

Managing Trans-European Networks in Polycrisis – a CEE Perspective

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Abstract

Most of the Central European members of the European Union joined in 2004 with the aim to catch in several fields including transport, energy and telecommunication networks. This paper aims to identify the crisis affects on the trans-European networks EU policy on the one hand, and to identify the ability of Central European member states accessing the EU in 2004 and after to manage their influence of this policy.

Shortly after the accession of most of the countries in the focus of this research, the 2006 energy crisis and the financial crisis reshaped EU policies with special regard to investment in infrastructure. The changes of policies, finances and institutions were crystallized in the 2014-2020 budget and the accompanying regulations, also reflected in the Juncker Plan. A new investment approach, going beyond the cohesion goals, overshadowed cohesion. By the end of the 2010s, climate crises become a decisive factor in policy formation. The finances of the EU for the 2021-2027 period were planned with Covid crisis in mind. Several EU level decisions on trans-European networks in this period were influenced by the crisis in Ukraine. This paper examines how the infrastructure plans for the Eastern part of the European Union were influenced by these crises. The two main questions addressed: Did polycrisis bring any additional effect strengthening the interconnections among Central and Eastern European EU members, or did the raw of crises rather lessen the focus on these infrastructure elements? Did these effects strengthen the position of these countries within the European Union, or did the changes rather eliminate the aspect of catching up of the newcomers?

This paper follows a multi-level governance approach. The role of EU and member state level administration and their interactions regarding Trans-European network development is analysed. Interactions among member states are considered, too. The Three Seas Initiative as a high-level political forum is in the focus, but other infrastructure related relations, including trade, are taken into account, as well. The methodology used is the analysis of relevant documents and data.

Despite the mixed results, some clear tendencies can be identified, especially on the northern flank of the region – like strong Baltic cooperation, or intertemporal principles of the Polish infrastructure development policies. Changes do not affect all types of infrastructure in the same way. Energy infrastructure has recently come into focus, while results can be traced back to longer tendencies, just partly accelerated by the polycrisis. There are differences between road and rail. Pandemic and war influenced the digital transformation, but regional specialities are less trivial.

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Points for Practitioners

This paper helps to identify basic specifics of EU level and member state level competences of the administration of the Trans-European Networks, and the interactions among the stakeholders. An overview of policies, plans and results is given how the transport, energy and digital infrastructure of the Central and European region is being developed in the time of polycrisis. Regional specifics of post-Covid and war related discussions on infrastructure development are being displayed. Some positive examples are presented as key factors for regional success, while some controversies constraining regional cooperation are mentioned, too. This paper lets the reader to get an impression of complexity of policy changes from the viewpoint of countries which joined the EU with aim of catching up. The paper aims to assist policy makers to evaluate and to make better use of the existing framework of multi-level governance.

Key words: Crisis, Trans-European Networks, transport, energy, telecommunication

1. Introduction

Czechia, Estonia, Hungary Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia became members of European Union in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and later, in 2013, by Croatia. These countries acceded the European Union with the aim to catch up, among others, in terms of physical interconnections with each other and the rest of Europe. This process had been supported already by the pre-accession financial instruments of the EU, further financial support was expected after the accession. Regarding the 2007-2014 financial framework, newcomers had to share resources with the beneficiaries of the pre-accession period. This was also a learning period,

Europe has experienced a security crisis since the 2014 events in Ukraine, with intensive military operations since 2022. The climate crisis has been there for longer, getting a special focus in the EU institutions from 2019. The pandemic crises related to Covid-2019 led to economic problems starting in 2020 with long aftereffects. Europe has been hit by high energy prices and disruptions of supply, since 2021-2022. These crises effect transport, energy and digitalization in a complex way. The European Union has been constantly revising its policies. When looking for milestones, the European elections and the subsequent inauguration of new Commissions can be one of the pivots. The crucial moment for transforming the priorities into actions is the adoption of the multiannual financial framework.

The 2021-2027 multiannual financial perspective was finalized during the Covid-19 crisis. As a response to the crises, an additional temporary instrument, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) was introduced. The management framework of the key instrument: the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) changed, also in connection with the adoption of the new Common Rules of Procedure (CRP) Regulation. The regulatory framework of Trans-European Transport Network and of the Trans-European Energy Network was revised. Covid-19 crisis itself had substantial short-term and long-term effects on transport, energy use and digitalization. An energy and security crisis evolved already during the 2021-2027 period, shaping the concept of transport and energy networks, strengthening cybersecurity awareness. Among the many specifics of the Eastern part of the European Union

member states, the rule of law crisis with implications on EU funds' availability for Hungary and for a short time Poland can be mentioned. Still this paper focuses on the lobby strength of the countries of the Three Seas Initiative reflected in the TEN related decisions of the European Union.

The approach of the paper is linked to the multi-level governance concept. Trans-European Networks are physical infrastructure built in the individual member states within the competence of the member states of the European Union. Due to their interconnecting nature, cooperation of neighbouring countries is essential. Since these networks also connect regions, subnational actors will also have a say. At European level, the availability of funds, the setting of standards and deadlines are the main factors influencing the member states' progress in the development of the necessary infrastructure. At all levels, number of affected parties is high. Comprehensive coordination is needed at European level.

The beginning of the new financial period was earmarked by the Covid-19 crises and its economic consequences, at the same time an energy crisis started to emerge. Already after the occupation of Crimea, aspects of military and energy security massively influenced the agenda of infrastructure development at both EU and national level. After the 24th of February, 2022, security considerations gathered further ground. The European Union's strengthening intention to integrate Ukraine and Moldova increased the importance of physical connections with regard to the transport and energy networks, too. At the same time Europe also took action to enhance military preparedness for an eventual attack from the east. Part of this is reconsidering transport network for dual use including military mobility.

This paper focuses on the thirteen countries of the Three Seas Initiative (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia): the Eastern part of the European Union, rather the latter twelve. With the exception of Austria, these countries have higher infrastructure development needs in order to catch up to the level of interconnectivity of the Western Part of Europe. Any change of the EU practice has higher effect on these countries than those with a more developed infrastructure relying on their own development resources. The main subject of this analysis is if the changes of the EU policy on Trans-European Networks due to several crisis related factors are beneficial for the new member states under examination. Complexity of requirements and scarcity of funds are typical factors negatively influencing the opportunities of the countries concerned.

2. Research questions

The central question of this research is if the changes of the conditions of the development of the infrastructure falling into the category of the Trans-European Networks, were beneficial for the countries of the European continent joining the EU in 2004 or later, and for Greece connected to the rest of Europe through the new members (disregarding maritime connections). After 2004, legislation and financial support related to the trans-European transport, energy and digital infrastructure, have changed several times. A series of crises starting with the 2006 energy crises, influenced the EU legislation. Most of the changes were related to start of new multiannual financial frameworks. MFF debates are generally characterized by a mixture of reactions to the turbulent changes of reality

and the compromises balancing the national interests of member states. The interests of the countries in focus has been to catch up to the Western members in terms of transport, energy and digital interconnections with the support of the European Union.

This paper summarizes the changes of the European law, institutional structure and financial resources that are in connection with the Trans-European Networks (TEN). First, an overview of the literature is given, mainly with theoretical aspect on the governance of EU policies in shared competence with special regard to the Trans-European Networks. Then the main changes of legislation are summarized and where appropriate the possible effects on the countries of the Three Seas Region are analysed – based on their geographical location, level of development and governance related characteristics. Changes of institutions, personal changes in key positions are also taken into account. Besides theory, legislation and institutions, budget is also crucial, so the share of relevant funds within the available resources (including loans and financial support) is also examined. A wider explanation is given on what and why is related to the multi-crisis, how crisis management fits into longer term policies, how much this all has regional specifics.

So, the main questions to be answered here: What has changed in the governance of Trans-European Networks in the early 2020s, especially in connection with the start of the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework? What theoretical approaches describe the complex governance of the Trans-European Networks? Can any new circumstances be identified that would justify the reclassification of some elements of the governance of the Trans-European Networks? Do the recent institutional and personal changes have any specifics for the countries of the Three Seas Initiative? Are there more funds and loans available compared to the previous periods – for all member states and specifically for the region? What multi-crisis elements can we identify behind the changes – lessons learned from the pandemics, response to the energy crisis and to potential military security challenges? Do these new risks and the responses have some special relevance to the region in focus?

3. Methodology

This paper gives an overview of the literature of multi-level governance and other governance approaches that are relevant for the Trans-European Networks. Elements of theory and the TEN practice is compared. The main method applied in this paper is comparative analysis based on documents. Not only theory and practice are compared, but also the multiannual financial periods 2007-2014, 2014-2020 and 2021-2027. The individual regulations of Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), Trans-European Energy Network (TEN-E) and Trans-European Telecommunication Network (e-TEN), replacing former guidelines adopted as EC decisions, were adopted in 2013-2014, the two first changed in the beginning of the 2021-2027 period. Issues of governance is analysed separately for these types of infrastructure.

Personal and institutional changes, as well as policy changes are related to European election years – 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024 elections and their results are in focus. Interactions of persons and policies are checked – if they support the convergence of policies and governance practice of member states (the countries of the Three Seas Initiative) and the European institutions. Changing policy accents influencing TEN are also mentioned. The

most important framework for the funding of the Trans-European Networks at European level is the regulation of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). The 2013 CEF regulation was replaced in 2021 – again two pieces of legislation to be compared. Regarding the budget, proportional comparison of the numbers is used. Projects financed – both from EU funds and loans – are also compared both in terms of numbers and selection criteria related characteristics.

There is a polycrisis section putting all above in connection with the consequences of the financial, the pandemic, the energy crises and the military situation in Ukraine. Documents and decisions related to these crises are also analysed with a focus on TEN and regional aspects. The changes of some related policies – energy, transport, cohesion, environment, climate – are also checked how these changes influence the room for TEN development. The support of TEN is not in the focus of the NextGenerationEU, the reasons behind are important to understand how TEN is positioned.

The geographic focus on the countries of the Three Seas Initiative comes from the similarity of topics raised by these countries and the target of Trans-European Networks. These thirteen countries constitute a continuous geographical area with similar challenges. Although Austria differs in the level of development, Austria is an important transport and energy hub of the region worth to be discussed with the new members. Greece is a newcomer in the club of the Three Seas Initiative, but their geographical and development proximity underpins the common approach with new member of the EU. After some pre-history, the first annual Three Seas Initiative summit was held in 2016, this also makes reasonable to be used as a reference for framework in comparing 2014-2020 and 2021-2027.

4. Discussion

4.1 Trans-European networks among the EU policies

The Union policy of the trans-European networks is conferred to the shared competence of the European Union and the member states by Article 4 paragraph 2 (h) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, the Treaty). Title XVI of the Treaty on the Trans-European networks further specifies the Union's contribution "to the establishment and development of trans-European networks in the areas of transport, telecommunications and energy infrastructures". The key words of this title are interconnection, interoperability and access. The need of linking peripheral regions with the central regions is underlined. The means of the policy mentioned in the Treaty are guidelines, standards and support. The Treaty emphasizes the need of coordination among the member states. The policy of the trans-European networks was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty as "encouragement for the establishment and development of the trans-European networks". The wording of the Title (that time XII) on the trans-European networks was not changed by the Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon treaties.

The appearance of community policies in the Maastricht Treaty inspired the multi-governance theoretical approach and substantially changed the scene of scientific discussion on the governance of the European Communities that had been dominated by the gatekeeper and the neo-functionalist approaches. Marks (1993), pioneering in the

conceptualization of the European Community based on the multi-governance concept, referred to both the (neo)functionalists and the (neo)realist intergovernmental theorists. The multi-level governance concept widens the perspective by pointing on the role of further stakeholders beyond the EU institutions and the national governments, like regional and local actors. As the Treaty specifies, the guidelines and other TEN measures shall be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee (ESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR). ESC and CoR are the main formal channels set at the level of TFEU, while the TEN guidelines gradually opened fora for a great number of stakeholders in infrastructure development. By the adoption of the 2013-2014 regulations, the institutionalization of coordination and consultations got stable forms and scope.

Piattoni (2018) reminds that multi-level governance sometimes refers to processes, sometimes to situations, sometimes it is reflected in strategies, sometimes in structures. In her understanding a multi-level governance approach needs to consider political mobilization, policy-making and state restructuring parallelly. The policy of trans-European networks is interrelated with several other policies in the shared competence of the EU and the member states, especially: internal market, cohesion, environment, transport, energy. The EU internal market, transport and energy policies have major impacts on the operators and users of the TEN infrastructure. The EU cohesion and environment (climate) policies largely determine the requirements and available funds for TEN infrastructure. Stephenson (2013) while acknowledging the complexity of the scientific discussion on multi-level governance, detects scientific consensus on the multi-level character of EU transport, energy and telecommunication policies. Radula and Spendzharova (2022) gave an overview of internal market developments summarizing the findings of several partial research of policy areas linked to the internal market. They pointed to some weak points of governance mainly related to the capacities of member states and uneven representation of private interests.

The evolution of the EU transport policy can be traced in diversified set of liberalization packages and white papers. Air transport was the forerunner with the 1987, 1990 and 1992 packages, while the adoption and implementation of liberalization packages for the rail sector is relatively slow. One of the main sources of support for the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) is the Cohesion Fund established by the Maastricht Treaty. Borrás (1998) saw the “state centred” nature of this fund as a challenge for the multi-level pattern of governance of the Structural Funds. According to Stephenson (2022), the governance of trans-European networks not only became multi-level, but he also discovered deliberative and experimentalist elements. At the same time, he pointed out that the new member states still had a state centred approach.

The evolution of governance of the EU energy policy overlaps with the storyline of the governance of the Trans-European Energy Network (TEN-E). The first two (1996-1998 and 2003) energy packages focused on the liberalisation of the national markets previously dominated by monopolistic structures of vertically integrated national providers of energy. The third (2009) energy package reformed the governance structure by establishing the European Union Agency for Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) and the two European networks of transmission system operators for electricity and gas ENTSO-E and ENTSO-G. The fourth (2019) energy package increased ACER’s competences in cross-border cooperation. As Eckert (2022) finds, ENTSO-E and ACER

gradually gained competence. Regarding TEN-E, they play a crucial role in determining cost and benefit calculation methodology – a decisive factor in selecting projects of common interest. ACER is a hybrid governance structure with strong influence of the EU institutions. Jevnaker et. al (2024) call the phenomenon double-delegated rulemaking. Since 2015, the Commission itself has further delegated competences (in delegated acts) regarding terms, conditions and methodologies (TCMs) for electricity and gas markets and system operation. Parallely, the Council of the European Energy Regulators (CEER), a bottom-up organization of national entities is getting marginal.

Regarding the influence of environmental policy, Van der Heijden (2006) focused on the influence of non-governmental environmentalists on the TEN-T policy. Already the 2001 white paper² warned that the share of rail transport fall in the last three decades of the last century and called for a shift towards railway transport for environmental reasons. E-mobility and the usage of hydrogen has been promoted in many ways, too. In its energy policy, the EU has shifted towards renewables and gradually distanced from the use of natural gas.

Projects of common interest in the field of transport, energy and telecommunication have been financed by the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the EIB Group since the very beginning of the European integration according to the Treaty of Rome (Article 130 of the original Treaty of Rome, Article 309 of the TFEU). According to Mertens and Thiemann (2017), the growing role of the EIB Group and of the development banks of the member states can be interpreted as a “hidden investment state” reshaping the governance of TEN-related and other investments.

4.2 The evolution of the policy of trans-European networks until 2019

The guidelines referred to in the Treaty were first adopted in 1996 and 1997 – a TEN-E (1996), a TEN-T (1996) and an e-TEN (1997) guideline in the form of decisions by the European Parliament and the Council.³ The guidelines have been regularly updated. In 2013 and 2014 the TEN-E (2013), TEN-T (2013) and e-TEN (2014) regulations⁴ elevated the level of TEN legislation. These guidelines (decisions, regulations) gradually formed the institutional framework of the trans-European networks.

There are so called priority geographical corridors of the trans-European energy networks. There are parallel corridors for electricity and gas. These are rather regions: North Sea (for electricity)/South (for gas), Western, South-East and Baltic. Both in Western Europe and the Central and Southeastern region, north-south connections are mentioned even in the name of the corridors.

In the case of transport, coordinators and forums facilitate the development of infrastructure. The project-based approach was transformed into a corridor-based approach, each coordinator being responsible for one the nine corridors or on one of the two horizontal priorities. Corridors date back to the mid-nineties of the last century when

² COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES WHITE PAPER. European transport policy for 2010: time to decide. Brussels, 12.9.2001 COM(2001) 370 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52001DC0370&from=EN>

³ No 1254/96/EC, 1692/96/EC and 1336/97/EC respectively

⁴ 347/2013/EU, 1315/2013/EU and 283/2014/EU respectively

Helsinki corridors were adopted. The single largest difference is that one of the ten Helsinki corridors, connecting the eastern neighbours was omitted. Transport corridors are lines (often with several branches) connecting distant borders of the European Union. Coordinators are former high-ranking politicians from a country not involved in the development of the corridor the coordinator is responsible for. The coordinators facilitate meetings of the governments, organize forums with stakeholders going beyond the governments of member states.

Trans-European telecommunication infrastructure originally meant physical infrastructure of telecommunication companies. The e-TEN regulation almost completely redefines telecommunication infrastructure replacing it with some crucial digital services. Broadband internet network is still a priority, but data security, e-government related and similar projects are getting more in the focus of EU support. There are transport and energy EU policies, but telecommunication is just part of other policies and priorities. Digitalization is a horizontal priority, supported by several EU financial tools – CEF being just one of them.

In 2014 the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) was introduced uniting the diverse sources of EU-level TEN-support in one single tool.⁵ In institutional terms, the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency was formed.⁶ Since the Treaty (TFEU Article 177) specifies that TEN-T financial contribution for the cohesion countries is provided by the Cohesion Fund, these financial resources had to be transferred from the Cohesion Fund. According to the common provisions regulation⁷ 10 billion out of the 66.4 billion euros (in 2011 prices) of the Cohesion Fund were transferred to CEF. In the 2014-2020 period (in 2011 prices), EUR 29.3 billion of CEF fund was available, EUR 23.2 of this was allocated for TEN-T (including the EUR 10 billion from the Cohesion Fund), EUR 5.1 billion for TEN-E projects and EUR 1 billion for e-TEN.

4.3 Trans-European networks and the polycrises

Ansell et al. (2023) pair the resilience at policy level with robustness of governance. Factors of robustness are hard to find in the case of TEN governance. Despite some communication elements, including relabelling of existing tools⁸, the European institutions are bound by the rigid periodicity multi-annual financial frameworks. Policy and governance level answers to challenges are typically formulated around the European elections and discussion of the new multi-annual financial frameworks. Withdrawing TEN financial support from the cohesion context and displaying it in wider investment context, with the launch of CEF, came as late as in 2014, the reason was still based on the lessons learnt from the 2008-09 financial crises.

Responding to the climate crisis, with a ‘green deal’, was among the priorities of the first von der Leyen commission. The new member states still have some intention to develop or at least maintain fossil fuel based

⁵ Regulation 1316/2013/EU

⁶ By the COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION of 23 December 2013 establishing the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency and repealing Decision 2007/60/EC as amended by Decision 2008/593/EC

⁷ Article 92(6) of the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006

⁸ a typical example is the REPowerEU plan

energy infrastructure. Developing highways was also among their priorities. Green deal led to overwriting priorities of TEN development relatively fast: the 2021-2027 period was planned with green objectives in mind, turning away from gas pipelines and distancing from road transport development.

Short term transport effects of the pandemic crisis were enormous with stopping air transport of passengers, with disruptions of supply chains and with rapidly increasing transport cost. Very soon, an energy crisis evolved making energy expensive and strengthening the securitizing trends of energy policies in Europe. Widespread home office gave momentum to digitalization. Despite the widespread effects on transport, energy and digital fields, the effects of future infrastructure needs were not clear. The response in the form of Next Generation EU left it to the member states if they wanted to use the additional funds for infrastructure.

The current military crisis can be traced back to 2014. Already the Juncker commission came out with a plan how dual civil-military infrastructure should be developed in Europe. The Russian invasion led to an acceleration of the integration process of Moldova and Ukraine that had some effects on the development of trans-European networks. The amendment of the TEN regulation with extension to Ukraine and Moldova was adopted relatively fast. Regarding military mobility, crucial decisions have been made before the 2022 Russian invasion, but the new security situation provided an optic of fast reaction.

In the beginning of the 2020s, new regulations replaced the TEN and CEF regulations: the new CEF (2021), TEN-E (2022) and TEN-T (2024) regulations,⁹ while the e-TEN (2014) regulation remained in force. INEA was replaced by CINEA (European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency) – energy and transport projects are managed by this agency –, and in the case of the digital projects the replacement is HaDEA (European Health and Digital Executive Agency).¹⁰ The new regulations and the new agencies provide the regulatory and institutional framework for the financial resources available for 2021-2027. At the same time, the new multiannual financial framework itself and the NextGenerationEU redefined the relative position of trans-European networks among budgetary priorities. These changes were adopted during the Covid-19, energy and military crises. The decisions were made under the direct or indirect influence of the crises.

The new TEN-E (2022) regulation mentions the word ‘climate’ 131 times, replacing the old regulation mentioning climate related issues just 10 times. The new regulation eliminates the possibility for natural gas interconnectors to be classified as projects of common interest thus receiving financial support, replacing the natural gas corridors by hydrogen and CO₂ pipelines. According to the understanding of Tian et al. (2022) on Covid’s global impact on the energy market, renewables are still the future, investing in fossil energy is still risky despite the high prices. Due to the combination of military and energy crises, Thaler and Hofmann (2022) envisions the trilemma of energy security, sustainability and sovereignty where all three cannot be provided.

The new TEN-T (2024) brought less radical changes, but rail is even more preferred than before, e-mobility and hydrogen infrastructure get an increasing attention. Vickerman (2024) finds that the Covid crisis profoundly

⁹ Regulations (EU) 2021/1153, (EU) 2022/869 and (EU) 2024/1679

¹⁰ Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/173 of 12 February 2021 establishing the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, the European Health and Digital Executive Agency, the European Research Executive Agency, the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, the European Research Council Executive Agency, and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and repealing Implementing Decisions 2013/801/EU, 2013/771/EU, 2013/778/EU, 2013/779/EU, 2013/776/EU and 2013/770/EU

effecting transport, gave an opportunity to rethink the basics of governance of transport, with special regard to cross-border transport. Disruptions of supply chains described by Ishak et al. (2022) are just on part of the story. Covid and the energy crises increased transport costs substantially leading to the rationalization of corporate logistics based on costs and risks. The increasing relevance of military aspects strengthened the military dimension on transport infrastructure development in EU policy making.

Håkansson (2023) giving an overview of the EU military mobility project from its inception with Juncker's 2017 state of the union speech, finds this project rather a security project to be understood in the context of NATO, still it implicated financial support for dual use infrastructure, widening the policy aspects of infrastructure development. The 2018 military mobility action plan¹¹ was revised in 2022. The Action plan on military mobility 2.0¹² builds on the EUR 1.7 billion dual-use transport infrastructure budget in CEF 2021-2027. Also this document mentions the extension of four transport corridors towards Moldova and Ukraine by the 2022 amendment of the TEN-T regulation. Military mobility is a permanent structured cooperation (PESCO).

Comparing the budgets of the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, we can find similar sums for the trans-European networks, but they are expressed in 2011 euro values for 2014-2020 and in 2018 values for 2021-2027. The same EUR 5 billion for CEF energy projects are actually less, just like the same EUR 10 billion (in 2011/2018 value) transferred from the Cohesion Fund. The Cohesion Fund transfer to CEF is relevant for the region in focus, since the trans-European networks in the cohesion countries (members acceding in 2004 or later plus Greece and Portugal) are almost identical with the countries participating in the Three Seas Initiative. The NextGenerationEU finances only a few projects related to the trans-European networks.

4.4 A Central European perspective in the mirror of the Three Seas Initiative

The new members joined the European Union in 2004 and after with infrastructure development needs. Their public is more sensitive to development of physical networks than abstract climate goals. Most of these countries also have a high sensitivity of security, their citizens are concerned about the military developments in Ukraine. The development of network infrastructure and the improvement of energy efficiency, as well as the installation of renewable power generation capacities highly depend on available EU funds.

The budget of 2021-2027 rather responds to the climate crisis than any other recent developments. Another horizontal priority is digitalization, linked to the trans-European telecommunication networks. The multiannual financial framework was extended by the NextGenerationEU providing additional, debt financed funds, providing grants and loans in the frameworks of the Recovering and Resilience Facility (RRF), but only limited funds were made available for the development of TEN infrastructure. The few TEN related RRF projects are viaducts of Rail Baltic in Estonia, electrification of the Cluj-Oradea railway and some other minor railway projects in Austria and Czechia – under the green transition priority.

¹¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/35410_en

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022JC0048>

The annual meetings of heads of states of Three Seas Initiative have been focusing on north-south natural gas connections, this framework did not follow the EU turning away from fossil fuels. Military mobility and the extension of TEN-T towards Ukraine and Moldova meet the interests of most of the countries of the region, while the region is lagging behind Western Europe in terms of railway focus and e-mobility. The increasing digitalization efforts of the European Union are beneficial for all the member states.

Transport, energy and telecommunication are dealt with by separate commissioners at the EU level and separate ministries in most of the members states. One ministry covering all three fields is rare, but Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia had such ministries for several government cycles. There is a growing level of interdependence of the three fields at project level, but neither EU, not member states level governance structures follow this trend.

Although commissioners do not represent “the country they best know”, but as Kirpsza (2024) points out, key positions of a country’s nationals in the Commission are not without connection to the bargaining power of that particular country. In 2014-2019 (Juncker Commission) the commissioners for transport, energy and telecommunication (Bulc, Šefčovič, Gabriel) came from the region. In 2019-2024 (the first von der Leyen commission) transport and energy were in the hand of commissioners (Vălean and Simson) from countries of the Three Seas Initiative, but in the 2024-2029 (second von der Leyen) commission only the Greek transport commissioner Tzitzikostas can be mentioned.

The penetration of the nationals to the EU administration from the region has reached a level proportional to their population. Even in management positions of the relevant directorate generals, we can find nationals of the countries participating in the Three Seas Initiative. The supervision of the EU agencies (in 2014-2020 a single agency, INEA, since 2021 CINEA and HaDEA) administering TEN support is split between the relevant directorate generals (DG MOVE, DG ENER, DG CONNECT). It may be a coincident that in the moment of writing this paper all three directors responsible for the supervision of TEN funding are Polish nationals (three DGs, different levels).

In the European Parliament, the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) is chaired by Borys Budka since 2024 (predecessors also from the region: Cristian-Silviu Buşoi (2019-2024) and Jerzy Buzek (2014-2019)). The Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN) is chaired by Elissavet Vozemberg-Vrionidi from Greece since 2024. That time Romanian MEP Adina-Ioana Vălean was one of the rapporteurs of the CEF (2013) regulation, later she became the commissioner for transport. A Czech MEP Evžen Tošenovský, was the rapporteur of the e-TEN (2014) regulation. The new CEF (2021) regulation had again a Romanian rapporteur, Marian-Jean Marinescu. The new TEN-E (2022) regulation’s rapporteur was Zdzisław Krasnodębski. The new TEN-T had an Austrian rapporteur, Barbara Thaler. Several members of the European Parliament from the region were in key positions when TEN related key legislation was adopted.

5. Conclusion

At the level of the treaties, Trans-European networks appeared with the Maastricht treaty. The text the relevant part of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, introduced by the Maastricht Treaty, remained unchanged. The Lisbon Treaty only changed the terminology. Trans-European networks had been called a community policy, following the post-Lisbon terminology we speak of shared competences of the EU and member states.

EU responded to the recent crises in a comprehensive way, reshaping the priorities with effect to the trans-European networks. The major changes on the governance of this EU policy were linked the introduction of the Connecting Europe Facility. This new facility was reasoned by the financial crisis. Pandemic crisis was unprecedented, leading to a response centred around the recovery and resilience fund only sporadically supporting TENs in lack of sufficiently prepared projects. Climate, security and energy crises had some prehistory in the previous decades, but the region was unevenly prepared to their amplification.

The EU policy of trans-European networks was developed in the nineties with the shared competence of the EU institutions and the member states. The available funds were merged in the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), since 2014 this is the main financial instrument supporting the development of TENs. Loans also play an important role with the central role of the European Investment Bank (EIB). The launch of CEF was the last milestone in developing the structure of governance of TENs and their financial support, no substantial institutional changes came after 2014.

The 2021-2027 financial framework and the related new regulations reflect the prioritizing of climate related actions. This effects the countries of the region, at least the 12 cohesion countries among them profoundly. Climate priorities play down the focus on cohesion. The perception of the climate crisis also drive the EU towards crisis management, overshadowing other long-term goals, like the catching up of the eastern members.

Some of the transport related changes: the support of military mobility and the extension of TEN to Ukraine and Moldova meet the interests of most of the countries of the region. The ever-increasing focus on railway transport is not against the interests of the region, but the management of these projects is not without challenges. The prioritization of e-mobility does not meet the needs of the majority of the population in the region. The sudden change of TEN gas corridors to hydrogen and CO₂ pipelines seems to be too fast for the region worried about securing their natural gas needs.

The Juncker cabinet was special with commissioners for energy, transport and digital issues all coming from the region. The von der Leyen commission have less commissioner from the countries of the Three Seas Initiative, but the region is well represented in the directorates generals related to the trans-European networks. MEPs of the region are active in transport and energy related matters, with proportionally substantial influence.

The development of trans-European networks is an important factor in the cohesion of the Eastern part of the EU. The turbulent times with a series of crises play down the cohesion related priorities, TENs among them.

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