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TEN YEARS OF THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE WITHIN EUROPE'S EAST-WEST
DIVIDE: DRIVEN BY ECONOMICS OR POLITICS?

MA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

Persevering cleavages between the European Union's older and newer member states – states which acceded in or after 2004, collectively referred to as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – continue to attract substantial scholarly attention. Variably interpreted as a developmental divide, a political one, or dismissed as an archaic relic, this so-called East-West divide forms this thesis' theoretical background. The thesis derives five analytical concepts from existing scholarship – economic development and productivity on the economic axis; nationalism, sovereignty, and transnational coalitions within the EU on the political – and applies them to 11 Joint Declarations of the Three Seas Initiative between 2016 and 2026 through qualitative content analysis. The Three Seas Initiative, the only intergovernmental forum whose membership fully encompasses the CEE region, is treated as an emancipatory tool through which CEE states collectively engage with the divide. The thesis finds that economic factors are definitionally dominant across the Joint Declarations. Its second hypothesis proposes the role of crises as an aggravating factor heightening political salience. It is partially confirmed: the Ukraine crisis produced a marked spike in political content across the 2022–2026 declarations, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced economic rather than political factors, suggesting the aggravating effect of crises is contingent on their typology. An emergent post-2022 security logic increasingly supersedes both competing framings. The thesis concludes that the Three Seas Initiative's Joint Declarations reveal a forum whose economic foundations are structurally entrenched, but whose political expression is crisis-contingent, and whose self-conception has shifted considerably across its first decade from a convergence-seeking regional platform to an actor with ambitions beyond its region which, by 2026, demands convergence from others.

Keywords: East-West divide, Three Seas Initiative, regional cooperation, qualitative content analysis, European Union

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Introduction

An innate human impulse to claim swathes of land as “ours” and “not ours” with their associated symbols and privileges, peoples therein as “us” and “them” with their respective attributes and characteristics, and delineate them accordingly, has served as the impetus for many historical developments since the inception of writing. Such delineations assume a diverse array of shapes and justifications. They can follow natural features or be artificially geometric, adhere to pre-existing religious, ethnic, and linguistic populations or mark the extent of an ancient conqueror's victorious campaign, or reflect increasingly sophisticated processes of international institutional compromises, peace treaties and referenda notwithstanding. Europe, itself an ambiguously defined part of the Eurasian landmass, is no exception to the rule. Despite its nations' unprecedented ongoing effort to integrate much of its territory across various spheres of public and private life within the eponymous European Union, several non-institutionalised and unspoken cleavages persist. One with an undeniable basis in 20th-century history, which seemingly still guides the attitudes of policymakers, the fates of nations and, crucially for this thesis, contemporary regional cooperation, and is therefore subject to substantial academic attention, is the European Union's so-called “East-West divide”.

The 'East', whose members are typically referred to as CEE (Central and Eastern European) or ECE (East Central European) states, occasionally NMS (New Member States) in the context of European studies, is variably defined as either economically or politico-culturally “backwards” compared to its occidental counterpart. Economic convergence appears unattainable even two decades after the landmark 2004 enlargement, which witnessed the majority of CEE states accede to the European Union (Bârgăoanu et al., 2019). Further exacerbated by an uneven representation in European institutions, differences between Western and Eastern Europe have resulted in the propagation of “anti-Brussels” populist rhetoric (Markowski, 2018), democratic backsliding (Volintiru et al., 2024) and a preference for regional policy coordination as a parallel or even an alternative to European integration (Bedeia & Osei Kwadwo, 2021). These tensions have increasingly encouraged alternative forms of regional cooperation. Alongside more salient frameworks such as the Visegrád Group or enhanced cooperation among the Baltic states, a project which has not received due attention in comparison to its scale and ambition is the Three Seas Initiative.

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), established in 2015 and appropriately named after its location spanning the space between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, is nominally a "flexible political platform" aimed at "stimulating more rapid development of the region" ('About – Three Seas Initiative', 2018). Its 13-state membership is nearly coterminous with the divide's titular East: it includes the three Baltic states, the four members of the Visegrád Group, and the four Balkan countries of Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria, along with the notable outliers of Austria and the newest participant Greece. This member composition renders it the only forum which spans the entire CEE region, and a unique tool in the region's states' repertoire. The 3SI's origins in a perceived frustration with the East-West divide are overtly stated among its official website's Overarching Goals: "The second objective is to increase real convergence among EU Member States, thereby contributing to enhanced unity and cohesion within the EU. This allows avoiding artificial East-West divides and further stimulate EU integration." ('About – Three Seas Initiative', 2018). All of its participants – exempting the two states which fall outside the pattern – are post-communist states which joined the European Union in or after 2004. Their high-level delegations convene at annual Three Seas Summits and issue Joint Declarations: the only formalised expressions of the full membership's common political will. These offer valuable insights into CEE states' understanding of both the East-West divide and the 3SI's specific function within it and serve as the dataset of its empirical analysis.

The thesis investigates the existence, possible justifications, and embedded logic of the 3SI – which it considers the foremost emancipatory tool for CEE countries to address, question, or perhaps erase the East-West divide beyond its explicit connectivity goals in addition to a great host of other CEE regional efforts – through the following research question: "How has the 3SI been motivated by economic or political factors over time?" This question has remained unanswered in part because 3SI scholarship is a nascent field, dominated by CEE-based researchers in publications which are seldom English-language, and in part because no study has subjected the Initiative's Joint Declarations to holistic empirical analysis. This constitutes a meaningful gap. Joint Declarations are the sole texts to which all participating heads of state are signatories, and their content analysis offers a uniquely comprehensive view of how CEE states collectively represent their own position within the divide – a view of the divide, in other words, from the East's own vantage point.

The thesis opens with a chapter surveying the East-West divide's theoretical landscape, organised along two dominant yet contrasting axes of academic thought: economic factors, encompassing regional disparities and a cheap-labour economy underpinned by demographic decline, and political factors, encompassing euroscepticism and identity, democratic backsliding and rule of law standards, and a propensity toward regional coalition-building in response to structural underrepresentation in EU institutions. Both strands are accepted *a priori* as valid and their veracity, i. e. the validity of their authors' contributions and research, is not scrutinised.

In its second chapter, the thesis proposes a conceptual reframing of the five previously identified factors of the East-West divide from scholarly literature. Its independent variable(s) is the very existence of the divide, further differentiated into an economic and a political divide, which unite to explain and necessitate the formation of the 3SI as another regional integration format supplementing other vehicles of regional integration and the European Union. The founding and continued functioning of the 3SI and its inner justification is therefore the framework's dependent variable. It presents a unique and parsimonious conceptual framework crafted specifically for the thesis' single-case study, which is not transposable and does not imply or posit any causal relationship between subjects, actors and phenomena other than CEE states (via the 3SI) and the East-West divide.

Its conceptual framework subsequently maps these five factors onto five analytical concepts – economic development, productivity, nationalism, sovereignty, and transnational coalitions within the EU. Also stemming from a dominant narrative in literature, the presence of crises may heighten the relevance of political factors in 3SI's Joint Declarations. Their systematic examination across the Initiative's full decade of existence makes it possible to test a conditional claim about regional behaviour: that economic and political logics do not merely coexist within CEE states' cooperation but may shift in their relative salience under the pressure of successive EU-level crises. The aggravating effect of crises is also introduced and conceptualised at the end of the second chapter serving as the basis for the thesis' second hypothesis. The thesis' foundational hypotheses developed from its synthesis of literature and resulting conceptualisation are as follows:

H1: *"Economic factors are definitionally more prominent in CEE countries' justifications of the Three Seas Initiative – thus its treatment of the East-West divide – than political factors."*

H2: *"Political factors rise in salience during crises."*

These hypotheses inform the thesis' empirical qualitative content analysis of 11 3SI Joint Declarations, spanning the Initiative's full existence from 2016 to 2026, in the third chapter. They do not represent an especially significant volume of text and key passages are subjected to relevance sampling, supported by direct citations from the Joint Declarations' text and accompanying text justifying their selection and interpretation, or providing crucial context. Presented chronologically, the analysis's observed patterns are then assessed in the Discussion section linking empirical findings to hypotheses, established theoretical debates on the nature of the divide, and investigating surprising findings.

The thesis' findings are summarised in its concluding chapter, which also outlines its implications for the Three Seas Initiative's future trajectory, and potential avenues for further research.

1. The East-West Divide

This chapter introduces trends and prevailing opinions in scholarship on the East-West divide in the European Union, and the European continent on a wider scale. It does so first via exploring the geopolitical history of an East-West divide closely resembling the modern understanding until 2004, which saw eight CEE states (all eventual founding participants of the Three Seas Initiative) accede to the European Union in its fourth wave of enlargement in 2004 aptly termed ‘Eastern’ of a historically unprecedented and unrivalled scale (O’Brennan, 2006). Academic debates on the post-enlargement dynamics and development of the East-West divide are then divided into two broad viewpoints, “economic” and “political”, reflecting an often invoked dichotomy in the literature.

As becomes apparent, many authors explicitly dismiss the relative importance of their less favoured factors when analysing the divide, and others reject the divide’s existence altogether. Though most do concede that both economic and non-economic determinants contribute to present differences at least partly, a persevering tension between attributing greater value to economy vis-à-vis politics or vice versa is fairly illustrated in the abstract of one of the field’s more transformative recent articles, which postulates that “...earlier scholarship on the East-West divide emphasised economic divergence as a primary explanatory factor. As relevant as the economy still is, our contribution is to argue that the divide also needs to be assessed against the broader political backdrop of democratic backsliding and new geopolitical developments.” (Volintiru et al., 2024). Though choosing a discursive side is not within the scope of this thesis, highlighting their arguments is necessary for creating an appropriate conceptual framework and assessing the Three Seas Initiative’s self-declared position on the East-West divide.

1.1. Historical East-West Divides in Europe

A broad understanding of a difference between Europe’s greater Western and Eastern parts is embedded in its peoples’ history, geography, and identity. Numerous landmark events offer themselves as potential points of divergence, most prominent among which are the Roman Empire’s 395 AD dissolution and the subsequent fall of its Western portion governed from its former heartland in modern-day Italy in 476; or the East-West schism of 1054 within the Christian

world, which saw the break of communion between the Roman Catholic Church and a polycentric Eastern Orthodox church (Baker, 2009). Though an invocation of Latin and Greek spheres of influence has certainly lost some traction over the past few centuries, American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington nevertheless appealed to it in his influential 1993 essay “The Clash of Civilizations?”, in which he defines the “Western Christian” world as being separate from the “Orthodox East”, constituting two different civilisations – the world’s primary blocs of allegiance after the relative decline in importance of Westphalian states in his model – which may only seldom reconcile, and certainly not in celebration of the West’s exclusive values of democracy and human rights (Huntington, 1993, p. 30). Romania and Bulgaria would later become members of the European Union in 2007, joining their fellow Orthodox-majority state of Greece in an organisation dedicated to upholding values characterised as exclusively Western, thus bridging the divide over Europe’s key civilisational fault line.

Huntington’s thesis generated much criticism, with part of it aimed at dispelling the myth of Europe’s Western-Orthodox dichotomy. One such article titled “Was Huntington Right? Testing Cultural Legacies and the Civilization Border” asserted that instead of seminal millennia-old cleavages, a third possible point of origin of the modern East-West divide is much more salient – the alignment of Europe into communist Eastern and capitalist Western blocs following the Second World War (Mungiu-Pippidi & Mindruta, 2002). Rather than essentialising Europe’s East via a single cultural quirk, the division was instead exemplified by a political-economic mode of governance exported to reinstated and restructured post-war states under the Soviet Union’s leadership. The existence of the Iron Curtain, geographically defined by Winston Churchill as having descended across Europe “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic” (Feuerlicht, 1955, p. 186), led to half a century of near-total separation between Europe’s two blocs of states. During this time, the East of Europe would attain several other designations highlighting its peripheral or lesser status in comparison to the West, chiefly “the Second World” (Krouskop et al., 2024) (though non-aligned Yugoslavia would occasionally be identified with the Third World (Životić & Čavoški, 2016)) and “the Other Europe” (Walters, 1988).

After the consecutive fall of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe between 1989-1991, a metaphorical “lifting of the Iron Curtain” revealed two distinct Europes to one another. East-West isolation or, in radical cases, antagonism, transformed into a careful and controlled East-West rapprochement with outlooks of a shared future based on (Western) European

values, and their adoption by and export to the East. While some authors consider the collapse of the Eastern bloc a direct consequence and therefore victory of the liberal-democratic system's power projection fostering the newly democratising states' political will (Schöpflin, 1990a), others would repeatedly fail to both predict and explain their geopolitical pivot (Przeworski, 1991). Samuel P. Huntington, for instance, posited just several years earlier in 1984 that a democratisation process is "virtually impossible" to occur due to a legacy of Soviet control and influence (Rupnik, 2000, p. 116). Though in retrospect, historical comparative research between the trajectories of the states on either side of the former Iron Curtain conceded that any division was nebulous and ephemeral, with a clear-cut line between the West and the East firmly established only after the Second World War (Berend, 1986; Chirot, 1989), 40 years of parallel development gave rise to demonstrable and significant differences in demographics (Monnier & Rychtarikova, 1992), economics (Lipton et al., 1990), and political culture, the latter described as 'backwards'. (Schöpflin, 1990b). Highlighting the perceived root cause of these cleavages – an extended tenure of vanguard Communist Party governance –, these states would jointly receive the attribute "post-communist" in future scholarship (Åslund et al., 1996).

Issues of ambiguity surrounding nomenclature and political taxonomy within European countries are instrumental in understanding grievances with the very perception of an East-West divide. "Eastern Europe", much like other regional divisions stemming from a cultural-geographical definition of a cluster of countries, is a tangentially helpful but discursively loaded term. An assumed association with Europe's East carries precisely the connotations presented in this chapter so far – a backwardness or an otherness (Kuus, 2004). *Mittleuropa*, Central Europe, a concept popularised in the rhetoric of 19th-century nationalist and revivalist movements in what corresponds to modern-day Germany and the former Austrian Empire and intermittently used since, had instead regained prominence (Judt, 1991). Czech author Milan Kundera proposes in his noteworthy 1984 essay that the origin of Central Europe is located precisely between the fault lines established in Antiquity by the dissolution of the Roman Empire, and the East-West schism some centuries later. The Czechs and Slovaks, the Hungarians, the Poles, the Slovenes, and the Croats entrench their nationhood deeply in their Roman Catholic faith fostering a profound sense of European belonging in stark contrast with Russia (as demonstrated by the 1956 and 1968 unrests in Budapest and Prague, respectively) (Kundera, 2017) .

There was no room for Central Europe on a divided continent, and while acknowledging their identity as decisively not Western, "...when Hungarians, Poles and Czechs writing in English claim a central European status for themselves and deny a European identity to Russia, the bizarre situation results of a continent with a west and a centre, but no east. (Okey, 1992, p. 104)" Nowadays, Central Europe is generally understood to encompass the German-speaking Austria, Germany, and Switzerland; countries of the Visegrád Group; and Slovenia (Šabič & Drulák, 2012). The Baltic states, though hardly a unitary bloc, seek abstract membership in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, often portraying themselves as a "bridge" or an "intersection" (Lamoreaux & Galbreath, 2008). Exempting Slovenia, any classification of other states of the Balkan peninsula is questionable, with a historically rooted Central European belonging occasionally attributed to Croatia (Topalović & Krleža, 1996) and Romania (Janowski et al., 2005). In other Balkan states, an exclusive dichotomy between Europe and the Balkans persists and the promotion of any further division (e. g. "the Western Balkans") serves a tool to further enforce it (Kolstø, 2016).

These designations necessarily transcend the East-West divide and are therefore seldom employed in political science. Furthermore, several authors still highlight a continued "East-West divide" within Germany, the East corresponding to the post-communist German Democratic Republic which reunified with its Western counterpart in 1990. The observed differences between West and East Germany are similarly attributed to 40 years of communist governance, and include demographic (Klüsener & Goldstein, 2016), economic (van Hoorn & Maseland, 2010), and political (Reiser & Reiter, 2023) factors.

Jan Zielonka, Polish-British political scientist and an author frequently cited in academic literature on the East-West divide due to his classification of the European Union as an imperial polity, asserts therefore that any perceived or measured East-West differences stem from a natural clash between the core and its periphery (Zielonka, 2008). He is, however, an outspoken critic of the existence or relevance of any substantial fault line; in his 2017 article "The mythology of the East-West divide", he highlights several discrepancies in common narratives and definitions. Particularly striking is his critique of the term post-communist: "I never was a member of the communist party, yet I am destined to die as a post-communist according to the East-West narrative. I have several Italian colleagues who were members of *Partito Comunista*, but they would not see themselves or their country as carrying the stigma of post-communism, which is attached to the

eastern part of Europe” (Zielonka, 2019, para. 4), one also associated with the more localised stigma of the term “ex-Soviet satellite” (Willoughby, 2024) or “post-Soviet” (Tlostanova, 2015).

Zielonka proceeds to analyse the internal differences within the thesis’ region of interest and highlight its many conflicts and few similarities. “How Hungary can belong to the same bloc as Romania and Slovakia is a mystery to me. What does Bulgaria have in common with Latvia in terms of economic and political culture?” (Zielonka, 2019, para. 6). Nevertheless, in a subsequent terminological synthesis, the post-communist states of Eastern Europe would attain the scholarly name “Central and Eastern Europe” (CEE), “East-Central Europe” (ECE) or “New Member States” (NMS) following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, with other states of interest acceding to the Union in 2007 and 2013. The term ‘East-West divide’ has also been reimagined to refer to parts of the former Iron Curtain, as in the case of Germany, and also completely transposed to the European Union’s external border post-2004 (Illés, 2010). This thesis uses the designation ‘Central and Eastern Europe’ (CEE) to refer to all 11 member states which acceded in or after 2004 except for Cyprus and Malta and follows the prevailing academic usage of the “East-West divide” to refer exclusively to their perceived and measured differences vis-à-vis other member states of the European Union.

1.2. Economic Factors of the East-West Divide

Nearly every empirical investigation into the manifestations of the East-West divide both prefaces and concludes its findings with a variation on the following thought: “If anything, there are more differences *within* the so-called East...and West...than *between* East and West...” (Grzymala-Busse, 2016, p. 89). The validity of any such investigation therefore necessarily suffers under scrutiny and challenges fundamental reasons to conduct such research in the first place, in addition to dispelling narratives of innate backwardness and poor governance in CEE states. The assertion that even across various CEE states, the transition to market economy and its subsequent economic success in approaching Western states’ levels of development has not been uniform, appears in papers predating the 2004 accession (Katchanovski, 2000). Nevertheless, the *idea* of the divide remains salient, as is evidenced by its continuous analysis in scholarship, by its invocation in the rhetorics of policymakers (Crisp, 2018), and by the Three Seas Initiative’s avowed goal of challenging it and converging with the West.

Convergence is defined as “the process whereby the real GDP per capita levels of lower-income economies catch up, on a durable basis, with those of higher-income economies” (Diaz Del Hoyo et al., 2017, p. 10) – to converge would therefore mean to erase the East-West divide economically. CEE states represent 27% of the European Union’s area and 22% of its population, yet only 13% of its total gross domestic product (GDP) and 17% of its GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) (Eurostat, 2026a). According to preliminary 2026 data, every CEE state is below the EU average in their GDP/PPP per-capita index (with Czechia and Slovenia approaching the average value of 100 with a value of 92 and 91, respectively), while only five out of the remaining 16 are (Eurostat, 2026b). Though this collection of isolated statistics fails to provide a comprehensive picture or confirm the existence of an East-West divide, it demonstrably places CEE states in a comparable relative developmental category, which is jointly not up to par. Studies on the evolution of economic convergence within the European Union have indeed highlighted that while economic convergence in the Union is increasing, CEE states are no closer to “catching up” to the rest of the Union, instead experiencing considerable convergence within or within even smaller sub-regional groupings (Borsi & Metiu, 2015; Cieřlik & Weiřlik, 2020).

Other than their uneven starting line and their comparatively shorter tenure reaping the benefits of European economic integration, a robust empirical investigation of economic development in CEE states posits that the challenges perpetuating the East-West divide are best understood along two socio-economic dimensions: “...subnational disparities and the economic model based on cheap labour and lower positions in the global-value chains.” (Volintiru et al., 2021, p. 106).

1.2.1. Regional disparities

Authors suggest a causal relationship between the physical proximity to centres of economic activity and affluent markets, and the relative economic development on both a national level a regional level. Border regions straddling the former Iron Curtain and capital regions therefore exhibit increased levels of development and economic activity. In 2020, all subnational units (i. e. statistical regions) with a GDP per capita lower than 50% of the EU average were located in CEE countries, specifically Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania (Volintiru et al., 2024, pp. 106–108). On the other hand, five of the Union’s 20 wealthiest subnational units in 2024 (by

GDP/PPP per capita) belong to CEE countries, all of which are capital cities and their surrounding regions. These include, in addition to notably low-inequality states of Czechia and Slovakia, the capital cities of Hungary, Poland, and Romania (Eurostat, 2026c). Scholarship on the sources of wealth inequality is diverse and its potential reasons manifold (Dorjnyambuu, 2025), but significant investment infrastructural development, particularly communication, digital, and energy infrastructure, appear to strongly correlate with economic growth in CEE states (Maciulyte-Sniukiene & Butkus, 2022).

Addressing and alleviating subnational and cross-border wealth inequality is the main goal of the European Union's Regional Policy, also called the Cohesion Policy. All CEE states are notoriously net beneficiaries of EU funding, though Slovenia and Estonia are trending towards an equilibrium – cohesion funding promoting economic growth in underdeveloped regions and eventual convergence constitutes a significant part of the received resources (*Spending and Revenue*, 2022). To this end, the European Commission has established three European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) with the explicit goal of regional wealth redistribution and specific embedded provisions favouring countries and regions underperforming economically in comparison with the EU average: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Between 2007-2020, 18 of the 25 subnational regions with the most awarded total funding among these three funds were part of CEE states. The remaining seven were divisions of Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece (Cohesion Open Data Platform, 2022). The CEE states of Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland have also reportedly changed their administrative division with the sole purpose of receiving additional funding (Zdražil & Kraftová, 2023). The level and salience of European Union engagement and scholarly evaluation both demonstrate that regional disparity is a key feature of the East-West divide.

1.2.2. Cheap labour and demographic decline

CEE countries are characterised as having a “developmental model...that is heavily reliant on the comparative advantage of cheap labour.” (Volintiru et al., 2021, p. 108). Features of this model encompass a disproportionate reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI), including but not limited to the regional developmental aid of the European Union, which may occasionally result

in an inert status of dependency and a lack of domestic competitiveness (Mrak et al., 2015). Despite persevering and deeply politicised scepticism and criticism towards European Union funding, which is often conditioned by adherence to the European Union's governance rules, especially in Poland and Hungary, many CEE states have largely remained FDI-dependent, even if the providers of this aid have diversified to encourage investors from outside the European Union, such as the United States and China (Horobet et al., 2021; Medve-Bálint & Éltető, 2024). As a significant proportion of FDI is directly connected to the fostering of logistics, manufacturing, and assembly of products meant for further export, CEE states are expected to continuously grant access to their relatively affordable labour market to foreign-owned and foreign-funded companies, further contributing to its population's "de-skilling" (Epstein, 2014).

Authors note that various measures of innovation and research & development investment suffer as a consequence, and portray an innovation East-West divide where regional improvement is limited to individual CEE states, such as Slovenia or Estonia (Vlajčić et al., 2025). The European Commission-issued Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), which monitors several indicators of digitalisation and the availability of digital infrastructure in EU member states, reports only three CEE states as ranking above the EU average in its 2022 report – Estonia, Slovenia, and Lithuania (*DESI | Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, 2022). Closely related to both the paradigms of cheap labour and a lack of innovation is the phenomenon of "brain drain", i. e. the emigration of students, skilled workers, and specialists. Analysed as early as the late 1990s (Bobeve, 1997), research into the outflow of human capital reveals that all CEE states lack institutional capacity to reliably retain high-quality professionals to varying degrees, with Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania identified the most vulnerable (Ienciu & Ienciu, 2015).

Brain drain and its related drawbacks can be analysed as a necessary part of CEE states' greater demographic problem of population decline, with most countries experiencing a combination of low fertility rates, high mortality rates, and outward migration (Sobotka & Fűrnkranz-Prskawetz, 2020). Western European states are the primary destinations of CEE migrants, and they consequently also outrank CEE states in various indices measuring life expectancy, quality of life, education, and future population prognoses (Bârgăoanu et al., 2019). While FDI demonstrably stimulates economic growth and a continued uninterrupted flow of it is indicative of both the EU's and CEE states' policymakers' priorities, as is the gradually increasing funding of R&D and digitalisation initiatives (Serbanica & Constantin, 2018), the region's

precarious demography finds itself in a paradoxical predicament. Owing to its sensitivity, measures to combat or alleviate it will likely continue to be at the discretion of individual states, but events shaping a talented citizen's decision to pursue opportunities abroad can seldom be influenced at the national level.

1.3. Political Factors of the East-West Divide

An exhaustive exploration of economic differences between CEE states and other European states which, as demonstrated, typically favour the latter, could fill out the pages of a dissertation. The thesis' cursory review of literature on general and specific economic determinants has, despite the robustness of the European Union's funding schemes with an explicit goal of erasing the East-West divide via economic convergence, demonstrated the persistence of a substantial gap between CEE states' economic performance vis-à-vis Western Europe. Economic manifestations and explanations for the divide, however, remain relatively underrepresented in both public and academic debate. Authors and commentators alike place emphasis on institutional and political factors of the East-West divide, including the status of democracy and rule of law, relationship with external actors, a frustration with an undue lack of representation, a preference for deeper integration within sub-regional initiatives, and geopolitical trends.

Political narratives of the East-West in the first decade after the EU's 2004 enlargement substantially resembled modern debates about the economic state. The goal of EU integration was, in its way, also a convergence – not in GDP or economic performance, but in CEE states' emancipatory “liberation” from inherited political backwardness and a successful adoption of the Western European governance model: “From the EU's perspective, there was reason to hope that all the post-communist countries would evolve according to the democratic criteria of political competition, rule of law and the separation of powers.” (Epstein, 2014, p. 7). The success of democratisation and democratic consolidation processes were evaluated much like their economic counterpart. CEE states were expected to follow a branching yet clear path paved by their exemplary predecessors, i. e. previously acceded states, and, in the ideal case, “catch up” with the rest of the Union (Epstein, 2014). Results within CEE states were expectedly diverse, but an overall increase in performance was found to positively correlate with EU membership and the level of regional integration, especially when compared with states outside the EU (Petersheim, 2012).

1.3.1. Euroscepticism and identity

“2015 was undoubtedly the year in which an east-west divide emerged once again as Europe found itself facing the most serious migration crisis since the end of the Second World War.” (Rupnik et al., 2021, p. 86). Perceived anxiety and danger stemming from the mass migration of war refugees and economic migrants from non-European countries, especially those from majority-Muslim countries (Stojarová, 2018), later exacerbated by the European Commission’s decision to circumvent a unanimity vote in the European Council on the imposition of migrant relocation quotas led to the propagation of Euroscepticism and anti-immigration rhetoric in virtually every CEE state. Though Slovakia and Hungary attempted to challenge the measure legally, the European Court of Justice dismissed all their claims without deliberation. The quotas were later not enforced solely because of almost every member state’s failure to meet them – Malta was the only exception (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2018).

The Visegrád Group, a cooperation framework between Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, emerged as an especially defiant bloc, though its members appear to have been relatively wary of integration even before their accession (Beichelt, 2004). An expectation to shelter and finance refugee influxes despite their economic divide, relative ethnic homogeneity underpinned by a demographic decline, and only recently rediscovered nation-state enthusiasm (communist education typically sought to dissuade nationalist ideas), combined with a critique for a lack of solidarity and for sowing discord within the EU directed CEE states by European institutions and Western states transformed into a general dissatisfaction with their peripheral, subsidiary position within the continent’s hierarchy (Krastev, 2017). Although several Western European states also held reservations towards or explicitly disagreed with the Commission’s immigration policy, including Greece, Italy, and Spain, they were never targeted by exclusionary and othering rhetoric, and punitive measures (Grzymala-Busse, 2016, p. 92). A synecdochical representation of the Visegrád Group might not be appropriate, however. The incumbent Eurosceptic governments of Poland and Hungary outwardly reframed the Union’s East-West divide as a value-based cultural and ideological battle between ‘liberals in Brussels’ and ‘Christian conservatives’, while the governments of Czechia and Slovakia remained more diplomatic in their statements during the relevant period and never claimed themselves to be the true inheritors of Europe’s historical legacy

(Walsch, 2025). In reaction to these tensions, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán famously declared Hungary to be an “illiberal democracy” (Rupnik et al., 2021, pp. 88–90).

Euroscepticism in the European Union is not exclusive to CEE states and the term has long been used as an attribute of diverse ideologies and political platforms, including the ever more prominent right wing populism (Bürkner, 2020). A 2014 study analyses the entry into the mainstream of about a dozen Eurosceptic parties, with the Hungarian Jobbik as the only CEE example (Topaloff, 2014). The propagation of opposition to the EU is exemplified by the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the Union following the successful 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. Its tumultuous decoupling from continental dependencies and European cooperation frameworks, and ensuing economic complications, has exerted a particular softening effect on Visegrád Group’s anti-Brussels hardliners previously campaigning for a withdrawal (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). In an article investigating public opinion across the East-West divide, Grzymala-Busse poignantly asserts that “If anything, the real divide runs between main-stream European political elites and large swaths of voters disappointed in what they perceive as the failure of their representatives to respond to their concerns. A rising tide of resentment against the status quo and the established political elites seems to be leading to a convergence between a disappointed West and a dispirited East.” (Grzymala-Busse, 2016, p. 92).

1.3.2. Democracy and rule of law

Two key principles of good governance promoted by the European Union and an integral part of its values and its accession criteria are democracy and rule of law. Though subject to rigorous legal debate and continuous refinement since its introduction in 1957, these terms generally correspond to the practice of governmental transparency, and accountability of governmental institutions and elected politicians to an independent judiciary (Pech, 2022). They are often discussed jointly and assessed as steadily backsliding particularly in the CEE region. A 2025 report by the Berlin-based non-governmental organisation Civil Liberties for Europe indicates that five EU member states are systematically dismantling rule of law on the domestic level – CEE states of Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, and Slovakia, in addition to Italy (Henley, 2026). After the adoption of the so-called Conditionality Regulation by the European Union in 2020, and its upholding by the European Court of Justice in response to complaints submitted by Hungary

and Poland (Scheppelle, 2022), the European Commission used the newly introduced procedure to partially freeze cohesion funding to Hungary, and limit post-pandemic recovery funding to both of the former plaintiffs after indicators of rule of law were found to have worsened significantly (Blauberger & Sedelmeier, 2025).

An analysis of states' attitudes to the measure forms the backbone of the field's seminal work. The article "Is there an East–West divide on democracy in the European Union?" (Sedelmeier, 2024) comprehensively assesses both democratic and rule of law indices, and several measurements of governmental attitudes towards punitive measures like the Conditionality Regulation. Along every policy issue, at least one state outperformed expectations inherent to a regional divide – Estonia was typically overperforming on par with Western Europe's heavy hitters, while Austria, Greece, and Malta display slightly below-average democratic tendencies. Nevertheless, the most consistent supporters of punitive measures and fosterers of quality democracy were Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Sweden. The other extreme of the spectrum was populated with Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. "In sum, rather than a clear-cut divide, it is more helpful to consider intra-EU differences on democracy as a continuum, with a small group of western members at one end and some eastern members at the other, but most member states are in distinctive sub-groups in-between, with fairly fluid positions." (Sedelmeier, 2024, Conclusions).

1.3.3. Lack of representation and regionalism

CEE states are systematically underrepresented in the European Union, accounting for a historical 0% of leadership appointees across all its institutions (including the main Institutions of the EU, Advisory bodies, Agencies, and others) in 2023, down from the 2-4% range in the previous years. A report by the Geographical Representation in EU Leadership Observatory 2024 (GRELO2024) further discovered that while Western Europeans are overrepresented by 50% and Northern Europeans by more than 200%, Central and Eastern Europeans jointly constitute less than 25% of their 'fair share' (based on population percentage) of EU leadership positions. Despite the conciliatory appointment of Estonia's Kaja Kallas as the Union's High Representative and Vice-President of the Commission in 2024 – probably the second most prominent CEE appointment after Donald Tusk's tenure as European Council President –, the observed trend is

surprisingly worsening for CEE citizens' total representation, widening the East-West divide even further (European Studies Centre, 2024; Jakobsen, 2024). This pattern proliferates entrenched feelings of alienation and reflects accordingly on CEE states' low turnouts at European Parliament elections. Curiously, its linkage to the greater divide is further reinforced by the observation of similar phenomena within Germany, where the post-communist East is similarly underrepresented both at the European and at the federal level (Vogel, 2021).

Scholarship acknowledges this statistical disparity and drafts a causal chain between underrepresentation in the EU and regional integration: "The authors recognise that Visegrad, as a sub-regional partnership, can provide a space for the collective voice of its Central European members. In theory, this should give added weight to the shared opinion of the four member states within the increasingly crowded EU intergovernmental bargaining space." (Butler, 2014, p. 355). The four-member Visegrád Group, a loose cooperation framework exhibited by occasional alignment in policy issues, sporadic meetings between delegations of its participating states and a transnational Fund, remains the most salient coalition of its kind, though it has exhibited considerable disagreement on certain affairs (Bedeia & Osei Kwadwo, 2021; Eihmanis, 2024).

CEE regionalism is further encouraged by proposals of a 'multi-speed integration' in Europe, which would exclude states based on a combination of economic, political, and normative criteria as evaluated by Western European elites (Anghel, 2020). Other relevant international formats in the CEE region include the Bucharest Nine (B9), which is complementary to NATO's function in the region (Nagy, 2024); the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) which engages actively in a wide range of regional issues, and a rare example of a regional initiative which transcends the East-West divide (Möller & Nič, 2019); the Central European Initiative (CEI) headquartered in Trieste, Italy, which has all but lost relevance since its founding in 1989 (Cviic, 1999); various *ad hoc* formats; and the titular Three Seas Initiative (3SI).

1.4. The Three Seas Initiative

Research on the 3SI, the most comprehensive forum whose membership is nearly coterminous with our delineation of the CEE region, is fledging and almost exclusively a domain of scholars based in that region, some of whom are funded from its financial instruments or present their findings at irregular 3SI Business Forums. Nevertheless, they encompass a great diversity of

thought. Publications which view the 3SI as an equalising force alleviating most of the aforementioned contributing factors to the East-West divide are readily available, including regional disparity (Andreea-Raisa, 2025), cheap-labour economy propped up by demographic decline (Górka, 2018), and a lack of representation in the EU in the emancipatory form of “an attempt to break away from everything that prevents the region ‘between Berlin and Moscow’ from being a subject, not an object of political affairs” (Bartoszewicz, 2023, Abstract). Grgić (2023) provides a comprehensive overlook of various theories of sub-regional integration, within which she classifies the 3SI as economically complementary, but normatively substitutive to the European Union’s position in CEE as a vaguely Eurosceptic and a CEE-identity forming framework, thus deepening the East-West divide as explored previously (Li, 2025). No literature links the activities and effects of the 3SI with attempts or failure to converge in democratic or rule of law standards.

Other research has strong geopolitical implications. Common are explanations of the 3SI’s internal logic based on the assumption that Polish ambitions to establish an autonomous CEE bloc, within which it would enjoy exclusive privileges as its single most powerful member (Ištók et al., 2021; Mozga, 2025; Zięba, 2023). These are, in turn, contrasted by studies highlighting individual participating states’ divergent motivations, some of whom are wholly committed to European integration and have little to gain from decoupling from its power centres (Dostál et al., 2021; Orzelska-Stączek, 2024; Sprūds & Vargulis, 2022).

Some analyses also place heavy emphasis on the 3SI’s third “overarching goal” – its reciprocal support for United States’ engagement in the region as a security guarantor, a counterweight against the proliferation of potential Russian, Chinese, and ‘unwelcome’ EU influence, and a prolific investor. The United States have contributed to the 3SIIF, and high-level delegates of the United States have attended several Three Seas Summits since the 2017 Dubrovnik Summit, of which President Donald Trump was himself an attendee (Nix & Brzezinski, 2025). The controversial American think-tank The Heritage Foundation published a policy paper in March 2026, underpinning a historic low-point of transatlantic relations, detailing the economic and political benefits of increasing support to the 3SI during the second Trump Administration for the United States, while providing “a critical occasion for these Central and Eastern European states to seize or forfeit a chance for renewed transatlantic prosperity and stability.” (Embree & Kim, 2026). While these implications and strands of thought are inseverable from the 3SI’s inner logic,

as are similar observations and musings about its support of Ukraine and denouncement of Russia, these are not related to the thesis' study of the East-West divide, do not appear in East-West divide scholarship, and indeed exhibit a degree of internal diversity even within CEE states (Jora et al., 2018, p. 65). Consequently, references to transatlantic relations or any other dimensions of American engagement in the region, and to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which all appear commonly in the texts of the Joint Declarations, are mentioned in the later analytical part only tangentially.

1.5. Assessment of factors

The thesis recognises the perceived persistence and layered nature of the East-West divide in theory in line with the Three Seas Initiative's commitment to "[avoid] artificial East-West divides and further stimulate EU integration" ('About – Three Seas Initiative', 2018). Therein, the thesis identifies five prevailing conceptual narratives on the nature and characteristics of the East-West divide within the European Union in academic literature, two economic – **regional disparities**, including infrastructural and digitalisation problems, and a **cheap-labour economy** propped up by demographic decline and an overreliance on FDI – and three political – **euroscepticism and identity, democracy and rule of law**, and a propensity to engage in **regional cooperation due to a lack of representation in EU institutions**. They diverge significantly in their explanatory power and observed correlation with the prevailing geographical delineation of the East-West divide, but they invoke the concept of the divide nevertheless and proceed to analyse it using wide and often mutually contradictory theoretical lenses. An overview of their application to existing research on the Three Seas Initiative is further explored in the conceptual chapter.

According to their authors' own admission and the thesis' cursory literature review, regional disparities and a cheap-labour economy are both defining features of the East-West divide. The correlation is slightly weaker with euroscepticism and identity, and democracy and rule of law, the respective values of which in the EU's East and West include numerous notable cross-divide outliers on either side. A lack of representation in EU institutions and resulting regional cooperation is, similarly, a uniquely CEE phenomenon – though the thesis does not interact with regional cooperation and sub-regional integration between states outside the studied region, their motivation necessarily cannot stem from an underrepresentation in EU institutions if they are

adequately represented or overrepresented. The Three Seas Initiative itself is uniquely positioned within this regionalist paradigm as the only international organisation whose members include all CEE states and as a body which explicitly interacts with the conceptualised divide.

Their divide into the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ categories is one of many possible contrasting categorisations, and these two spheres may logically overlap substantially. Rising euroscepticism might cause an increase in FDI due to the incumbent government’s search to appeal to China or the United States; an insufficient adherence to democratic principles and rule of law might create suitable conditions for the deepening of regional disparities. The categories do, however, represent the most commonly operationalised dichotomy in scholarship on the East-West divide, and are concrete and unambiguous enough to expectably appear in the texts of the Three Seas Initiative’s Joint Declarations, the thesis’ dataset, the empirical analysis of which is its primary research contribution.

1.6. The role of crises

A temporal, conditional dimension to the East-West divide over the past decade must be investigated as a potential aggravating factor. As has been intermittently indicated throughout this chapter, research into the East-West divide tends to spike in its output and intensity when differences between Eastern and Western EU member states become especially salient in policymaking and public discourse. These instances represent periods of political upheaval, controversy, and disagreement – crises. In a seminal work of a large-scale literature review on the East-West divide since 2014, authors report that “the literature shows relevant aspects of an East-West divide in the specific context of migration patterns, the financial crisis, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, EU enlargement, ‘culture wars’, and the internal reform of the EU.” (Volintiru et al., 2024, p. 788).

Analyses of the divide grounded in events and turning points which exacerbate underlying structural differences or insufficient development hold significantly more explanatory power for political interpretations of the cleavage rather than economic ones, and defiance of a member state (typically ones located in the CEE region) towards the viewpoint of the European Union, itself mostly a reflection of Western states’ attitudes, is attributed to its backwardness. To restate points established in the subchapter on political factors, the very term “East-West divide” gained

prominence as a framework to understand certain Eastern states' attitudes to the 2015 migration crisis. Perplexed at a perceived disappointment in their dismissive stance towards proposed redistribution quotas, explanations for CEE states' rejection of these quotas "...were quickly framed around the culturally backward contexts of these nations: xenophobia, racism, their far right political orientation and the internalized conditioning of being branded solely as emigration versus immigration states" (Bejan, 2016, p. 9). Authors further speak of a "return" of the East-West divide believed to have been erased by the EU's 2004 enlargement, but unexpectedly showing itself as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon manifested beyond progress achieved towards economic convergence (Krastev, 2017). The fact that CEE states did not reject migration quotas universally and in equal part, and that several Western states opposed the quotas as well, is occasionally lamented: "The Eastern bloc responses to the refugees' crisis cannot be analyzed just *a posteriori* through a Western projection of Eastern backwardness (although no one seems angered at the UK optout for example)..." (Bejan, 2016, p. 38).

Further scholarship attempted to impose the framework of the East-West divide upon a wide range of measurable differences. Literature on the 2009 Euro crisis does not imply differences between Western and Eastern economic governance, acknowledging that CEE states remained relatively untouched by the crisis, instead identifying common findings with a North-South divide within the Eurozone (Fagerberg et al., 2015, pp. 60–75). The North-South divide is typically attributed to clinical differences in states' institutions, not to cultural relics or other assumptions verging on essentialism (Pérez, 2019). Every subsequent crisis of the European Union, however, would then be analysed along the East-West faultline and would critically invoke insufficiently developed democratic or governance indicators – political factors – to support their reasoning.

Though what exactly constitutes a crisis in the European Union is certainly disputable, events often labelled as such include the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis (also called the Schengen crisis), the Brexit crisis (Schimmelfennig, 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic (Boin & Rhinard, 2023), and the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In addition to the previous explorations of the Eurozone and migration crises, Brexit was stated to have emboldened anti-EU voices in CEE states, thus exacerbating the East-West divide (Makszin, 2020); and certain CEE states were found to have introduced restrictive and authoritarian measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, indicative of democratic backsliding and of a regression in rule of law standards (Bohle et al., 2022). On the other hand, responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine are seldom attributable to common of the East-West divide other than EU member states' efforts to diversify their supplies of energy resources and reduce their dependency on Russia in this regard, which, however, stem primarily from geographical proximity and state-level determinants rather than CEE characteristics (Anghel & Jones, 2023).

The spectrum of recent EU crises, which often overlap both temporally and substantively and are therefore mutually interdependent, has occasionally been termed a “polycrisis”. Polycrises exhaust a joint governance system's capabilities to act effectively with equal regard for all of its components, and thus may, via politicisation of these issues, negatively impact attitudes towards the system, or European Union (Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024). The tumultuous and unpredictable development of the EU polycrisis has been shown to impact regional cohesion and policy coordination within more-or-less institutionalised CEE cooperation frameworks, namely the Visegrád Group (Eihmanis, 2024). A covert precedent for assuming the effect of crises for the cohesion of CEE states, and therefore the political factors of the East-West divide, exists.

2. Conceptual framework

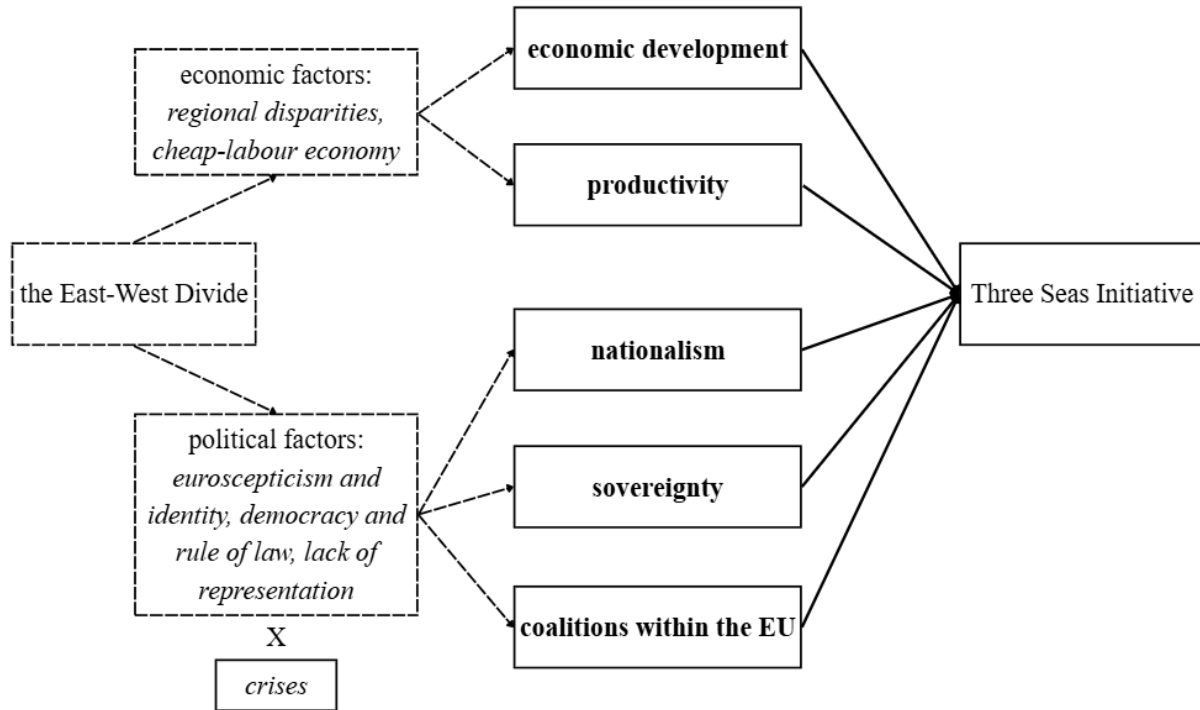


Figure 1: The thesis' conceptual framework. Dashed lines and boxes summarise common threads in scholarly literature on the East-West divide while solid lines propose association.

The concepts presented in Figure 1 are unambiguously defined as indicative of either economic or political facets of the East-West divide and their further granulation is useful solely for ease of analysis and diversity of argumentation. This reassociation is not a one-to-one mapping between previously established factors and concepts, as the proposed factors and the analyses their authors conduct are far too multifaceted. They are, however, sufficiently distinct as to not overlap in their respective applicability, and clear and concise enough to be identified via our empirical content analysis of Joint Declarations of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The thesis does set as its research question a comparison of the factors influencing the 3SI's position within the East-West divide, but an in-depth conceptualisation and operationalisation are not necessary. The concepts only need to be introduced insofar as they logically expand upon theoretical expectations from the literature, and insofar as they are understood to encompass specific viewpoints and activities which could feasibly be mentioned in the 3SI's Joint Declarations. None of them are subject to direct

measurement, revolutionary reinventions, or theoretical scrutiny within the thesis' qualitative content analysis or, indeed, within its framework.

2.1. Dependent variable

The conceptual framework's dependent variable is the CEE region's understanding and treatment of the East-West divide via joint action and cooperation, ergo the very existence of the **Three Seas Initiative (3SI)**. An intergovernmental cooperation framework encompassing all states of the CEE region, this thesis assumes it is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon and seeks to explain its formation as a cooperation scheme wholly supplementary to the activities of the European Union and other regional coalitions. As an empirical phenomenon the exploration of which does not intend to be transposable to similar cooperation initiatives, it cannot be conceptualised. Its presumed connection to the thesis' conceptual framework is demonstrated in the second one of its three "overarching pillars" – "economic development, European cohesion, and transatlantic ties" – as increasing "real convergence among EU Member States, thereby contributing to enhanced unity and cohesion within the EU. This allows avoiding artificial East-West divides and further stimulate [sic] EU integration" ('About – Three Seas Initiative', 2018).

As demonstrated in the literature review, the Three Seas Initiative is typically analysed as either a forum outwardly addressing economic factors underpinning the East-West divide or a tool for geopolitical emancipation and regionalism of underrepresented CEE states. Its economic and political activities, implications and dimensions, and thus justifications for the conceptual framework's corresponding division into competing economic and political factors are reasonably well-established, though a correlation with the thesis' later conceptualisations of nationalism and sovereignty as defining features of the East-West divide is not present.

2.2. Independent variables

Stemming from Chapter 1's exploration of the East-West divide's economic and political factors as they appear in scholarly literature, the following conceptualisations do not seek to

adjudicate between them but to translate them into identifiable indicators — sufficiently concrete and distinct as to be recognisable in the text of the Joint Declarations.

The thesis conceptualises the **East-West divide**, its composite independent variable, as “the multitude of political, legal, institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and developmental differences, either perceived or empirically manifested, between East and West European countries and stakeholders” (Volintiru et al., 2024, p. 790), where it specifically defines “East European” countries as EU member states of the CEE region, therefore the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The definition’s authors’ supplementary comments, which highlight the fluid and transient nature of the divide and the specific membership of its respective “blocs”, and the great variety of dimensions within it, are accepted as crucial and valid, but not observed within the thesis. Adhering to the principle of parsimony, it engages solely with the **economic** and **political** dimensions of the divide, and CEE countries are considered firmly entrenched on its Eastern side.

The **economic** factors as defined within the literature are conceptualised by states’ differences in **economic development** and **productivity**. Both represent complex variables which are themselves commonly understood as composite indices. **Economic development** must be conceptually distinguished from economic growth: “While economic growth is simply an increase in aggregate output, economic development is concerned with quality improvements, the introduction of new goods and services, risk mitigation and the dynamics of innovation and entrepreneurship... Economic development requires collective action and large-scale, long-horizon investment. Economic development addresses the fundamental conditions necessary for the microeconomic functioning of the economy.” (Feldman et al., 2016, p. 1). This definition addresses established aspects of both regional disparities and CEE states’ cheap-labour economies with an outsized dependence on foreign direct investment, within which convergence could be reached by adopting specific long-term strategies. A non-exhaustive list of such collective action and quality improvements is expanded in a seminal text on the East-West divide, where even post-2004 enlargement, CEE states have failed to converge in “development indicators such as the urban-rural ratio, level of capitalisation and savings, entrepreneurship and innovation, integration in global/European production, technology, R&D chains, the minimum wage, social expenditures, poverty, deprivation, income inequality, unemployment, and mortality” (Bârgăoanu et al., 2019, p. 108). As a simpler conceptualisation, any measure which is indicative of a government’s long-

term strategy to propagate a positive environment for both investors, and foreign and domestic businesses, is interpreted as a measure seeking economic development.

Productivity is a related concept which this thesis conceptualises as a ratio of economic output over input, or, specifically, a variable with four components: “innovation, including the creation of new technologies; education to spread these new technologies and develop the capacity of the workforce; efficiency to promote the effective and flexible allocation of resources for production in various sectors; and infrastructure” (Kim et al., 2016, p. 1). The wording is overtly similar to the concept of economic development; indeed, various development indicators of the previous paragraph could themselves be conceptualised as encompassing all of productivity’s components. Its analytical strength lies in its explicit references to education, connecting the concept with the established factor of underdeveloped domestic capacities and brain drain, while infrastructure and resource allocation highlight the impact of productivity gaps on regional disparities within CEE countries themselves. As a simpler conceptualisation, any measure which aims to address specifically the capabilities of the domestic workforce, or the construction and maintenance of new infrastructure is interpreted as a measure aimed at increasing productivity.

This thesis divides **political factors** as defined in literature into three concepts: **nationalism**, **sovereignty**, and **transnational coalitions within the EU**, referring to the efforts of the latter to shape policy from a more lucrative position than an individual member state could attain. The former two are positioned curiously in their relation to the East-West divide: they represent concepts which have been used as analytical lenses and conceptual frameworks for the divide’s exploration, but unlike the economic factors, their increase (however one would choose to measure them) would deepen the divide. A decrease in their influence on policymaking processes would, on the other hand, enable mitigating the effects of the political cleavage. Nevertheless, they remain defining features of the East-West divide’s conceptualisation within this thesis. References to these two concepts which could be interpreted as discouraging their use, or positively negative identifications, such as an encouragement of the European Union’s governance and an overt identification with its values, is also noted.

Providing a clear definition of **nationalism** is a complex undertaking. It, together with its implications within the conceptual framework, represents possibly the single most contestable term operationalised in this thesis, and debates on its definition, characteristics, and typology have been led across scientific disciplines for centuries (Dar, 2022). In analysing the East-West divide,

this discourse can be circumvented by linking nationalism to Eurosceptic tendencies attributed to CEE states, which was previously introduced as the divide's first political factor. The causal and conceptual association between nationalism and Euroscepticism is well-established (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012; Huddy et al., 2021); the thesis adopts one of its conceptualisations, which introduces nationalism as “a political movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential “nation” (Breuilly, 2022, pp. 16–17). Though this wording seemingly introduces three individual concepts masquerading as one, this thesis does not purport to be a treatise on nationalism – the unwanted intervention of foreign actors including European institutions is simply interpreted as curbing national autonomy, unity or identity in one way or another in nationalist narratives.

A clearer but more specific connection with the theoretical debate on the East-West divide is present in this thesis' conceptualisation of **sovereignty**. Though the term itself is subject to a comparable amount of discursive nebulosity as nationalism, and is obfuscated even further by the removal of sovereigns and the democratic transition (while the nation still retains its salience), a single definition emerges as all-encompassing: “the core element of sovereignty is the possession of ‘supreme authority’” (Bellamy, 2006, p. 171) over all matters of governance and public life as a necessary solution to anarchy where consensus cannot be relied upon. The exclusive holder of sovereignty is typically the state, but sovereignty is increasingly pooled in the European Union as its institutions attain a growing number of competences (Fassbender, 2024). The supreme authority of the state therefore ceases to exist and its sovereignty falters as a result, inviting comparisons to the late 20th-century where CEE states were under Soviet domination (Bickerton, 2009). Sovereignty, respectively the loss of it in the wake of European integration, is therefore occasionally connected with Euroscepticism as a political factor of the East-West divide but maintains a much more salient link with democratic standards and rule of law concerns. The competence of the European Union to impose migration quotas or certain governance practices, or instead impose punitive measures because of its dissatisfaction with member states' conduct directly infringes on states' supreme authority (Brack et al., 2020).

Finally, **transnational coalitions within the EU** provide a way for states to overcome structural disadvantages stemming from their underrepresentation in the Union and are a more case-specific alternative to conceptualising regionalism, regional cooperation, or regional

integration. A coalition is understood “a temporary alliance of ideologically distinct parties for combined action” (Truchlewski & Schelkle, 2024, p. 969) which cooperate in a given policy area motivated by a range of commonalities “from leadership ambitions to shared interests and policy preferences, from geographic proximity to personal ties between leaders, from sympathetic political cultures to compatible bureaucracies” (Janning & Möller, 2014, p. 5). The potential benefits of such cooperation include an increase of bargaining power vis-à-vis other states, a pooling of natural or human resources, or economic capabilities, an amplifying of voices in policymaking arenas, and in a greater share of voting power in the EU’s processes.

2.3. Aggravating factor and hypotheses

Following the final explored concept in the literature review, **crises** function as an aggravating factor in the conceptual framework affecting the salience of political factors of the East-West divide for the 3SI. A crisis is defined as an “extraordinary moment of urgency and uncertainty that poses an immediate threat to the proper functioning of the policy domain challenged by the crisis in one or more EU member states” (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021, p. 1354), a complete list of which we extrapolate directly from literature. These are the migration crisis of 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine from 2022 onwards. Their status within the framework as exerting influence primarily on political factors logically follows from the provided conceptualisation and the literature review part on crises. In conclusion, the thesis does not necessarily seek explicit references to crisis events in 3SI documents but hypothesises their contextual importance.

An initial reading of Figure 1 may portray the thesis’ main argument as one which posits that the existence of 3SI represents CEE states’ response to the existence of the East-West divide. This internal logic is indeed unconditionally confirmed by the Three Seas Initiative’s avowed mission statement. The figure, however, contrasts political and economic narratives of the divide as proposing two or more cleavages which are parallel, but not identical, in its geographical location, impact, or specific empirical manifestations. As becomes apparent in the next chapter, the 3SI is nevertheless largely an economic forum, its institutions (outside of the Three Seas Summits which are attended by heads of participating states and at which Joint Declarations are issued) all aim to boost economic development and productivity, but its political underpinnings

cannot be dismissed. It was founded at the height of the migrant crisis and the rise to prominence of the East-West divide in public and academic discourse, which it swore to transcend. The 3SI is also the sole international forum which primarily represents CEE states and interests, and their continued participation must be understood as an expression of their political will.

The solid arrows of Figure 1 connecting concepts with the Three Seas Initiative would best be interpreted as being of varying strength and transparency, perhaps even flickering. Expectations synthesised in the literature review and distilled in the conceptual framework result in the following two hypotheses:

H1: *"Economic factors are definitionally more prominent in CEE countries' justifications of the Three Seas Initiative – thus its treatment of the East-West divide – than political factors."*

H2: *"Political factors rise in salience during crises."*

3. Research design and methodology

3.1. Case selection: The Three Seas Initiative as the Comprehensive CEE Forum

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is an intergovernmental forum founded in 2015 by Croatia and Poland, later upsizing its membership to include 13 participating states: all the CEE states – the only forum to do so –, founding member Austria, and its newest member Greece. In addition to its location between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas, it also styles itself as positioned on a spatial intersection between Europe’s North-South axis and its East-West divide. On its website, which is, admittedly, rather outdated, it centres connectivity among its member states as its main goal with a “special focus on infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity”. (‘About – Three Seas Initiative’, 2018).

The 3SI is primarily structured around annual Three Seas Summits, which have been held in different cities and different hosting countries in the CEE region since the inaugural 2016 Dubrovnik Summit, with Bucharest and Warsaw being the only capitals to have hosted it twice. Similarly to summits of the European Council or NATO, participating states are typically represented at the presidential level (or the next highest rank), in light of which they become the most senior diplomatic meetings exclusive to the CEE region, with the occasional participation of other states (Błaszczak, 2024). Their ultimate outputs are the Joint Declarations of the Three Seas Initiative, whereby all present heads of state sign a common viewpoint on the 3SI’s progress, activities, and goals, but increasingly also various geopolitical topics. These are the only formalised outputs of the 3SI’s political activity, the sole expressions of its members’ political will, though policymakers have proposed permanently staffed bodies on several occasions. A 3SI Secretariat had been established for the 2020 Tallinn Summit, but was discontinued the following year (Reinsalu, 2020).

A nebulous number of subsidiary summits, *ad hoc* working groups and other institutionalised elements has been organised within 3SI’s auspices. Three examples of established institutions include the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF), the Three Seas Business Council (TSBC) and its Business Forums, and the List of Priority Interconnection Projects, which compiles projects in one of the 3SI’s three key connectivity areas spanning one or more participating states. Resources within the 3SIIF are only granted to projects on the List, which are

nevertheless mostly funded by the states themselves. “Initially comprising 48 projects in 2018, the List had expanded to 143 by 2024” (*Priority Projects*, 2025) to and 140 by the 2025 Warsaw Summit (Orzelska-Stączek, 2025).

Despite literature’s previous focus on divergent motivations of individual member states rationalising their depth of engagement, this thesis analyses the CEE participants of the 3SI as a holistic unit and does not engage with individual states’ depth of engagement and underlying political goals. Joint Declarations of Three Seas Summits’ participating delegations are the only sources which allow such a holistic analytical approach of all CEE countries and their attitudes towards the East-West divide at least in part.

3.2. Research strategy and methodology: Content analysis

This thesis seeks to answer the following research question: “How has the Three Seas Initiative been motivated by economic or political factors over time?” The only data sampled for its empirical analysis are 11 Three Seas Summits’ Joint Declarations published between 2016 and 2026. Three Seas Summits’ Joint Declarations represent the only available source of a shared expression of political will between CEE states, the specific view of which on the East-West divide is the crux of the research.

Every annual Joint Declaration is presented and analysed individually in the empirical section and then briefly evaluated and contextualised. To this end, relevant passages of text are cited at varying length. The thesis identifies references to concepts which pertain to its framework, which themselves were derived from previous scholarship on salient manifestations of the East-West divide. Broader observations about the variation across time are then analysed in the following Discussion section and linked back to relevant debates on the nature of the East-West divide and their conclusions for CEE countries. To this end, the thesis uses a problem-driven qualitative content analysis: “Problem-driven content analyses are motivated by epistemic questions about currently inaccessible phenomena, events, or processes that the analysts believe texts are able to answer. Analysts start from research questions and proceed to find analytical paths from the choice of suitable texts to their answers.” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 343).

Although many regional and subregional integration frameworks do not issue Joint Declarations, and those of the Three Seas Initiative have never been analysed, there exists a body

of similar research on Declarations of the European Union issued under the auspices of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Within one such analysis, declarations are defined as having “no formal legal effects but (they) are a statement expressing the EU’s official position on aspects of foreign affairs. Since an official position can only arise from cooperation and agreement between the Member States, Declarations offer a rich insight into the emerging foreign policy of the Union and the values the EU seeks to promote.” (Cardwell, 2016, p. 1). This wording only needs to undergo light reinterpretation to apply to Three Seas Summits’ Joint Declarations, as they too offer a rich insight into its signatories’ emerging and entrenched policies.

The thesis’ research question inquires about temporal variation over the entire existence of the institution, the corpus of Joint Declarations is relatively small, and no individual data points are prescribed outsized importance. It is therefore suitable to follow the principles of relevance sampling in its data selection (as opposed to random sampling), defined as aiming “at selecting all textual units that contribute to answering given research questions” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 119), i. e. the full body of available text, though due to frequent repetition, only notable samples will be cited in the analysis. The thesis exempts references to subjects and phenomena which are not of any relevance to the central research puzzle, but are nonetheless parts of the Joint Declarations’ texts, including trivial declaratory statements addressing administrative matters and the Three Seas Initiative’s foreign relations. It avoids exploring these parallel lines at depth not to dilute or impede the investigation into its central research question but might engage with them when they have a potential implication reframing relevant data. The Joint Declarations’ authoritative versions are all readily available online in the English language on the website of the Three Seas Initiative’s Research Centre.

Though nuance and critical reflection is indispensable, Joint Declarations are presumed to be representative of the highest possible literary register and thus drafted with enough precision as to clarify any potential ambiguity. They provide a distilled overview of its constituent members’ common viewpoints and priorities and could certainly be described as “least-common denominator” manifestos, thus they are indeed necessarily indicative of a joint political stance even if it is minimal. This conciseness and deliberateness enable identifying references to concepts – e. g. infrastructure commitments as an acknowledgement of the economic independent variable of productivity; policy recommendations to the EU as indicative of the 3SI’s transnational “coalition” attempting to exert its influence on Brussels’ legislative processes; or the categorical rejection of

foreign political influence as antithetic to nationalist tendencies – without much ambiguity, though the research design nonetheless carries with it some limitations. The clinical austerity of the language used precludes the usage of other research methods, such as critical analyses or quantitative coding, cementing qualitative content analysis as the appropriate choice. Nevertheless, the analysis may on occasion attain an interpretative undertone when contextual clues make clear attributions of concepts to declarations’ logics difficult.

3.3. Research limitations

The thesis’ research design innately includes three potential objections to the validity and reliability of its outcomes. Firstly, the deductive, problem-driven qualitative nature of its research, which is necessitated by three levels of intervention by the author – the level of theoretical grounding and case selection, the level of assessing patterns and prevailing opinions in the academic debate and their respective usage in creating and imposing conceptual correlations. Neither stage of the research process is unambiguous, and a slightly different approach might have led to causal links, observed trends, and conclusions which would have been either radically different with no overlap whatsoever, or completely contradictory. This remains a persevering problem underpinning nearly all of qualitative research, and disbelief must be suspended when boarding the author’s train of thought, as he might nonetheless arrive at an insightful and valid endpoint. A personal, critical, and scrutinising engagement with every single component of the research process is a virtue, but it might lead to an epistemological ‘missing the forest for the trees’.

Secondly, the applicability of this research’s conclusions and implications might be extraordinarily narrow. Though the textual data is both reliable and relevant, it nonetheless represents only some 40-50 pages of text pertaining to a limited time period of one regional cooperation framework among many. The East-West split is not a concept which can be transposed, and the Three Seas Initiative is not an “ideal type” for any form of subregional cooperation. Both are analysed as wholly unique phenomena within European studies and international relations and appraised as such.

Thirdly, the thesis reflects both the linguistic bias of its author, and the biases of other authors writing on the East-West divide. Its very premise – the existence of an East-West divide – is subject to considerable controversy, and the thesis presupposes its existence without revaluation.

Fortunately, the Three Seas Initiative also refers to its existence, though only in vague terms. Despite having referenced the substantial differences within CEE states repeatedly, the thesis does not incorporate the agency of individual participating states and the transience of their positions within the divide's various indices unless exceedingly relevant. An unexpectedly significant swing from one extreme to the other might always be one legislative election away, particularly in young and consolidating democratic states.

4. Three Seas Summits' Joint Declarations

The thesis' empirical analysis concerns itself exclusively with the text of Three Seas Summits' Joint Declarations as representative of a joint political will of the 3SI's members, or the CEE region. They, however, differ in content, format, and length, possibly due to differences in the individual host countries' drafting process. Taking note of these differences, some offer significantly more insight into the evolution of the proceedings at the Three Seas Summits and serve as grounds for richer and more effective analysis. These potential limitations or strengths are noted in each subchapter when appropriate.

4.1. Dubrovnik Summit (2016)

The 3SI's debut summit, a grand institutional unveiling attended by high-level delegations of its 12 founding members in Croatia's seaside town of Dubrovnik, predictably preceded the 3SI's shortest-ever Joint Declaration in August of 2016. Over its eight paragraphs, it nevertheless contains three important elements which legitimise the thesis' theoretical expectations and conceptualisation of the international framework.

Firstly, the Joint Declaration opens with a consensual acknowledgement of an East-West axis within the European Union, though curiously without invoking the divide, any developmental gap, or a specific ambition of convergence. It instead notes that the signatories have *“recognised the importance of connecting Central and Eastern European economies and infrastructure from North to South, in order to complete the single European market, given that so far, most efforts served to connect Europe's East and West”* (3SI Summit, 2016, para. 2). The passage geographically defines the 3SI as encompassing the CEE region composed of EU member states (i. e. states to which the single European market is pertinent), and identifies within the region itself a spatial dimension, North to South, which itself is subject to disconnection or a divide. It further names its constituent cells as composed of “economies and infrastructure” employing language conceptualised previously as an exclusive domain of the economic dimension of the East-West divide.

Following further acknowledgements of the efficacy of the European Union's funding schemes to developing the CEE region, thus boosting the Union's resilience and defining itself

once again as an inseverable part of it, the Joint Declaration states that *“the momentum behind a comprehensive Adriatic–Baltic–Black Sea area cooperation... has to be reinvigorated, without creating a parallel structure to the existing mechanisms of cooperation”* (3SI Summit, 2016, para. 5). It therefore reinforces our assumption that the activities of the 3SI ought to be supplementary to other regional schemes and to the functioning of the European Union, and concurrently a novel cooperation forum which does not seek to replace existing regional schemes. As pertaining to its own conceptualisation and the initial expectations of its founders as to its function and format, the Three Seas Initiative is *“an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the States involved in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors in Central and Eastern Europe”* (3SI Summit, 2016, para. 6). This section highlights its political legitimacy and its capacity to facilitate acting within its capabilities but notes its conception as an informal forum. Its fields of activity are nevertheless exclusively related to economic matters.

The analysis’ key takeaway from the first Joint Declaration’s brief text is its omission of any reference to the East-West divide’s existence. Consequently, none of the divide’s conceptualised factors can be recognised within it either. As had been previously established, however, addressing the root causes of the divide would later become one of its key goals. The Joint Declaration concludes with an endorsement of the 3SI’s second high-level summit in Wrocław, Poland.

4.2. Warsaw Summit (2017)

The second Three Seas Summit, subtitled for the only time by the triple slogan of “Connectivity, Commerciality, Complementarity”, was held in June of 2017 in the Polish capital of Warsaw instead of Wrocław as originally suggested. The Joint Declaration issued therein represents a significant expansion in length and scope compared to its rudimentary predecessor; it comprises of 15 paragraphs which largely acknowledge the achievements of projects and cooperation frameworks both under the European Union’s supervision and outside of it. Specifically, it exalts regionalism as an especially helpful form of international policy coordination, whereby *“long-established successful regional and subregional mechanisms which have fostered extensive cooperation and development among our countries and continue to be important actors*

in strengthening cohesiveness” (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 4). The attribution of actorness to regional and subregional mechanisms is a curious inclusion, but with the omission of any specific framework, it is unclear whether this includes formats such as the Visegrád Group which have shaped EU policy or instead refers to various bilateral treaties. Its non-exhaustive list of priority investment areas also corresponds to the thesis’ conceptualisations of economic development and productivity more closely, encompassing *“the economy, transport connectivity, energy infrastructure, environmental protection, R&D and digital communication”* (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 9).

The text of the second Joint Declarations continues to defy theoretical expectations by celebrating its signatories’ *“successful European connectivity along the East-West axis”* (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 3). Once again, therefore, 3SI member states refuse to acknowledge any East-West divide within the European Union, and instead prioritise concepts invoked at the Dubrovnik summit such as an underdeveloped North-South connectivity and an adherence to European unity without highlighting any specific governance principles other than cohesion and joint economic development. The Joint Declaration’s conceptualisation of the 3SI, however, is amended significantly, defined instead as *“a flexible Presidential Forum which provides political support to foster a more effective cooperation of governments, business entities and non-governmental organizations interested in boosting regional bonds”* (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 10), a framework much more multidimensional than its relatively austere 2016 predecessor. Its formerly avowed informality, for instance, was challenged by the establishment of the *“3 Seas Business Forum which shall bring together economic entities interested in economic cooperation aimed at enhancing economic bonds within the region”* (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 15). All geographical determinants outside of the titular Three Sea Adriatic-Baltic-Black dimension have also been removed. Correspondingly, the previous definition of its participating states and space of operations are no longer defined as Central and Eastern European, but instead self-referentially as the 3SI region.

While other differences could be attributed to a crystallisation in policy preference, or the ambitious influence of the 3SI’s most populous and influential state of Poland as the Summit’s host, the analysis’ key takeaway from the second Joint Declaration is its overt denial of the existence of an East-West divide. Its factors and manifestations which constitute the thesis’ conceptual framework therefore continue to be inapplicably elusive. Nevertheless, an expected

preference for regionalism outside of the 3SI's own activities can be identified. The Joint Declaration omits an invitation to its future third Summit and does not confirm their member states' adherence to an annual summit structure.

4.3. Bucharest Summit (2018)

The third Three Seas Summit, hosted in September of 2018 in Bucharest, the capital of the 3SI's second most populous participating state of Romania, includes 21 paragraphs which are however of a surprisingly much lesser specificity than the Warsaw Declaration. The 12 participating states' Joint Declaration marks the 3SI's first explicit reference to the theoretical East-West divide by "*agreeing that the 3SI responds to the common interest of the countries of the 3SI region for acting in a coordinated manner to harness their economic potential and facilitate more rapid development, in order to increase economic convergence within the European Union*" (3SI Summit, 2018, para. 1). An increase in economic convergence within the European Union as attributed to the whole of the 3SI must be interpreted to hint at their convergence with other states of the Union, not limited to convergence among its members. This acknowledgment connects to the Warsaw declaration's proposal of the existence of Europe's East and Europe's West and firmly places the 3SI on its Eastern flank.

The Bucharest declaration also attributes fledgling agency to the 3SI and its structures in particular, though once again conceptualised as "*informal presidential platform to support pragmatic cooperation among its participating States*" (3SI Summit, 2018, para. 3), unprecedented agency vis-à-vis the European Union. Even though it otherwise includes more references to European cohesion and insists on the 3SI's coherence with existing EU legislation in a greater range of fields than the previous two declarations, it nevertheless recognises "*the Initiative's potential to contribute to the substantiation of the EU policies addressed to the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, and to complement efforts to bring these two regions closer to the European Union, including through increased interconnectivity*" (3SI Summit, 2018, para. 7). This wording does still certainly connote the 3SI's relative subsidiarity, as the Initiative's member states are indeed co-creators of these EU policies, but it sets a precedent for a more resolute and ambitious drive to shape EU policy from within.

Much of the Joint Declaration concerns various dimensions of cooperation with foreign partners or recognises and establishes an ever-increasing array of lesser specified fora and bodies organised under the 3SI's auspices including the Three Seas Investment Fund. These are not pertinent to the thesis' conceptual framework. Exempting the two key and transformative observations – a possibility to increase convergence and thus a recognition of the existence of the East-West divide, and the 3SI's ability to act jointly and exercise a united political will –, the Bucharest Declaration does not engage with the East-West divide's explanatory factors beyond what was already established previously.

4.4. Ljubljana Summit (2019)

The 3SI's fourth summit in Ljubljana, Slovenia, which was held in June of 2019, reflected a significant discursive shift in its 17-paragraph-long Joint Declaration. It contains the third exact repetition of the 3SI's three fundamental pillars and objectives first delineated in the Warsaw Declaration: *“boosting economic development, strengthening the cohesion of the EU, including by means of upgrading the infrastructure of the region, and enriching transatlantic ties”* (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 1). The first pillar includes the term used for one of the thesis' concepts and is therefore considered a direct recognition of its acuteness and relevance for CEE states. The Joint Declarations never provide an explicit conceptualisation, but as previously noted, occasionally provided lists of components (incl. in the Warsaw Declaration) of such development wholly correspond to the conceptualisation.

The Ljubljana Declaration includes three significant innovations which represent a gradual alignment of the 3SI's internal logic towards theoretical expectations. Firstly, its signatories recall *“the 3SI is fully coherent with the EU's efforts towards strengthening cohesion and overcoming regional disparities within the EU and affirming that the 3SI is complementary to the existing EU strategies and programmes”* (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 2). While the complementarity is a recurring feature, the Joint Declaration represents the first reference to the Union's regional disparities. It is unclear from its text, however, whether this is an acknowledgement of the East-West divide connecting onto the first passing reference to such a disparity in the Bucharest Declaration, or an implied reiteration of the 3SI's North-South axis, which is completely omitted otherwise. A paragraph which once again reinvents the institutional definition of the 3SI seems to

favour the latter interpretation by asserting that “*the 3SI, as a presidential platform, is an additional opportunity for the participating States to deepen their integration and cooperation and overcome developmental differences*” (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 3). This passage’s wording suggests that these developmental differences exist within the 3SI. Subsequently, the crucial EU-centric concept of convergence is not invoked.

The Ljubljana Declaration furthermore includes two decisive political statements which map to two political concepts of the thesis’ framework. It reaffirms concurrently that “*the 3SI complements our cooperation within the EU and contributes to prosperity, security, democracy and respect for human rights*” (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 5), and that “*the message of unity and equality regarding the future of the EU, driven by its values and freedoms that have provided peace, stability and prosperity across Europe*” (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 10), notably emerging as the first instance the 3SI has endorsed the activities and tenets of the European Union not exclusively in reference to its various infrastructure and cohesion funding schemes. This represents at least a rhetorical deviation from theoretical expectations which ground the East-West divide in nationalist, sovereigntist, or otherwise Eurosceptic explanations. In the following paragraph, it expands upon earlier hints of the 3SI’s potential transformative power from the Bucharest Declaration by laconically encouraging “*EU institutions to include the 3SI objectives and priorities in formulating their policies*” (3SI Summit, 2019, para. 11). The wording seemingly ascribes an external status to EU institutions relative to 3SI’s participating states, not merely a hierarchically superior one.

The Ljubljana Declaration contains several key references to the East-West divide which could, however, be interpreted in a multitude of ways. It acknowledges that regional disparities within the EU still exist, which could alternatively be an endorsement of the Bucharest Declaration’s soft recognition of the East-West divide, or the previous Declarations’ embedded goals of increasing North-South connectivity. It also cements the 3SI as an actor capable of, by the joint merit of its participants’ political will, exerting influence on EU policies including economic development and cohesion.

4.5. Tallinn Summit (2020)

The fifth summit of the 3SI, which is known as the Tallinn Summit after the capital city of its hosting country of Estonia despite having been held virtually due to restrictions imposed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, saw the reemergence of common keywords and concepts, and largely followed themes first observed in its predecessors. Its Joint Declaration co-signed by the 3SI's 12 founding members had become the longest one in the format's history with 23 paragraphs. Two striking omissions include the first lack of a conceptualisation of the 3SI as any sort of governmental forum, and the lack of any attribution of agency or actorness to the 3SI vis-à-vis the European Union, i. e. no recognised capacity to transform EU policies.

The Tallinn Declaration's chief contribution to the analysis is its reiteration of two themes which were absent from the Ljubljana Declaration: the North-South axis of connectivity and convergence plausibly spanning the East-West divide. The former is invoked in its variation on the 3SI's mission statement, "*cohesive economic development and enhanced connectivity in the Three Seas region through the dynamic cooperation in developing efficient and modernized infrastructure connections in the fields of energy, transportation and digitalisation, especially on the north-south axis of the European Union*" (3SI Summit, 2020, para. 2), the logic of which is once again reminiscent of the thesis' conceptualisation of economic factors of the East-West divide but not in direct reference to it. The latter is perhaps invoked in its assertion that "*the engagement of Germany in the Three Seas Initiative contributes to the development of the region and convergence among EU member states*" (3SI Summit, 2020, para. 9), whereby Germany could play a particular role in helping CEE states converge to a level of economic development which it itself possesses or contribute to the alleviation of regional disparities within 3SI in a further unspecified way.

A connection to the innovations of the Ljubljana Declaration is maintained elsewhere, but in a manner of less relevance for the research question and the goal of the analysis. The Tallinn Declaration repeats the 3SI's value-based commitments "*in line with the principles of free-market economy, democratic values and transparency*" (3SI Summit, 2020, para. 4), but omits a rhetorical linkage with the European Union. The Union is mentioned solely as the provider of funding instruments and a pre-existing framework with which the 3SI and its activities are cohesive and complementary.

A hitherto unprovided opportunity to observe patterns related to the second hypothesis and the aggravating factor is provided by the Tallinn Summit's occurrence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the one paragraph which acknowledges the crisis, its *“global economic and financial impact...highlights the importance of regional economic ties and well-developed cross-border infrastructure, and increases the relevance and role of the Three Seas Initiative, including in stimulating economic recovery after the pandemic”* (3SI Summit, 2020, para. 3). Though a tenuous connection to the political factor of regional coalitions could be constructed, it does not exhibit a willingness to engage with EU policymaking and is thus not considered as responding to the East-West divide. Its primary focus on infrastructure and the economy is consistent with the alignment observed in previous declarations outside of times of upheaval.

The main innovation of the Tallinn Declaration is its expansion of the 3SI's institutional structure, including its establishment of a permanently staffed secretariat. The Tallinn Summit marks the first and the final time when a secretariat was functional; the body was never reinstated. Its potential acknowledgements of the East-West divide are of questionable validity at best, as it overall represents a significant regression in its relation to the conceptual framework compared with the previous two declarations.

4.6. Sofia Summit (2021)

The sixth Three Seas Summit held in October of 2021 in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia marked a return of the in-person format after the two-year interruption. Its output exceeded its predecessor in length to become the 3SI's longest Joint Declaration with 26 paragraphs. In addition to its conceptually important content, which includes insightful references to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and EU-wide convergence, it is the first declaration since the Dubrovnik Declaration to identify the 3SI region as geographically Central and Eastern European.

Serving as a synthesis of several themes introduced throughout the previous five Joint Declarations, the Sofia Declaration defines *“the Three Seas Initiative as a cooperation platform aimed at increasing connectivity especially along the North-South axis in the region of Central and Eastern Europe in the fields of transport, energy and digitalization, strengthening cohesion and convergence within the EU”* (3SI Summit, 2021, para. 6). While convergence within the European Union appears as a direct reference to the East-West divide, the wider context is likely

indicative of an adoption of the EU's convergence goal to apply to the 3SI region exclusively. The 3SI clarifies its understanding of cohesion and convergence further by proposing a statistical claim that *"closing just 50 percent of the infrastructure gap on the North-South axis of the European Union in the regional infrastructural connectivity by 2030 would cost between 3 to 8 percent of GDP per year"* (3SI Summit, 2021, para. 13), the source and scope of which is unclear and elusive. Its treatment of the pandemic is very similar in wording to the Tallinn Declaration's precedent, stating that *"the coherent activity of the Three Seas Initiative will provide a broader framework for deeper cooperation aiming at recharging our economies and developing cross-border infrastructure"* (3SI Summit, 2021, para. 7) and thus avoiding any political implication. Also in direct continuation of the Tallin Declaration, and therefore a direct denial of the Ljubljana Declaration, the text's passage listing values and principles of the 3SI does not identify them with the European Union.

The Sofia Declaration includes possibly the clearest reference to the yet uninvoked concept of sovereignty, though its operationalisation is surprisingly attributed to the 3SI vis-à-vis foreign actors, not to individual states. The signatories *"remain open to collaborate with other regional and global actors with whom (they) share the same democratic values, the European and transatlantic orientation goals, and common interests. At the same time, (they) uphold (their) readiness to involve, based on consensus, non-Three Seas Initiative countries in implementing regional priority projects, developed under the Three Seas Initiative"* (3SI Summit, 2021, para. 19), whereby they declare an exclusive competence to facilitate foreign involvement in 3SI activities. While extra-European foreign affairs were previously stated to not pertain to the research question, the assertiveness of this claim is unprecedented and partly supersedes the reliance on coalitions to influence EU policymaking. Though not seemingly linked to the concurrent COVID-19 pandemic by any salient measure, it provides some support for the second hypothesis due to its timing.

In 2021, the 3SI reintroduced the geographical framing of its own spatial dimension as coterminous with the CEE region, acknowledged convergence within the EU as belonging to its main goals, and included an expression interpretable as collective sovereignty, or "supreme authority", to coordinate 3SI projects. Considering these findings, the Sofia Declaration becomes the most significant Joint Declaration yet.

4.7. Riga Summit (2022)

The seventh Three Seas Summit was held in Riga, Latvia, in June 2022. Much of the contents of its Joint Declaration addressed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched in February of that year, and Ukraine joined the 3SI as the framework's first partner-participant. The conflict certainly emerges as a crisis state which substantially politicises the text: 4 of the Riga Declaration's 31 paragraphs reference the 3SI's support of Ukraine in absolute terms.

Exempting this contextual innovation, which is best exemplified by its paragraphs expressing concern about "*the current extremely volatile geopolitical and economic environment and global security situation caused by Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine*" (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 2) and "*resolutely condemning Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and urging Russia to immediately stop its indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and to immediately and unconditionally withdraw all its troops and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders*" (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 3), attitudes of CEE member states towards Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine do not constitute a factor influencing Europe's East-West divide in literature. The Riga Declaration's text, however, does consequently include strong messaging aligning the 3SI with the European Union, its values, and its expansion, displaying an antithetical identification with the concept of nationalism as a representation for Euroscepticism, and thus a political factor. EU governance is endorsed in a passage defining "*the 3SI as a valuable tool for the promotion of the principles of good governance, green economy, and smart and sustainable development, thus contributing to the development of the EU*" (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 18), reincorporating an identification of the 3SI's principles with the Union for the first time since the Ljubljana Declaration.

Its willingness to contribute to EU policymaking similarly not included in Joint Declarations since the Bucharest summit in acknowledging "*the 3SI's potential to contribute to the EU policies directed at the Western Balkans, thus complementing the efforts of bringing this region closer to the EU, including through investing in interconnectivity, extending of EU energy, transport, digital and telecommunication corridors, and accelerating green transition*" (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 14) marks a significant rhetorical turn since the Sofia Summit. In contrast with emphasising 3SI's "supreme authority" to coordinate its projects, many of which concern the

3SI's own infrastructure corridors, it now again offers itself as a subsidiary partner to the EU in achieving the same goals, even declaring to *“welcome the applications for EU membership of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia”* (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 14). In familiar and oft-invoked formulations, the 3SI further defines itself *“as a cooperation platform aimed at strengthening cohesion and convergence within the EU”* (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 15) with a primary goal of *“stressing the growing importance of the EU North-South connectivity, where 3SI has an important role to play in reinforcing resilient networks and cohesion of Europe”* (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 5). The text also entrenches *“further efforts to focus on science, education, technology and innovation in the three pillars of the 3SI”* (3SI Summit, 2022, para. 21) in a direct reference to the thesis' conceptualisation of productivity – one of the three pillars of the 3SI is increasing cohesion within the EU which could variably be understood as a tacit acknowledgement of the East-West divide, though a firmer identification remains unestablished.

The Riga Declaration serves a primary function as the 3SI's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and exhibits unprecedented levels of political alignment with the European Union, including signs of shaping its policy through the transnational coalition of CEE states it constitutes. The economic dimension and an avowed goal of convergence remain definitional, but as hypothesised in literature, crises aggravate the salience of political factors.

4.8. Bucharest Summit (2023)

The eighth high-level summit of the 3SI was the second such event held in Bucharest, Romania, in September of 2023, marking the first time in the forum's history a country hosted the Three Seas Summit twice. In accommodation of this fact, the 42-paragraph-long Joint Declaration issued at the summit is referred to as the Second Bucharest Declaration. Continuing to reflect CEE states' stance towards the crisis situation occurring at its Eastern border *“one and a half years into the brutal war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine and the geopolitical upheaval it generated”* (3SI Summit, 2023, para. 24), the Second Bucharest Declaration is a slightly expanded thematic continuation of the precedent set by the Riga Declaration. Rather than occasionally remarking that all of 3SI's participants are member states, the text solidifies the Initiative's position as an unquestionably intra-EU entity.

A significant change within the 3SI in 2023 was a shift in national composition; though Austria had been a founding member of the 3SI, Greece joined the forum as its 13th member *“greatly enhanc(ing) its potential as a platform for improving economic development, transport, energy and digital infrastructure connectivity on the North-South axis and for strengthening the cohesion of the EU”* (3SI Summit, 2023, para. 25). The project decoupled from a strict CEE-regional association and cemented itself as representative of the region but not its exclusive domain. Though Austria is not traditionally considered part of the CEE region, its classification as a Central European country is seldom disputed. Greece, on the other hand, would invariably avoid the label of an “Eastern European” state despite sharing several key characteristics identified in literature with conventionally CEE EU member states.

The Second Bucharest Declaration includes several more paragraphs on Ukraine and its unwavering support of that country in face of Russia’s full-scale invasion than the Riga Declaration did. It expresses similar levels of support for Moldova, and *“welcome(s) the granting of the EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia. (They) reiterate a strong message of support and encouragement to the EU aspirants for continued reforms on the EU path.”* (3SI Summit, 2023, para. 28). As the analyses of the last two declarations indicate the bridging of a potential political East-West divide driven by the consequences of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and CEE’s reintegration into the European Union, the 3SI maintains its regional economic and connectivity focus, but is also greatly concerned about *“the increasing volatility of the security environment due to Russia’s continued unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine and its hybrid warfare provoking a chain of disruptive effects at global level, including on supply chains, economic development and energy coherence”* (3SI Summit, 2023, para. 4).

The text is further underpinned by references to military resilience and security topics, which are presented as partly economic and partly political, but no longer carry even a disputable East-West divide connotation. The term “convergence” does not appear in the text despite its considerable length. The text therefore no longer proposes even in soft terms a policy-shaping transnational coalition or a partnership position for the 3SI. To cite a more salient development in the 3SI’s self-conceptualisation, the sovereignty-declarative foreign partnership provision of the Sofia Declaration reappears in a much tamer and “more European” form: *“the 3SI is open to*

cooperation with non-EU countries who are committed to the fundamental values and principles of the European Union” (3SI Summit, 2023, para. 19).

In conclusion, the Second Bucharest Declaration joins the Riga Declaration as indicative of a post-2022 reinvention of the 3SI, or perhaps a return to its original conception as a loose cooperation framework and informal high-level forum enriched with several Funds and parallel summits of lesser diplomatic relevance. Its intermittently mentioned political ambitions had instead shifted to an absolute alignment with the policies of the European Union both rhetorically and practically, yet reflective of the substantially unchanging composition of these Joint Declarations’ signatories, they remain expressions of CEE states’ political will.

4.9. Vilnius Summit (2024)

The ninth 3SI summit was held in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius in April of 2024. Its corresponding Joint Declaration, comprised of 25 paragraphs many of which are long and technical, represents a slight diversion in both length and writing style from its two predecessors. Nevertheless, it serves as a thematic continuation of the Riga Declaration, denouncing Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and including a growing number of commitments to policy coordination in security affairs, and a consistently expectable volume of paragraphs highlighting 3SI members’ affiliation and policy alignment with a diverse array of activities of the European Union.

Other than highly specific reflections on certain progresses in the 3SI’s priority areas, the Vilnius Declaration introduces one substantial innovation onto the Second Bucharest Declaration by noting *“the geostrategic importance of the 3SI participating states in Europe and the potential of the 3SI as a beneficial coordination platform of strategic interests of the region (and) commit(ting) to strengthening the role and visibility of the 3SI, including vis-à-vis EU Member States who are not members of the 3SI”* (3SI Summit, 2024, para. 4). If it were a part of a Joint Declaration issued earlier, this passage would hold significantly different implications and could have also been mapped to conceptualisations of shaping EU policy through regional coalitions and nationalism or sovereignty. It nevertheless functions as an identification of a plausibly political factor underpinning a manifestation of an East-West, or CEE-vs-non-CEE, divide, but it does not correlate with any of the thesis’ expectations; security and geostrategy do not appear in its literature

review or conceptual framework. Even previously operationalised concepts are attributed to this new theoretical underpinning whereby “*the context of Russia’s unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war against Ukraine, (they) highlight the urgency and strategic importance of accelerating 3SI efforts in building resilient infrastructure and enhancing connectivity, in particular on the North–South axis, to contribute to greater convergence within the EU, redirection of transportation routes and supply chains, and the strengthening of overall 3SI security and prosperity*” (3SI Summit, 2024, para. 14). Though convergence does reappear among the 3SI’s goals, its utterance cannot be attributed to either political or economic factors.

The Vilnius Declaration introduces a new regional descriptor, enriching the previous repertoire of names consisting of Central and Eastern Europe and the self-referential 3SI region by noting in a different paragraph that development of dual-use infrastructure represents “*a political goal as well as a responsible investment in our secure future and contributes to the reinforcement of the Eastern flank of NATO*” (3SI Summit, 2024, para. 19). The association of the CEE region with NATO could indicate an increasing overlap in several regional cooperation frameworks, but as separate from the East-West divide, it is no longer pertinent to the thesis’ framework in any meaningful way. It nevertheless continues to observe the same connection to the thesis’ hypotheses and conceptual framework as the Riga Declaration and the Second Bucharest Declaration, and an increasing salience of factors of the East-West divide attributed to politics, specifically their near-total disappearance from the 3SI’s Joint Declarations, as aggravated by the continued crisis state of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

4.10. Warsaw Summit (2025)

Warsaw hosted its second high-level summit of the 3SI in April of 2025. The Second Warsaw Declaration, recalling pre-established naming conventions, no longer contains any references to the 3SI’s regional delineation, to EU-level convergence – though it does mention the term in connection with the European integration candidate countries –, or to the North-South axis outside of a retrospective report deeming this area successful. It redefines the 3SI’s ultimate paradigm as “*politically inspired but business-driven and it is the business cooperation that is the core of its framework*” (3SI Summit, 2025, para. 7). This passage is instrumental in answering the thesis’ research question to an extent, but the 3SI no longer interacts with the East-West divide. Its

relationship vis-à-vis the European Union is disambiguated by the declaration's signatories briefly declaring their commitment to "*putting the EU integration at the centre of all 3SI undertakings*" (3SI Summit, 2025, para. 5).

Measures previously conceptualised as alleviating the effects of the economic East-West divide still form the majority of the Second Warsaw Declaration's text while the Joint Declarations do not hold an obvious connection to its framework. Other parts of the text are composed either of references to an ever-increasing pivot to a security focus, which could feasibly be seen as contributing to productivity and economic development, or of declarative statements denouncing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The text is therefore a minimal thematic successor of the post-2022 Riga Declaration tradition but reflects a significant shift in 3SI's self-conceptualisation.

A scenario reflected both in literature on the East-West divide, the literature on the 3SI, and in the subchapter on research limitations, but deliberately unaccounted for in the thesis' conceptual framework, resurfaces with perhaps the most analytically insightful development in the framework's course since the 2022 summit. While Joint Declarations of the 3SI were presupposed to constitute a document detailing a joint political will of its signatories, or the participating states of the 3SI, or all CEE states, the Second Warsaw Declaration saw Hungary, one of the founding members of 3SI and a signatory of the Second Warsaw Declaration, submit a statement disassociating itself from paragraphs 4-9. These respectively concern a commitment to a "*merit-based and result-oriented EU accession process*" for Albania and Montenegro; a strong condemnation "*of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine*"; "*unwavering support for Ukraine, its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity*"; a readiness to "*step up pressure on Russia in order to weaken its ability to continue waging its war of aggression*"; a call for "*accelerating the accession process with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova*"; and a conviction that "*those who committed war crimes in Ukraine must be held accountable*" (Joint Declaration of the 10th Summit of the Three Seas Initiative, 2025, paras 4–9).

Noting that "*certain elements of these paragraphs go beyond the new political circumstances*" (Hungary, 2025, para. 2), Hungary expresses its support for the long-uninvoked core objective of the 3SI of "*strengthening... economic development across Central and Eastern Europe*" (Hungary, 2025, para. 1). The implications of Hungary's Statement for the thesis' conceptual framework are briefly discussed in the discussion chapter, but the Second Warsaw Declaration is in its other wording no longer pertinent to the East-West divide.

4.11. Dubrovnik Summit (2026)

The most recent summit of the 3SI saw high-level delegations of its participants reconvene in Dubrovnik, Croatia, for the 10th anniversary of the summit structure's launch in April of 2026. The Second Dubrovnik Declaration subtitled "*The Three Seas in Its Second Decade: Powering Europe's Strategic North-South Axis*" has become the most structurally refined of all the Joint Declarations and is vulnerably introspective. Its 41-paragraph-long structure is divided into 8 thematic blocs, hereafter referred to as chapters.

Rather than comprising of policy recommendations and expressions of future political ambitions and political will embedded within the previous set of 10, the Second Dubrovnik Declaration resembles a cover letter or a magazine page. The introductory chapter presents the 3SI region as forming "*a backbone of European resilience and growth. With over 120 million citizens and a combined GDP exceeding €3.5 trillion in 2025, and consistently growing faster than the EU average, this region is one of Europe's largest and most dynamic economic spaces*" (3SI Summit, 2026, I), and the text later entices private capital via an advertising passage: "*The Three Seas region offers a compelling investment case: EU-anchored legal and financial predictability alongside a significant and largely unmet infrastructure gap. Closing that gap requires scaling up private capital alongside institutional financing*" (3SI Summit, 2026, VII). The latter refers to an infrastructure gap which ought to correlate with the earlier conceptualisation of a divide in economic development, but the erratic and unconventional writing obfuscates meaningful comparisons to the conceptual framework. The Joint Declaration clarifies that the 3SI's primary focus is nevertheless retained on infrastructure development and policy coordination, with frequent references to the regional security apparatus and its signatories' support of Ukraine.

An overt link to one of the thesis' political factors is provided in the closing chapter on Governance and Future Development of the Initiative: "*In a time of growing geopolitical fragmentation, the Three Seas Initiative stands as a pillar of European cohesion, resilience and strategic direction. We emphasise the importance of strengthening the voice of the Initiative within EU institutions and global governance frameworks, such as G7 and G20*" (3SI Summit, 2026, para. VIII). While the former sentence implies total alignment, perhaps even a leading role within existing EU policymaking, the literature review has highlighted a systematic underrepresentation of CEE citizens within European institutions and the resulting propensity to seek exerting influence

on EU policymaking via the latter provision. It is also vaguely reminiscent of statements from earlier Joint Declarations which suggest the 3SI acts as a unitary force within the European Union system, but the excerpt does not seem to ascribe significant enough actorness to the 3SI. Similarly to other concepts operationalised during the forum's earlier stages of activity, convergence, too, has attained a new usage, whereby the 3SI calls on the European Union's candidate countries to *"advance decisively on reforms and alignment with EU policies, including in foreign and security policy and we will continue to support convergence and connectivity that deliver tangible benefits to all partners"* (3SI Summit, 2026, VI). This interpretation is curious for calling for convergence in political factors as well, but it posits that a fault-line states on both sides of which ought to converge is represented by the European Union's external border.

The Second Dubrovnik Declaration connects to the post-2022 declarations in some themes and is similar to the Second Warsaw Declaration in some themes and formulations, though it has little formal characteristics in common with the earlier Joint Declarations published during the 3SI's first decade of functioning. It reinforces the 3SI's absolute focus on economic development, productivity, and shaping EU policymaking while aligning itself with the Union's political processes. It reinvents the conceptualisation of convergence, and by extension the geographical location of the East-West divide and rhetorically positions itself as having indisputably prevailed over it. It concludes with a commendation of *"the commitment of Slovakia to host the Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum in 2027"* (3SI Summit, 2026, para. VIII), an event which has never happened under the organisation of this founding participating state and signals persevering interest in the format from its members.

5. Discussion and synthesis

The penultimate chapter of this thesis details and compiles the analysis' findings, identifies trends within the analysis and correlates them first to the conceptual framework's two hypotheses. Its structure and argumentation rely on several basic premises from the first two chapters, chief among which is the implication that seeking convergence and cohesion is an acknowledgment of the economic East-West divide within the Three Seas Initiative's conceptualisation of it. This notion was not at all visible in the Joint Declarations themselves, and the 2017 Warsaw Summit's assertion that "*successful European connectivity along the East-West axis*" (3SI Summit, 2017, para. 3) sets an example for the North-South dimension to follow might even seem contradictory. Nevertheless, the Three Seas Initiative's website states that "The second objective is to increase real convergence among EU Member States, thereby contributing to enhanced unity and cohesion within the EU. This allows avoiding artificial East-West divides and further stimulate EU integration." ('About – Three Seas Initiative', 2018) in a more recent publication. The chapter is then followed by the thesis' Conclusion, where information synthesised herein is applied to the central research question.

5.1. The first hypothesis

The first hypothesis which directly addresses the research question is that "*Economic factors are definitionally more prominent in CEE countries' justifications of the Three Seas Initiative, thus its treatment of the East-West divide, than political factors.*" This statement, the basic premise of which is addressed in the introductory paragraph to this chapter – a link between the Three Seas Initiative and the East-West divide – has no temporal dimension, therefore it presupposes the continuous prevalence of economic factors over political ones. Its veracity is indisputable. As the most prominent and undisputable instances belonging to either conceptualisation were cited in the Joint Declarations, which are indispensably part of CEE countries' conceptualisation of the 3SI or the 3SI's self-conceptualisation, their occurrences can be summarised graphically.

Table 1 provides a cursory overview of whether political factors – a desire to shape EU policymaking through regional coalitions, an acknowledgement of the 3SI's sovereignty, or a

value-based invocation of nationalism, where the latter two were also observed to have been positively identified as negative, i. e. supporting the EU's transnational governance – and economic factors occurred within the respective annual Joint Declaration's text.

Table 1: The presence of conceptualised economic (E) and political (P) factors of the East-West divide within the Joint Declarations' empirical analysis.

JD	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
E	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
P	no	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no*	yes

*- only in the Statement of Hungary, whereby it invokes sovereignty

The first hypothesis is confirmed by the empirical analysis. The overwhelming dominance of economic content across all of the Joint Declarations, including but not necessarily limited to infrastructure investment, cohesion funding, connectivity, and convergence, maps directly onto the regional disparities and cheap-labour economy literature introduced in the literature review. This suggests that the 3SI's economic framing is not incidental but a direct institutional response to the divide's most structurally entrenched dimension. Scholars attributing the East-West divide primarily to developmental and economic factors implicitly anticipated this outcome; what the empirical analysis adds is the confirmation that economic salience is at the core of the Three Seas Initiative. The 2025 Second Warsaw Declaration's self-description as “*politically inspired but business-driven*” with “*business cooperation at the core of its framework*” (3SI Summit, 2025, para. 7) confirms that the 3SI and its members deliberately opt for an economic focus even in their alignment within transnational coalitions, which complicates the distinction between the literature's political-economic dichotomy.

Potential reasons for the relatively low occurrence of political factors are manifold. Firstly, the thesis' conceptualisations of sovereignty and nationalism (as the conceptual bases of Euroscepticism, thus an implied reluctance to adhere to tenets of European Union governance) defines them as features of the state, and though intermittent references to 3SI sovereignty or 3SI's capacity to influence EU policymaking via its Joint Declarations and other activities are certainly interesting, they are seldom employed. A refusal to relinquish sovereignty to a hybrid intergovernmental forum is itself a tacit declaration of state sovereignty, and it consequently cannot

be observed on the transnational level. The theoretical assumption that inter-CEE differences are as salient as West-CEE ones across political factors including the thesis' conceptualised and operationalised focus on sovereignty and nationalism, whereby the East-West divide on political factors is a spectrum with a cluster of Western states at one end, a cluster of Eastern states at the other, and with scores of outliers close to the centre, itself implies a difficulty of viewpoint coordination across such a large and diverse membership as the one of the 3SI. As the Joint Declarations started including positive associations with EU governance practices and referring to the 3SI as a component of the European Union, not just a non-competing or supplementary regional cooperation framework, the political East-West divide ought to be considered partly addressed and resolved.

The final caveat with the hypothesis' validity lies in the mapping of CEE states' attitudes as expressed by the Joint Declarations being directly indicative of their attitudes to the East-West divide. Hungary's disassociation from parts of the 2025 Second Warsaw Declaration which it considered antithetical to its geopolitical viewpoint is a double-edged sword. It certainly lends itself to an assumption of internal policy misalignment within the CEE region on some policy questions which weakens the sweeping and maximalist claim of the Three Seas Initiative's representation of all of its participants' joint political will. Nevertheless, it can instead be interpreted as supporting the hypothesis' analytical validity. If the structure of these Joint Declarations – not the result of any legal instrument nor does subject to a preset framework, as was demonstrated by their many inconsistencies on a year-to-year basis in matters as straightforward as defining the 3SI – allowed opt-outs, derisions, and disassociations since 2016, then every participating state must be assumed to have possessed yet never have utilised this tool. Although not binding, every provision and stance represented therein must instead be assumed to either represent its own sovereign stance or not preclude its exercise.

5.2. The second hypothesis

The second hypothesis posits that *“Political factors rise in salience during crises.”* Crises are presumed to function as aggravating factors to the prominence of political factors in CEE states' treatment of the divide specifically. As references to crises have been positively identified within the empirical analysis, and their conceptualisation corresponded to an exhaustive list, and political

factors have also been identified with greater granularity than the economic ones, findings can be summarised graphically.

Table 2 splits the Joint Declarations into three time periods corresponding to the crisis-free functioning of the 3SI before the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2021 period encompassing the COVID-19 pandemic, and the post-2022 period encompassing Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Table 2: The presence of conceptualised political factors of the East-West divide within the Joint Declarations’ empirical analysis mapped to crisis periods.

Time period	2016-2019	2020-2021	2022-2026
Crisis	none	COVID-19	Russia’s invasion of Ukraine
Political factors	2019: shaping the EU via coalitions	2021: sovereignty	2022-2026: (lack of) nationalism; 2024 & 2026: shaping the EU via coalitions

The second hypothesis is partially confirmed by the empirical analysis. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing crisis produced a significant and lasting increase in political content across the 2022-2026 texts. The 3SI as a transnational coalition with the capacity to shape EU policymaking and several positively negative identifications with nationalism and sovereignty, i. e. acceptance of EU governance and values, are all prominently represented in the post-invasion period in stark contrast with the pre-crisis period. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, produced the opposite effect: the 2020 Tallinn Declaration reinforced economic interpretations of the divide, whereby its *“global economic and financial impact...highlights the importance of regional economic ties and well-developed cross-border infrastructure, and increases the relevance and role of the Three Seas Initiative, including in stimulating economic recovery after the pandemic”* (3SI Summit, 2020, para. 3). In turn, the 2019 Ljubljana Declaration first defines the 3SI as a framework with potential implications for EU policymaking, and 2021 includes the strongest invocation of sovereignty in the entire corpus.

This divergence suggests that the aggravating effect of crises is contingent on their typology rather than their mere occurrence. The crises which generated the most sustained East-West divide scholarship, such as the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, or rule of law disputes,

none of which temporally coincide with the 3SI, were crises of political legitimacy and institutional governance. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was too a crisis with grave political and geopolitical implications for the CEE region in particular – after all, Hungary did submit its disassociation in response to it – but it served as a transformative divide-spanning event rather than one exacerbating political cleavages. By contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic was an external shock demanding an economic response. The thesis' second hypothesis therefore holds, but only for crises which implicate the specific political grievances the East-West divide is built on and not EU-level crises generally.

The conceptualisation of political factors following the 2022 Riga Declaration, a watershed moment in the length and content of Joint Declarations, and therefore of 3SI's embedded logic, could be subject to concerns. Within the five Joint Declarations issued after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an unexpected and theoretically not pertinent logic emerges. The 3SI drastically shifts its rhetorical and declaratory focus to one of a geopolitical vehicle supporting EU enlargement and denouncing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the gravest terms, while diversifying its economic portfolio to include an ever-growing array of security concepts and activities. Geopolitical inclinations, and foreign and security policies are not subject to analysis via the various East-West divide theoretical lenses; both its usefulness and this thesis' research question lose analytical focus when assessing CEE's only comprehensive forum. This is either indicative of the loss of salience of observed political cleavages similar to one of the proposed interpretations of the first hypothesis, and a political rapprochement within the European Union, or a uniquely 3SI phenomenon which requires a rethought and reconstructed approach outside of the East-West divide paradigm.

Perhaps the most telling finding of the empirical analysis concerns the trajectory of convergence as a concept across the 3SI's chronological corpus. Conceptualised within the thesis as a gradual closing of the East-West divide, the developmental and political gap vis-à-vis Western Europe, its eventual achievement formed part of the 3SI's foundational logic. By the time of the 2026 Dubrovnik Declaration, the forum presents its region as one of Europe's premier economic spaces and calls on EU candidate countries to advance their alignment with EU standards instead. The direction of convergence has inverted entirely, and with it the self-conceptualisation of the East-West divide's geographical manifestation. At the dawn of its functioning's second decade,

and in the background of its reinvention, the Three Seas Initiative has, at least in its own self-representation, transcended the East-West divide.

Conclusion

The thesis has analysed the cooperation between states in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, which has been formed a host of other regional coalitions and organisations with varying degrees of institutionalisation in 2016. A particular focus on the Three Seas Initiative is warranted by its designation as the only intergovernmental framework whose membership is essentially coterminous with the Central and Eastern European region and has been defined both in theory and in its own documents as an emancipatory tool. Its explicit goal and embedded logic are to transcend the so-called East-West divide, a multifaceted understanding of substantial and objective differences between CEE states and other member states of the European Union, by achieving economic or political convergence. The Three Seas Initiative is nevertheless understudied and practically unknown outside the CEE region despite its ambitious membership and mission statement. Its role in addressing the East-West divide in particular constitutes a significant research gap.

The thesis has provided a thorough overview of existing research on the East-West divide including its historical evolution. While sometimes operationalised as a set of various historical and cultural distinctions, exemplified perhaps by the common attribute of a “post-communist” state, other authors reject the divide’s existence altogether as a reductive and archaic analytical framework. The dominant theoretical dichotomy contrasts aspects of the East-West divide as either economic or political; the thesis adopts this line of thought. Identifying five common factors underpinning the East-West divide in literature – CEE states’ regional disparities and cheap-labour economy as economic manifestations; their democratic backsliding and rule of law standards, lack of representation in European institutions, and heightened identitarian Euroscepticism as political ones –, the thesis maps them to five more general concepts and follows their treatment in a chronological qualitative content analysis of the Three Seas Initiative’s annual Joint Declarations between 2016 and 2026. These are the only texts issued jointly by CEE states’ highest representatives and are therefore expected to contain unparalleled insights into their understanding of the East-West divide and collective treatment of such. The thesis has investigated its research question: “How has the Three Seas Initiative been motivated by economic and political factors over time?” To this end, it proposes two hypotheses resulting from a synthesis of literature on the East-West divide and addressing both of its thematic and temporal components: “Economic factors

are definitionally more prominent in CEE countries' justification of the Three Seas Initiative, thus their treatment of the East-West divide, than political ones", and "Political factors rise in salience during crises", which are introduced as an aggravating factor.

The thesis has thoroughly confirmed the first hypothesis in its empirical research, as the Three Seas Initiative introduces itself as an economic framework and its activities address infrastructural problems and economic development nearly exclusively. Nevertheless, it identified several insightful occurrences of CEE states exacerbating or alleviating the political dimension of the East-West divide throughout their statements in the Joint Declarations. While the Three Seas Initiative had increasingly placed itself within the European Union's framework as an independent joint actor capable of exerting outsized influence on policymaking, and once even affirmed its sovereignty as acting jointly yet outside of European institutions' influence during the COVID-19 pandemic, it increasingly aligned itself with the European Union's values and governance practices after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and by 2026 considers itself fully immersed within its structures and supplementary to its activity. This finding partially confirms the second hypothesis but introduces a nuance which may be disambiguated through a more granular typology of crises. It also surprisingly identifies hints of an understood shift of the East-West divide to the European Union's external border, and states of the Three Seas Initiative might now consider themselves as having achieved full convergence. The thesis answers its research question by asserting that economic factors have exercised greater influence on the Three Seas Initiative than political ones, but the latter framed its formation and its transformation into an European institution, thereby addressing the East-West divide.

Patterns identified in the thesis' novel analysis of Joint Declarations which were not initially grounded in theoretical expectations remain uncertain, and this research's limitations such as its lack of transposability and general applicability due to its grounds in a novel conceptual framework's analysis of a unique intergovernmental framework were introduced in the thesis' introductory and methodology chapters. Perhaps its primary contribution to future research on related topics is the notion that attributing the logic of CEE states' regional cooperation, and indeed their conduct in any capacity, to the underlying manifestations of the East-West divide holds little analytical power when not combined with additional frameworks or theories.

The effect of crisis typology on the East-West divide's expressions from the point of view of CEE states and their effect in promoting convergence among partner-participant states of the

Three Seas Initiative or beyond a new cleavage on the edges of Europe belong among the most promising avenues for future research. The thesis demonstrates the Three Seas Initiative, and by extension CEE states, consistently increasing in their ambition to project power as a coalition far beyond the geographical boundaries which were once thought to confine it. Limitations and potential shortcomings of its research include several research design choices for the sake of parsimony, such as an intergovernmental organisation-level analysis without engaging with divergent motivations of individual states, or its focus on the Joint Declarations exclusively without engaging with CEE states' other cross-border activities. The Joint Declarations themselves, or the Three Seas Initiative in its entirety, could also be subjected to a different research method or theoretical framing, including a more rigorous approach grounded in political economy, a specific theory of regional integration, or summit diplomacy.

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