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# VISIONS OF POLISH- LITHUANIAN REGIONAL COOPERATION – ARE THEY (IN)COMPATIBLE?

Policy Paper

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## *Summary*

Lithuania and Poland have deep and intensive bilateral relations. It can be said that the strategic partnership between Lithuania and Poland is no longer a matter that exists only in the rhetoric and documents of politicians. However, changes in the international environment and in Poland's domestic politics lead to concerns about the sustainability of the state of these relations and raise the question how further they can be strengthened. Lithuania and Poland work closely in bilateral and multilateral formats in the European Union and NATO. However, opportunities to strengthen Lithuania's and Poland's relations through regional cooperation still remain untapped: except for the Eastern Partnership, Lithuania and Poland do not work closely in any regional cooperation format.



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Because of their geographical location and size, Lithuania and Poland have different visions and priorities regarding regional cooperation. However, these visions are not incompatible. The strategic partnership between Lithuania and Poland could be elevated to a new level if Lithuania becomes more actively involved in the Three Seas Initiative and finds new forms of developing relations between Poland and the Baltic and Nordic countries.

## Introduction

Today's political relations between Lithuania and Poland have reached probably the best state after the accession of both countries to the European Union (EU) and NATO. Regular meetings of politicians and diplomats of both countries and visits of leaders take place, close cooperation in the fields of military, energy, transport, and foreign policy is developed, especially in dealing with the issues of the Eastern Neighbourhood, and joint infrastructure projects are implemented. It can be said that the strategic partnership between Lithuania and Poland is no longer just empty rhetoric that exists in the speeches of politicians and institutional strategic documents. The best example of this are the joint meetings of the governments of Lithuania and Poland that have already been held twice<sup>1</sup> and the functioning Consultative Committee of the Presidents of Lithuania and Poland.

On the other hand, the current stage in Lithuanian–Polish relations is not unprecedented. It is possible to recall the strategic partnership that was developed in 2005–2007 and was ceased due to unresolved issues of national minorities and a change of government in Poland. Progress in resolving the issues of national minorities is still slow, and it is more likely for the opposition to come to power than for the Law and Justice Party to form a ruling majority after the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland.<sup>2</sup> Although the joint projects

of Lithuania and Poland that have gained momentum and the deepening integration of countries will encourage politicians of both countries to continue cooperation, there is still a significant risk that these relations may turn for the worse and trust between Lithuania and Poland will weaken.

New issues on the international political agenda mount an even greater challenge to Lithuania's and Poland's relations. Such issues as Lithuania's integration into the common European energy market, the blockade of the Astravyets (Belarusian) nuclear power plant, green energy transformation, political crisis in Belarus, Russia's deterrence, China's expansion, enlargement of Euro–Atlantic institutions and the management of migration cannot be solved solely by close cooperation between Lithuania and Poland. They need a broader coalition of states.

Both Lithuanian and Polish politicians believed that these limitations of bilateral cooperation would be supplanted by membership in the EU and NATO and the foreign and security policy instruments provided by these organisations. However, developments in recent years have shown that these formats also have their drawbacks. Both the EU and NATO are complex bodies of multilateral diplomacy, in which decisions are reached by consensus and which do not always meet Lithuania's in-

terests. For example, the EU's Eastern Partnership programme has to compete for political and financial support with other countries' aspiration to develop the Southern Neighbourhood or expansion into the Western Balkans.

Over the last five years, both Lithuania and Poland have found a way to complement cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral EU and NATO levels by forming regional cooperation platforms. In addition to the traditional Visegrád Four (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) or the Baltic Council, new formats have emerged: Three Seas Initiative, Bucharest Nine, and Lublin Triangle. It can be said that Lithuania and Poland have joined in this way the common trend of developing regional cooperation and more active coalition building after the Lisbon Treaty came into force.

This situation encourages to assess how the new regional cooperation platforms can become an additional factor strengthening the Lithuania's and Poland's strategic partnership, help to protect the common interests of both countries and ensure its continuity irrespective of changes in domestic politics. In order to find the answer, it is necessary to compare Lithuania's and Poland's visions of regional cooperation and the goals set in them. To do so, this analysis will define in which regions, in what ways and for what purposes Poland and Lithuania are developing cooperation. The comparison of Poland's and Lithuania's visions of regional cooperation will assess the extent to which they are compatible and provide recommendations on how to strengthen the actions of Lithuania and Poland in joint regional cooperation platforms.

## 1 Poland – regional cooperation is more than just security

Poland can be considered a middle power in Europe. It is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy and the 5<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the EU<sup>3</sup>, which regularly allocates at least 2% of its GDP on national defence. According to David R. Mares, middle powers can be defined as states that can affect the [international] system together with a few smaller allies.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, for Poland regional cooperation serves not only to ensure security, but also to strengthen its influence both throughout the region and in the EU and NATO.

### *Eastern Partnership countries*

So far, the Eastern Partnership programme is a key field for Poland's regional influence and the spread of its interests outside the EU and NATO. Poland anticipates that in the long-run deeper and closer ties between the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU will lead those states towards EU membership. This should enhance security in Poland's neighbourhood, reduce Russia's influence in the region, and contribute to the well-being of Poland's eastern and southern voivodships.

However, for a long time now there is a prevailing opinion among both Polish experts and politicians that the Eastern Partnership programme has exhausted and needs reform. The programme is seriously challenged by stagnant reforms in the countries that have signed association agreements with the EU (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). In addition, Poland emphasises the problem of economic stagnation in the Eastern Partnership countries.<sup>5</sup> There is still a lack of concrete ideas and concepts but some clues of what Poland's position on the reform of the Eastern Partnership might look like can be found in the report on the Eastern Partnership written by Jakub Benedyczak,

Anna Maria Dyner, Lidia Gibadło, Elżbieta Kaca, Jakub Pieńkowski, and Daniel Szeligowski from the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

According to the authors, the Eastern Partnership should increase funding for key infrastructure projects, improve the absorption of investment funds, combat disinformation, strengthen strategic communication, combat hybrid threats, support reforms important for the societies of the Eastern Partnership countries, especially in the digital market, promote mobility of the people, especially youth, and strengthen non-governmental organisations. In addition, the Eastern Partnership must provide for a special offer for associated countries of the programme. This would include the creation of a new political format linking Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and EU countries. This could take place at the level of foreign ministers. The Eastern Partnership programme should also deepen cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova as well as develop instruments to help these countries better fulfil the free trade agreements with the EU.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the report was published in 2019; therefore, its recommendations are in fact no longer applicable to Belarus.

The report of the Polish Institute of International Affairs on the Eastern Partnership also highlights another problem: insufficient support from Western countries, especially Germany, for the expansion of the programme.<sup>7</sup> A relatively new initiative of the Lublin Triangle, which unites Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, comes as a response to this challenge. The cooperation plan signed by the foreign ministers of all the three countries in July 2021 provides for joint trilateral projects in the fields of politics, multilateral diplomacy, defence, cyber and energy security, infrastructure, economics, medicine, culture, non-governmental organisations, and heritage preservation.<sup>8</sup> From Poland's perspective, the Lublin Triangle could

become a platform through which Ukraine's aspirations to integrate into the EU and NATO can be further supported.<sup>9</sup>

### *Three Seas Initiative*

For Poland, the most serious format of regional cooperation within the EU is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which consists of states whose territories lie between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, and Austria. The initiators of this cooperation platform are Poland and Croatia. However, the first discussions on such a platform started in 2012–2013 between Polish business, US think tanks, and the Polish government. The primary idea of the platform is to deepen relations between the 3SI countries, especially in the fields of energy, transport and digitalisation. For this purpose, the Three Seas International Investment Fund has been created, which should finance 3SI projects and to which 9 members of the initiative have contributed financially. The relations and integration between the countries of Central Europe are said to be not as advanced as those between the countries of Western Europe. The main reason for this is the energy and transport infrastructure inherited from communist times, which connects the West with the East and was designed to ensure Moscow's dominance in the region, but not relations between those countries.<sup>10</sup>

It is believed that greater integration between the 3SI countries would promote their economic relations, accelerate their economic growth, and reduce their gap to Western Europe. Not only would this improve the economic well-being of 3SI citizens, but the movement of goods, services, people across open borders and, consequently, growing common benefits would allow them to feel better the advantages of EU membership. Therefore, Poland presents

the 3SI as an attempt to strengthen the EU in the region: this should reduce the differences between Central and Western Europe, which would eventually reduce disagreements between these countries. This is why Poland and other countries active in the 3SI, for example, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bulgaria, have made significant efforts to include in the 3SI format the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Germany which feared that the 3SI could be directed against the EU. For the same reasons, Ukraine or the non-EU countries of the Western Balkans were not included in the 3SI.<sup>11</sup>

Poland itself emphasises that this project is technocratic and has no geopolitical connotations. In a sense, this project marks a change in the thinking of Polish policy-makers: instead of generating big visions for the creation of a Central European political bloc (such as the revival of the interwar concept of Intermarium), which would become a counterbalance Russia and major European states but would likely to collapse quickly because of the extremely incompatible interests of the countries, it is worth working with the region “from the bottom”. After establishing more dense economic, energy, transport and digital connections between the countries of the region, in 10–15 years, it may be possible to return to the talks of building a regional bloc in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, the claims that the 3SI initiative has no political connotations are not entirely correct. First, the US is heavily involved in the 3SI. Not only Poland and Croatia, but also the Atlantic Council, a US-based think tank, worked on the 3SI concept.<sup>12</sup> The US sees the 3SI initiative as a way to maintain close relations with the EU, be involved in its politics and strengthen the transatlantic alliance, which becomes particularly relevant in the context of Brexit. The initiative was particularly supported by

the Donald Trump administration. In addition, the US sees an opportunity for its companies to profit, for example, by engaging in various digital projects, and in the energy sector in particular, as one of the objectives of the 3SI initiative is the creation of a common energy market, in which a major role is envisaged for the imports of liquefied gas and oil from the US.

Second, deepening integration between the 3SI countries with support from the US, the European Commission and other key Western European states as well as the resulting economic benefits for the members of the 3SI initiative should become a counterweight to Russian and Chinese capital. Some US strategists predict that the 3SI could eventually turn into an alternative to the 16+1 cooperation platform between China and Central Europe. This is also important in the context of the Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline: the development of energy connections between the 3SI countries could offset the negative effects of the pipeline.<sup>13</sup> In its political statements the administration of the current US President, Joe Biden, continues to express support for the 3SI initiative but still refrains from more concrete actions, for example, contributing financially to the Three Seas International Investment Fund.<sup>14</sup> However, for the above reasons, regarding in particular the US priority to offset China’s growing influence, the US can be expected to continue to support the 3SI initiative.

Third, the 3SI initiative has a very clear military dimension. Infrastructure projects such as Via Carpathia, Via Baltica, Rail Baltica, and the Central Communication Port in Poland would be used by NATO troops, especially the US, and would allow for the practical implementation of the idea of a “military Schengen area” that is widely discussed by US military representatives.<sup>15</sup> This would allow US and NATO armies to move more efficiently between different theatres of operations, for example, between the Baltic and Black Seas, which is

particularly important given the fact that the US has no plans to deploy troops on a permanent basis in the region. This is an additional reason for placing particular emphasis on the development of North–South connections in the 3SI initiative. The military dimension of the 3SI is also emphasised by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>16</sup>

### *Visegrad Four*

Another format for regional cooperation within the EU that is important for Poland is the Visegrad Four (V4), which includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The V4 states have a tradition of regular meetings, especially before the Council of Europe meetings, have set up a battlegroup and the Visegrad Fund. Both the previous Civic Platform and the current Law and Justice governments had high expectations for the V4 and hoped to develop it into a stable alliance of countries that could influence decisions at EU level. However, these hopes have not been fulfilled. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia view Russia as a considerably smaller threat, they do not prioritise relations with Ukraine, particularly its European integration, and they are much less inclined to conflict with Germany. Therefore, today the V4 in Poland is a more of a tool for domestic politics to show that the country is not isolated in Europe and sometimes to block unfavourable decisions at the EU level, such as the decision on the relocation of migrants. Poland's disagreements with the Czech Republic over the operation of a coal mine in Turów can be seen as a recent symbol of the failure of the V4 regional cooperation format.<sup>17</sup>

### *Bucharest Nine*

Finally, it is worth mentioning another format of regional cooperation important for Poland. This is the Bucharest Nine (B9), which functions within NATO and includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The B9 has no formal structures. It is an informal diplomatic forum whose members meet before each NATO summit to coordinate their positions. The aim is to reach a common position on further NATO actions in the eastern flank and to bring such a position to the NATO summit itself. This must strengthen the negotiating power of Poland and other B9 states both in negotiating additional security guarantees with the US and in counterbalancing the desire of France, Germany, Italy or other NATO members to redirect NATO resources to other areas or restore dialogue with Russia.

### *Baltic Sea cooperation formats*

Poland also participates in regional cooperation platforms that unite the countries around the Baltic Sea. First, is the cooperation platform for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which includes the Baltic Sea states within the EU. Second, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, which includes all the Baltic Sea states as well as Iceland and Norway. However, none of these formats is a priority in Poland's foreign policy and Poland does not spare them significant resources and attention.

## 2 Lithuania's regional cooperation: security first

Unlike Poland, Lithuania can be considered a small state. According to the same David R. Mares, these are states that cannot influence the system unless in an alliance where its influence is very marginal,<sup>18</sup> or those possibilities are very limited. In addition, small states are characterised by a shelter strategy, where they seek support from other major states and international organisations to ensure their security and survival.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the goals set by Lithuania for regional cooperation must first of all enhance its security, while increasing Lithuania's influence ranks lower in the list of priorities.

The main regional cooperation platform for Lithuania outside the EU is the Eastern Partnership programme. For Lithuania, the goal of the Eastern Partnership is to bring Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as close as possible to the EU, hoping that by 2027 they will acquire the status of candidate countries.<sup>20</sup> In this way, Lithuania hopes to expand its security zone to the East, counterweight Russia's influence in the region and open new opportunities for economic, political and cultural cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries and thus contribute to Lithuania's economic well-being.

Similarly to Poland, Lithuania divides the Eastern Partnership countries into "promising" ones, i.e. those that show a willingness to cooperate with the EU – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and "non-promising" ones that are not interested in European integration – Azerbaijan and Belarus. In recent months Lithuania has also started to develop more actively relations with Armenia, where Vilnius sees a desire to approach Europe. Although Lithuania has no clear ideas on how the Eastern Partnership could further function in the cases of Be-

larus and Azerbaijan, in the context of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the Eastern Partnership could be revived by more active participation of the Nordic countries and Germany.<sup>21</sup>

Another important platform for regional cooperation is the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) format. It is an informal structure that unites Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. It is worth noting that the EU NB8 members regularly meet before EU summits to discuss their common positions and the agendas of the meetings.<sup>22</sup> Lithuania also participates in a narrower format of regional cooperation, which includes Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Baltic Council of Ministers and the Baltic Assembly play a key role in this format.

These platforms of cooperation with the Baltic and Nordic countries should perform two functions. First, they help to solve problematic issues in the region and enhance Lithuania's integration with Western Europe. The synchronisation of the Baltic electricity networks with the Western European ones and the creation of a common energy market are particularly important priorities. The second function is the coordination of positions on foreign policy issues, especially at the EU level. In this way, Lithuania hopes to extend the coalition of states, which would support its position on issues of importance, especially the policy towards Russia and support for the Eastern Partnership. However, over the last few years, the limits of these cooperation platforms have become apparent: they have not contributed to reducing the differences between the countries or finding a common, compromise position. For example, Lithuania finds it very difficult to persuade Latvia and Estonia to block access to the Baltic market for the electricity produced at the Astravyets nuclear power plant. Also, the countries cannot reach agreement over the administration of the Rail

Baltica project for a long time. Despite Lithuania's hopes, Sweden, Denmark and Finland do not manifest a desire to actively engage in the Eastern Partnership programme or to develop relations with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

In this context it is worth noting that Lithuania participates in the format of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Despite the emphasis placed on the Nordic direction in the rhetoric of Lithuanian politicians and strategic documents, Lithuania does not pay much attention to this cooperation platform. Lithuania is also a member of the Council of the Baltic Sea States but does not treat it as a priority. One of the reasons may be Russia's membership in the Council. Lithuanian politicians are convinced that no cooperation with Russia in a multilateral format can be fruitful.

Lithuania also belongs to the B9 format. The country participates at the B9 summits but does not show any greater initiative in it and does not undertake to organise meetings within this framework. This could be explained by the fact that Lithuania does not see (or does not want to see) its interests in forming a connection between the Baltic Sea and Black Sea theatres. It is more inclined to treat the Baltic States and Poland as forming NATO's eastern flank and to view Bulgaria and Romania as NATO's southern flank. Meanwhile, B9 cooperation is based on the assumption that all members of the format form NATO's eastern flank.

Lithuania also participates in the 3SI. Although the Seimas of Lithuania emphasised the importance of the 3SI<sup>23</sup>, the Lithuanian government has so far maintained a reserved position. It did not oppose the inclusion of Rail Baltica and Via Baltica under the 3SI banner and contributed to the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. On the other hand, Lithuania does not show initiative and does not organise meetings in the 3SI format. The only more prominent new project initiated by Lithuania

in the framework of the 3SI is the integration of 5G connections into the transport corridors with Poland, Latvia, and Estonia.<sup>24</sup>

Lithuania's lack of enthusiasm is explained by the fact that so far the country does not see any obvious benefits from this format. For example, 7 of the 8 priority projects in which Lithuania participates were started before the establishment of the 3SI and only later were reformulated as part of this initiative.<sup>25</sup> Also, for now there have been no major new infrastructure projects initiated within the framework of the 3SI, which would include Lithuania. Added to this is Lithuania's uncertainty about the future of the 3SI: out of 90 projects, only 2 have been completed, work is underway in 15, significant progress has been made in 15, and 58 projects have only been registered.<sup>26</sup>

### 3 Similarities and differences between Lithuania and Poland's visions of regional cooperation

Lithuania and Poland belong to several regional cooperation platforms: Eastern Partnership, Lublin Triangle, 3SI, and B9. It is worth noting that Polish analysts point to the deteriorating security situation in the region and see regional cooperation formats as an opportunity to offset these negative trends. Sławomir Dębski, head of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, notes that after Brexit, the will of Germany and France to impose their vision of the future and integration of the EU on the rest of the community has strengthened. The aspiration of these countries to eliminate the right of veto in adopting EU foreign policy and defence decisions is particularly dangerous. This would, in principle, allow Germany and France to take control over the entire foreign and defence pol-

icy of the EU and to conduct separate negotiations with Russia, ignoring the interests of Central European countries. Therefore, according to Dębski, the countries between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas must cooperate to offset this asymmetry of power. Poland and other states of the Central European region should develop European defence capabilities, but this should complement rather than compete with the existing NATO structures.<sup>27</sup>

Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski, a member of the Political Cabinet of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs and the National Council of Development by the President of Poland, paints a gloomier picture. He says that competition with China has become a priority for the US and, consequently, it seeks to lessen confrontation on other fronts and redeploy resources from them to the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. Therefore, according to Żurawski vel Grajewski, the US has decided to entrust Germany with providing security for the region and is trying to reset relations with Russia. According to him, this manoeuvre will fail: Germany lacks capacities and public support to pursue an active defence policy in the region, and Russia will treat such US moves as evidence of the West's weakness. Sooner or later, the Biden administration will realise that the strategy they have chosen is unrealistic and will go back to the previous policy: to actively cooperate with Central European countries and ensure that Russia is adequately deterred. Żurawski vel Grajewski claims that before this happens, Poland needs to develop cooperation in regional formats: the B9, 3SI, V4, Lublin Triangle, Poland–Romania–Turkey and Poland–Ukraine–Turkey trilateral formats. An important component could be the interaction in the defence industry by countries from all regional cooperation formats at least between Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, with opening the possibility to include Ukraine

and Turkey. In this context, Mr Żurawski vel Grajewski spots an opportunity to develop cooperation with the Scandinavian countries.<sup>28</sup>

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs perceives the situation in a similar way. The Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2017–2021 published by the Ministry states that Europe will not be the only region where the US will be involved in providing security. This will inevitably affect the security of Poland.<sup>29</sup> Cooperation in regional formats, especially with Romania, the V4, the Baltic and Nordic countries, and in pursuing an active Eastern policy are distinguished as one of the ways to offset these negative trends.<sup>30</sup> The need to develop cooperation between the Polish and Scandinavian defence industries is also emphasised.<sup>31</sup>

So, Poland sees a deteriorating security situation in the region and, similarly to Lithuania, has recently focused more on security than on increasing influence while developing regional cooperation. Despite this similarity, there are a number of differences between Poland and Lithuania in setting priorities and allocating resources to different initiatives.

It can be said that Lithuania and Poland share essentially identical views on the Eastern Partnership. Both countries give it high priority and see it as an opportunity to strengthen their security. It is worth emphasising that both Lithuania and Poland understand that the Eastern Partnership can live through various stages and that both financial and political support for the Eastern Partnership at the EU level can fluctuate. This is why Lithuania and Poland see the need to develop additional formats, such as the Lublin Triangle, that could act as an alternative catalyser of European integration for the Eastern Partnership countries.

Within the EU framework there are different visions of regional cooperation. Poland pays most attention to the countries between Western and Eastern Europe and the 3SI initiative plays a key role here. As a middle power, Poland can take care of its security through NATO and by developing a strategic partnership with the US. Therefore, the 3SI is designed to reduce Poland's economic, infrastructural and technological gap to Western Europe and, in the long-run to strengthen its ability to influence EU policies.

Lithuania is focused on the Baltic Sea region. These differences are caused by the different geographical location and size of the countries. It is important for Lithuania to develop cooperation with the Baltic states in order to resolve practical obstacles to integration with Western Europe. Cooperation with the Nordic countries is based, among other things, on the assumption that they may also be concerned about Russia's aggressive foreign policy<sup>32</sup> and will be interested in supporting Lithuania's security and the European integration of its eastern neighbours. Lithuania does not believe that similar cooperation could be developed with the Visegrad or Black Sea states. However, it should be mentioned that the participation of Polish politicians in Baltic Council meetings has intensified in recent years.

It is worth noting that although this is less visible in the public, Poland is also gradually intensifying cooperation with the Nordic countries. The construction of the Baltic Pipe, which will supply Norwegian gas through Danish territory to Poland, should be completed by the end of 2022. Poland is also seeking to strengthen military cooperation with the Nordic countries. Poland would be particularly interested in their achievements in the development of military technology<sup>33</sup> as well as in the experience of Finland and Estonia in implementing and administering universal conscription, organisa-

tion of volunteer forces To this Poland's very good relations with Estonia may be added, where Warsaw is interested in Tallinn's experience in cyber security and ensuring border control.<sup>34</sup> Also, Poland is gradually investing in the development of its navy, and one of the main command centres of the Polish army and NATO forces, consisting of Polish, German and Danish troops, is based in Szczecin.

Currently, Lithuania, Poland and the Nordic countries are linked by the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the ad hoc joint regional cooperation meetings between the V4 and NB8 formats. None of them is currently active and effective but it cannot be ruled out that in the future Poland may be interested in developing some of them.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Lithuania and Poland belong to more than one regional cooperation platform but due to the different sizes of the countries, the two use these platforms differently, and regional cooperation does not yet act as an additional factor strengthening the Lithuanian and Polish strategic partnership. Nevertheless, numerous ways can be found to intensify interaction between the two countries in various regional cooperation formats:

- Lithuania and Poland have essentially the same view of the Eastern Partnership programme, which is very important for both countries. As a result, Lithuania and Poland can join their forces in an attempt to reform the programme, looking for new instruments and solutions for both non-democratic states and countries aspiring to EU membership, and work together to secure support for this reform from other EU members.

- If the effort to secure support for the EU's Eastern Partnership programme is not fruitful, Lithuania and Poland should strengthen cooperation with Ukraine in the framework of the Lublin Triangle. Such a step requires not only political and military cooperation, but also real projects in the fields of economy, culture, science, civil society, energy and cyber security, which would unite Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian businesses, artists, scientists, and civic organisations. This would allow Ukraine to continue its European integration and develop relations with the EU, despite the scepticism of other EU members. In addition, in such a format, Lithuania could play the role of an intermediary and moderator between Poland and Ukraine, whose bilateral relations do not lack tension and it is not always possible to avoid crises. A cooperation platform of similar nature could be set up in the future for Georgia and with the involvement of Romania also for Moldova.
- Lithuania should become more actively involved in the 3SI. Despite a value disagreement and allegations related to the rule of law against the current Polish government, Joe Biden's administration continues to express support for the 3SI, and Romania, Bulgaria and Estonia are taking an increasingly active part in the initiative in addition to Poland and Croatia. All this shows that 3SI is a long-term project, which is attracting more political support and will not end after the change of power in Poland. Lithuania's more active involvement would strengthen relations with other Visegrad countries, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia, would open new opportunities for Lithuanian businesses, researchers and non-governmental organisations and would also contribute to Lithuania's military security. In the long-run, this would allow Lithuania to strengthen its position within the EU and expand the range of issues that concern Vilnius, which is one of the newest goals of Lithuania's foreign policy.<sup>35</sup>
- Lithuania's more active involvement in the 3SI would contribute to the development of transatlantic relations and strengthen US relations with the EU. First, Lithuania, owing to its good relations with the current US administration, could encourage its more active involvement in the 3SI initiative. Second, Lithuania's active effort in the 3SI would allow mitigating the consequences of deteriorating Polish–US relations. Third, by expanding cooperation within the framework of the 3SI, Lithuania could easier convince Poland, Romania and other Central European countries that the 3SI is a better alternative to the 16+1 format promoted by China and encourage them to withdraw from the latter.
- Lithuania could look for a new format of regional cooperation that would include the Baltic Sea states that are members of the EU. Potentially, this could be the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region format that needs to be “reset”. In such a format, cooperation on issues of environmental and energy transformation could be discussed and developed. This is particularly important in view of the escalating conflict between Poland and Germany over Warsaw's desire to develop nuclear energy: a multilateral format, varying positions on the issue within the region (for example, Finland does not intend to abandon nuclear energy) could contribute to finding a compromise. In addition, cooperation between the defence industry sectors of the Baltic Sea countries could be developed in such a format. Lithuania would additionally benefit from the activation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region due to the joint participation of Poland and Germany because it would allow Lithuania to reduce the tension arising from the pressure to choose either “Warsaw” or “Berlin”.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Varšuvoje susitikę Lietuvos ir Lenkijos premjerai aptarę strateginės partnerystės stiprinimą”, *15min.lt*, 21 September 2021, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/varsuvoje-susitike-lietuvas-ir-lenkijos-premjera-aptare-strategines-partnerystes-stiprinima-56-1566918>.
- <sup>2</sup> According to political scientist Rafał Matyja, if the results of the polls of the Polish public in recent years are summed up and the number of seats in the Sejms per party is recalculated accordingly, the current opposition would have an advantage over the Law and Justice Party. Matyja says: “The most likely scenario is a government formed from today’s opposition with a small majority and frequent and effective vetoes by President Andrzej Duda.” For more detail: Rafał Matyja, „Sondażowa przewaga opozycji”, *polityka.pl*, 2 October 2021, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/2136588,1,sondazowa-przewaga-opozycji.read>.
- <sup>3</sup> Data from the World Bank.
- <sup>4</sup> David R. Mares, “Middle Powers under Regional Hegemony: To Challenge or Acquiesce in Hegemonic Enforcement,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 32(4), 1988, 453-471.
- <sup>5</sup> Strategia Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2017-2021, 3.
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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
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