

The Three Seas Initiative Civil Society Forum 2022
Connecting States, Regions, and Societies:
Debating, Innovating, and Acting

Policy Recommendations

The Three Seas Initiative Civil Society Forum “*Connecting States, Regions, and Societies: Debating, Innovating, and Acting*” was initiated by the President of Latvia H.E. Egils Levits and organised jointly by the Latvian Transatlantic Organisation, the Chancery of the President of Latvia, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.

The aim of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) Civil Society Forum (CSF) is to provide a unique and fundamentally new platform for the exchange of ideas and knowledge between civil society actors in the participating Member States with a direct interest in long-term cooperation. The CSF provides a support mechanism for strengthening democracy, security, and sustainability and building links of mutual benefit between the Member States and their partners inside and outside Europe. This means supporting civil society in the 3SI by protecting democratic principles and values, such as public participation in decision making, maintaining the transparency of political and economic decisions, and involving citizens in regional and European initiatives. The CSF participants discussed four topics important to 3SI societies, namely **connectivity, digitalisation, security, and governance**. Identifying the potential for cooperation, challenges, and existing projects, civil society representatives will make recommendations to be presented to 3SI leaders during a summit in Riga in June 2022.

The CSF was opened by the President of Latvia H.E. Egils Levits, followed by the panel discussion “Defining the political agenda of the Three Seas Initiative”, with participation of policy makers, which aimed at setting the scene for further debates among civil society representatives. The Three Seas Initiative has set the agenda, emphasising economic growth, investment, energy security, digitalisation, climate change, and geopolitics. The policy makers tried to answer the following questions: Is there a need to revise the identified priorities? In which areas immediate investment is needed to strengthen and develop not only the 3SI region, but also Europe as a whole? Europe's democratic tradition calls for the involvement of civil society in decision-making. What is the role of the 3SI in civil society? To what extent can European civil society benefit from the 3SI? The 3SI is already attractive to both the region's neighbours and other partner countries. What will be the role and place of a wider partnership with countries outside the region?

The civil society representatives addressed the following issues and proposed a wide range of recommendations, which need to be further discussed and implemented in cooperation with policy makers, business community and society at large.

Connectivity

Smart Connectivity, as one of the aims of the 3SI, enables expanding smart solutions for infrastructure, transport, energy, and logistics. This, in turn, provides a solid basis for modernisation, new technologies, and business models. The panel addressed potential of investments in future-oriented solutions, new, renewable energy resources, and alternative energy networks, automatisisation, and digital solutions.

Recommendations:

3SI Identity and international investment platform

- Participants of the workshop identified low public and market awareness of the 3SI as a major obstacle in furthering the platform's goals and establishing the platform as a regional and international multi-sectoral investment vehicle.
- There is a need to brand the 3SI region politically (which, in fact, is also a connectivity issue in its own right) and to bring the region closer together along a common identity firmly rooted within the EU. This common regional identity is underpinned by common values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law while also sharing history and seeking to rise above language differences.
- This approach correlates with EU macro-regional strategies identifying common challenges in specific regions. As mentioned in the opening discussion of the 3SI Civil Forum, branding 3SI as an EU macro-region is a natural strategy.
- 3SI needs to market itself to raise awareness and perception of the platform/EU macro-region as well as boost otherwise low investor awareness. This can be done through systematic strategic communication that is easily identifiable with a clear vision. Many participants mentioned the need for a permanent secretariat or management to boost the organisation's effectiveness.
- 3SI, as an investment platform, may be able to build on the advantage of reaching out to the 3SI country diasporas around the world (Latvians, Poles, Czechs, Romanians, Slovenes, etc.).
- 3SI needs to develop a common voice aligned along common priorities. This concerns common standards in services and production, as well as a public voice (common media projects reaching 3SI populations with a unified content quality standard, but in local languages).

Infrastructure

- Enhancing transportation infrastructure and tourism is an obvious strategic ambition with long-term investment potential. It is an opportunity to create modern 21st century infrastructure, including roads, ports, and railroads.
- Improving the abysmally poor existing infrastructure, and removing the obstacles of underconnectivity in the region, is an opportunity to create modern 21st century infrastructure: rail and roads that will demonstrably be able to deliver all other common goals of the 3SI. Economies improve when infrastructure quality improves.
- 3SI should strive to be recognised as a TEN-T Corridor in its own right, such as the North Sea-Mediterranean Corridor, Atlantic Corridor and others.

Energy: renewable and alternative

- Enhancement of common energy infrastructure is crucial to regional cooperation. A swift and effective transformation towards renewable energy needs to be comprehensible and affordable for the average 3SI citizen.
- Although the transformation towards green and sustainable energy is a climate change driven goal, the unexpectedly swift turn away from energy dependence on Russia also binds the 3SI region. The historic opportunity is NOW to address climate and security challenges in a sustainable way.
- Energy transformation is also a historic opportunity to connect the 3SI region through smart grids and new energy infrastructure connecting the energy supplies within the region and beyond.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to the vulnerable parts of the population affected by the rising energy prices and living costs, who risk deep poverty, societal exclusion, and other severe consequences.

Digitalisation

Digitalisation is one of the tendencies directly influencing and defining our future. Recent years have fostered the transformation of the ICT industry and societies. The Digital Agenda defined by the EU serves as a framework for regional countries. The panel looked at how the civil society can contribute to digitalisation and how the public–private partnership can foster innovation and education in ICT. Despite the increased digital skills of the population, several digital gaps exist, and they require effective solutions.

Recommendations:

- One of the 3SI key goals should be ensuring the region's leadership in 5G connectivity and excellence in cybersecurity, and its cross border implementation.
- This comes with the need to address human resources issues, digital connectivity, and education. The degree of digital skills is still low in various strata of the population. Training can address these issues, but needs to be smartly targeted to varying age groups and professional backgrounds.
- Establishing of the 3SI Centre for Digital Literacy will assist in countering disinformation and will make societies more resilient.
- Establishing the 3SI Cyber Security Centre is needed for effective coordination of policies and countering cyber-attacks. In addition to the traditional activities of such agencies, the Centre should reduce threats to civil society organisations, activists, and citizens.
- Transparency and accountability of algorithms. The 3SI countries could expand the European Commission's proposed Artificial Intelligence Act - when used in relations between state and citizens and between employer and employee. Initiative countries should subsidise only those technologies that ensure the highest ethical standards of accountability and transparency.
- The greatest obstacle to mutual understanding is often rooted in linguistic differences. This obstacle can be overcome to gain greater connectivity by actively seeking solutions that are based on AI as well as machine learning and other tools that can address “digital language” infrastructure.

Security

The security landscape of the 3SI countries and the region is diverse. The geopolitical environment, energy security, climate change, critical infrastructure, societal resilience, and maritime security—these are a few of the most relevant challenges, which require joint, coordinated, and resolute actions from all regional stakeholders. The panelists approached such issues as the role of civil society in mitigating potential risks and challenges and how the civil society can become a permanent partner in providing national and regional security. In a global competition of geopolitical blocks – which also overlaps with two competing value systems – democratic security is the best insurance against tyranny and autocracy. Civil society is a necessary component of democratic regimes. Above all – the ongoing war in Ukraine has a huge impact on European security and the 3SI region as well.

Recommendations:

- Utilise all transatlantic and European institutions to provide Ukraine with complete and comprehensive support during the war. Advocate for the importance of East-West coherence within the EU and NATO to strengthen a unified response to this threat to European security, values, and international norms. When the war is over, ensure a Marshall-style reconstruction plan for Ukraine.
- Maintain America's presence in the region as the best security guarantee for Europe! Commercial cooperation (investment and business) and security interests must be mutually beneficial (enhanced US troop presence in the region). Moreover, civil society organisations must step up engagement with lobby groups to ensure stronger cooperation with the US Congress and White House.
- Considering the threat to Eastern Europe, advocate for increased investment in common security by all EU member states.
- Integrate Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine into the Three Seas Initiative. Give them a clear status (associate/observer, for example). We have common security interests and can discuss domestic strategies. Ukraine, for example, is continuously putting its societal resilience to the test.
- Safeguard democracy and rule of law to build security at home – especially by means of EU integration in the case of Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.
- Transition away from reliance on Soviet hardware; accelerate convergence with NATO hardware and planning. The Three Seas region relies heavily on air defence and area denial systems. Our air defence is outdated, whereas Russia's capability is substantial.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the imminent security crisis serves as a heightened leverage to accelerate shaping the 3SI: improving logistics, cybersecurity, digital or energy infrastructure in the region must be high on the political agendas.

Governance

The 3SI has plans to put forward ambitious projects and initiatives, and the EU has introduced several macro-regional strategies. The panelists looked at different specific governance models needed for this region in order to ensure effective and flexible implementation of the initiated projects. The potential of formal and informal models of governance were explored. Civil society is one the main safeguards of democracy - how do we ensure that democratic principles are respected while drafting, deciding, and implementing decisions relevant to the 3SI?

Recommendations:

- Emphasis on the connectivity of values, human rights and democratic rule of law needs to be stronger on the political, civic and educational level leading to strengthening of democracy in the 3SI countries.
- Civil society needs to be encouraged to have a greater say in politics, engaged in project implementation, even to veto the problematic priority projects. Civil society participation, encouraging and developing “people-to-people” communication, sharing best practices in the region, has a synergic effect on economic and other forms of connectivity in the region.
- The 3SI needs to strictly fall under the EU umbrella, and specifically act as an accelerator of 3SI area integration, rather than anything else.
- Governance of the 3SI should focus on promotion of awareness of the 3SI even within the 3SI region and among the professional policy-making and investment communities, and minimise tensions between the flexible status quo and the need for a stable agenda in order to ensure the sustainability of the 3SI format.
- The 3SI investment fund, which has a management structure and the clear goal of seeking to attract infrastructure investment from businesses in 3SI countries and beyond could incorporate representatives from civil society and NGOs, thus fostering cooperation between business and society, as well as increase visibility of the implemented projects and the 3SI at large.
- Diversity in terms of gender, identity, generations, ethnicity and language needs to be embedded on political, educational and civic level.
- A 3SI education project, a secondary school version of Erasmus student exchange programs, to be created. It can be implemented across 3SI countries with a focus on civil society education programs such as service at the refugee centres, care centres for the elderly, etc.
- In terms of transparency, good governance, and positive transformation of public-private partnership, civil society must take the lead.
- Invest in human resources and experts – expand regional research. These policies will strengthen regional integration, connectivity, and public awareness of the Three Seas region (including among our own countries).

- Establish a special 3SI Fund to support media and investigative journalists in order to combat misinformation and promote quality reporting and media literacy throughout the 3SI.
- It is recommended to establish a 3SI public media broadcaster with a single high quality editorial room with access to all the local languages to enhance media connectivity and better understanding of one another in the region.

3SI leaders need to reflect on a common vision for the region. Summits have only identified infrastructure investment as a common goal, whereas other forms of cross-border cooperation are framed and enabled by the four freedoms ensured by the EU membership. The formulation of an attractive and understandable common vision could serve as a call to action to 3SI populations. A clear vision and openness to creating multi-stakeholder forums that would feed into the summit agenda would help create a sustainable and meaningful mission for the 3SI.