”. One of the well-known projects is the creation of a “New Europe” with Poland as the leader of a group of states united by a common geopolitical space, including the idea of “Intermarium” and Poland’s missionary activity in Ukraine and Lithuania.

The uncertainty regarding the relationship between the countries and peoples residing in the geographical center of Europe is determined by economic, cultural, religious, and political characteristics. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe were set apart from the European context due to their cultural and historical peculiarities. These states, which historically belonged to empires, found themselves located between major powers after the world wars and served as a watershed between the West and Eastern Europe, which was associated with Soviet Russia. With the weakening of the political center, where a created power vertical was maintained, the Eastern European countries began to seek a new support. In this situation, the only option for self-preservation for them was to combine with Western structures, which gained momentum, and the process of convergence with them started actively since the late 1980s.

However, after the start of Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014 (annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine) and the sanctions imposed on it, Russia’s influence in the Eastern European region significantly diminished and was limited to historical and geographical dependence on energy resources<sup>6</sup>. The aggressive actions of Russia on the territory of sovereign neighboring states led the Eastern European countries to solidify their pro-American views and reorient towards Western Europe. In addition,

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<sup>5</sup>Ткач Б.А. Ідея об’єднаної Європи у поглядах Альтьєро Спінееллі. *«Дні науки філософського факультету – 2017» (25-26 квітня 2017 р.): матеріали доповідей та виступів*. К.: Видавничо-поліграфічний центр «Київський університет», 2017. Ч. 7. С. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Михтуненко В. Ініціатива «Тримор’я» як стратегічний проєкт «нової» Європи. *Консенсус*. 2022. № 3. С. 85.

discredited international security agreements and the work of certain international organizations, such as the OSCE, contributed to this. The war in Ukraine demonstrates the actual inability to provide any security through these instruments.

As for Poland, the main generator of the idea of uniting Eastern Europe, after the liberal rule in the years 2007–2015, the parliamentary majority and the presidency were won by the national-conservative “Law and Justice” party. This party demanded the strengthening of Poland’s position in the EU and relations with other countries while maintaining close ties with the United States. It was during this time that thinking in terms of political realism, spheres of influence, and geopolitical power was revived. However, compared to the period of 2005–2007, “Law and Justice” abandoned attempts to confront Russia and create a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Particularly after 2014, it seemed that the Polish authorities had accepted that Russia remained the dominant force in the post-Soviet space. The politicians of “Law and Justice” expressed the opinion that in the current format of the EU, which is dominated by Germany, it harms the interests of other members.

Overall, the concept of “Intermarium” was revived by Andrzej Duda, who came to power in Poland in 2015. For the first time in many years, a high-ranking politician directly referred to the concept of “Intermarium”, stating that the turbulent situation in the world and within the EU compels the countries of Eastern Europe, which have a common historical experience, economic and cultural ties, to closely cooperate. Andrzej Duda believed that the cooperation of Eastern European countries is necessary for them to effectively pursue their interests within the EU. Some countries are re-establishing zones of influence or forming regional coalitions (such as Scandinavia and the Benelux), or completely withdrawing from integration processes (United Kingdom). This means that national and regional interests begin to outweigh pan-European interests. The institutionalization of the “Intermarium” concept would correspond to this logic. It would allow for the realization of the conservatives’ thesis on the necessity of building a “New Europe” instead of a supranational superstate. Strengthening cooperation among countries close to each other would be the means to achieve this goal.

In reality, the modern concept of “Intermarium” is almost entirely oriented towards the East. As a result of the hostilities in Ukraine, it becomes clear that geopolitical cooperation with the majority of the former Soviet countries (and even Belarus, in the event of a political change) is necessary. In such a situation, the southern vector of the concept, which is now called “Three Seas” due to the participation of countries located near the Adriatic Sea, is actively developing<sup>7</sup>.

The first step towards actualizing the “Three Seas” concept was taken in 2015 through the initiative of the presidents of Poland, Andrzej Duda, and Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. In 2016, the first summit of twelve states took place in Dubrovnik with the aim of creating the “Three Seas Initiative”. The leadership of EU member states from

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<sup>7</sup> Stępniewski T. Inicjatywa Trójmorza: uwarunkowania geopolityczne i nowy model regionalnej współpracy. *Studia Europejskie*. 2018. № 2. S. 33–43.

Estonia to Croatia and Bulgaria was invited to participate in the summit. Only Austria from the “old” EU member states was invited. Officially, the “Three Seas” is an economic and infrastructure projects<sup>8</sup>.

Projects planned within the framework of the “Three Seas Initiative” are of large scale (Poland–Croatia gas pipeline, Lithuania–Greece highway) and their implementation will take several years. However, the assessment of project success will only be possible after their completion. The concept of the “Three Seas Initiative” primarily focuses on economic and infrastructure goals. Their achievement and success depend on the political will of individual participating countries as well as external factors. The countries involved in the “Three Seas Initiative” are to varying degrees dependent on external forces (the European Union, NATO, and the United States), which requires them to play certain roles but also provides broad opportunities to exercise sovereign rights, particularly in the field of foreign policy.

During the initial summits of the participating countries, ways to achieve the set goals were outlined, including<sup>9</sup>:

- 1) economic growth of the region’s GDP through increased activity in the service sector and trade, both within the Eastern European region and in relations with neighboring countries (which opens up significant prospects for Ukraine);
- 2) increased interest from foreign investors;
- 3) establishment of a comprehensive energy security system;
- 4) implementation of geopolitical strategies through strengthening the unity of the “Three Seas Initiative” countries;
- 5) implementation of modern advancements in digital technologies through targeted investment, significant improvement in information exchange and utilization;
- 6) development of projects addressing climate change by reducing carbon emissions through the development of modern energy infrastructure.

Among the external actors of international relations, the United States is primarily interested in this concept as the integration of the Eastern European region and the creation of a unified collective security system there are key objectives for their policy of restraining Russia. Considering the above, Germany, which historically designed its own geopolitical structure for this territory, may oppose the integration of Eastern European countries. Discrepancies between Germany and Poland regarding the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, climate neutrality, EU institutional reform, and the role of the United States in Europe may affect Germany’s policy toward the “Three Seas Initiative”.

To sum up, it is worth noting that the development of the geopolitical strategy of the “Three Seas Initiative” directly depends on the conformity of the concept to the geopolitical

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<sup>8</sup> Загребельний І. Міжмор’я: (майже) втрачений шанс. Київ: ФОП Халіков, 2019. С. 202.

<sup>9</sup> Ковбатиюк М.В., Ковбатиюк Г.О. Ініціатива Трьох Морів як ефективний шлях розвитку міжнародного економічного співробітництва. *Транспорт та логістика: сучасні виклики та перспективи розвитку*: матеріали Міжн. наук–практ. конф., м. Одеса, 18 листопада 2021 р. Одеса: ДУ ІРЕЕД НАН України, 2021. С. 121.

plans of the participating countries. After implementing the initiatives within the project, the countries involved in the “Three Seas Initiative” should achieve a high level of regional cooperation, intensify cooperation with partner countries and the European Union as a whole, thereby ensuring systematic deepening of European integration.

The successful implementation of the “Three Seas Initiative” may be influenced by Poland’s gradual alienation from the European Union. This fact motivates the current Polish government to create alternative projects, but it may also push other EU members away from them. The further course of events will also be determined by the internal political dynamics of the project participants. Changes in ruling parties in individual countries can significantly impact their foreign policy priorities. For example, the victory of liberal parties in Poland would bring about a “softening” of positions towards the European Union and attempts to enhance cooperation with the “core of old Europe”, namely Germany and France. Therefore, any fluctuations in the political situation can lead to a decline in interest in the regional cooperation format represented by the “Three Seas Initiative”.

However, Russia’s openly expansionist policy and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine convince us that the countries of Eastern Europe will only intensify the process of creating a regional security system by involving Ukraine in it. Confirmation of this thesis can be seen in Ukraine being granted partner-participant status in the “Intermarium” initiative in June 2022.

**Conclusions.** Ukraine’s approximation to “Intermarium” has several advantages for integration. Firstly, it provides another channel of cooperation through projects with its eastern neighbor, which aspires to join the EU. Ukraine is part of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which includes the Odessa region, and more platforms like this are needed. Secondly, Kyiv would bring invaluable “deep knowledge” about the region, its complexities, and risks that few possess. Thirdly, it would give “Intermarium” a stronger Black Sea character, which some participating countries (such as Romania) would likely welcome. Finally, it is strange to discuss energy projects and security, which are among the priority investment areas, without the involvement of Kyiv. The political context makes Ukraine a likely supporter of the Common Energy Policy rather than separate initiatives that contradict it, thus becoming a factor of discipline and convergence within the Union.

Therefore, summarizing all the aforementioned, we can conclude that any project of uniting Eastern Europe requires years of painstaking diplomatic and economic work on multiple fronts by several countries simultaneously. If the political elites of the main potential participant countries can reach an agreement and carry out this work with the perspective of creating the project, it can become one of the most promising projects of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, revitalizing and strengthening a united Europe. However, it requires bold and unconventional steps from many countries. If the political elites of Eastern European countries are not ready for such work, each country will have to seek integration and build a security space around itself using old mechanisms that have persisted since the time of the bipolar system of international relations. Nevertheless, the emergence of such an

initiative already indicates a certain structuring of the political space in Central and Eastern Europe.

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