

Different Forms of Summit Diplomacy. Case Study Analysis of the Visegrád Group, the Bucharest Nine, and the Three Seas Initiative

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Abstract: *This article delves into the nuances of summit diplomacy in regional formats within Central Europe, with a particular emphasis on the Visegrád Group (V4), the Bucharest Nine (B9), and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) from 2015 to 2023. Though each format functions differently, all rely on summit diplomacy to achieve their objectives. The article aims to explore the reasons why informal regional formats are frequently implemented in this region. The study conducts a thorough review of existing literature. It systematically analyses past instances of the selected formats, considering variables such as meeting frequency, location, and the level of representation. Based on the adopted definition of summit diplomacy, this article classifies the meetings of the highest level during the specified period as personal meetings between political leaders from at least two countries with official, state roles, such as presidents, prime ministers, or ministers. These leaders hold significant power to shape their country's foreign policy and influence the legal and political order through summit decisions, while engaging with counterparts from other nations. The paper also highlights the variations between the above-mentioned formats in Central Europe, including the differences in meeting frequency, level of representation, and the number of participating states.*

Keywords: *diplomacy, summit diplomacy, Central Europe, regional cooperation, Three Seas Initiative, Visegrád Group, Bucharest Nine.*

General overview

Summit diplomacy has been a prevalent phenomenon throughout the twentieth century. This form of diplomacy is often utilized for resolving complex global issues, such as nuclear disarmament, regional conflicts, and economic cooperation. Summit diplomacy serves as a platform for leaders to discuss and negotiate on important matters, and to build relationships and trust between nations². As a result, it has become an essential tool for shaping international relations and promoting peace and stability worldwide³.

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² B.C. Rathbun, *Diplomacy's Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East*, Cornell University Press, 2014.

³ E. Goldstein, "The Origins of Summit Diplomacy", in D.H. Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summits*, Basingstoke, 1996, pp. 23.

Regional cooperation is a relatively recent phenomenon in Central Europe⁴. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, various new formats have emerged, such as the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and the Visegrád Group (V4), marking the arrival of 'new regionalism'. Their primary aim was to accelerate the accession of several states to the European Union and NATO, regarded as key to ensuring regional security. However, after the EU and NATO enlargements, regional cooperation lost momentum, as its *raison d'être* was questioned. After 2014, regional cooperation in Central Europe was revived in response to the new challenges and security threats entailed mainly by Russia's aggressive policy, and the slow erosion of the Atlantic cooperation. In January 2015, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia adopted the Slavkov Declaration, giving birth to the Slavkov Triangle⁵. Subsequently, the Bucharest Nine emerged, the Visegrád Group intensified its activity, and the Three Seas Initiative was established. However, it should be emphasised that these new forms of regional cooperation lack the institutional structures needed to transform them into international organisations and are therefore not expected to go down that road. The Three Seas Initiative operates through annual summits held at presidential level. In the case of Bucharest Nine (B9), the meetings mainly concern presidents, foreign ministers, and defence ministers. The Visegrád Group has developed a specific summit diplomacy formula for meetings in various personal formats that include high-level reunions with presidents, prime ministers, and ministers attending.

This article delves into the reasons behind the surge of informal regional formats, based on summit diplomacy, in Central Europe from 2015 to 2023. It analyses the correlation between the emergence of these international formats and their effectiveness in summit diplomacy, exploring the underlying reasons for regional cooperation and the differences between these formats. In addition, this article aims to provide a definition of summit diplomacy and investigate through empirical research the recent increase in regional cooperation. The qualitative research techniques include a thorough literature review and content analysis of relevant documents and official websites. The limited literature on summit diplomacy underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. As such, this article seeks to fill this gap by exploring the matter in greater depth and detail.

1. Definition of the summit diplomacy

Currently, there is no widely accepted definition of "summit diplomacy" in the existing literature, as its various definitions focus on its different aspects. The definition of summit diplomacy presents several ambiguities that require clarification. According to some scholars, this type of diplomacy gathers the most prominent politicians representing a given country, such as presidents and prime ministers. Nevertheless, contemporary practice indicates that ministers, particularly those of foreign affairs and of national defence, significantly influence policy implementation. Hence, this study shows that the ministerial level summits also fall within the definition of summit diplomacy. In the context of the analysed formats, meetings at different levels occur only in the case of the Visegrád Group. As B. Surmacz wrote: "Summit diplomacy is a meeting of heads

⁴ A. Orzelska-Stączek, "New wave of regional cooperation in Central Europe as a response to new threats", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe]*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2020, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

of state or heads of government who have a double legal status: on the one hand, they create the state's foreign policy and are responsible for making political decisions, and on the other hand, they enforce these decisions, entering into diplomatic interactions"⁶. In contrast to other means of diplomatic engagement, summits offer a more adaptable framework with strategic implications reinforced through joint declarations, subsequent initiatives, and dialogue among attendees⁷. However, in the current circumstances, it is worth extending this definition to include meetings of ministers from various ministries who also play a significant role in shaping foreign or internal policies. This is particularly relevant for foreign ministers or European policy ministers. Hence, for this article, we used the extended version of the above definition of "summit diplomacy", to include personal meetings of political leaders (presidents, prime ministers, or ministers of at least two countries) who are involved (even to a minor extent) in the formulation of their state's foreign policy, and can implement at national level decisions taken at the summit as a result of the interactions with their counterparts from other countries⁸. Nevertheless, contrary to E. Plischke's view, the reunions occasioned by the summit diplomacy are more comprehensive than regular face-to-face meetings. Summit diplomacy can also cover a wide range of communication between heads of state and government: exchange of letters, telephone calls, sending personal representatives, face-to-face meetings both bilateral and multilateral⁹. Moreover, it is possible to characterise summit diplomacy from the perspective of direct meetings between leaders¹⁰. Some of the research studies conducted on diplomacy have expanded their focus to include online activities¹¹. An approach to summit diplomacy perceived as an international performance could help to understand the comprehensive nature of summitry and the intricacy of impressions conveyed by diverse audiences^{12,13}. According to M. Holmes: "The literature theorizes the effectiveness of summit diplomacy as being grounded in a leader's agency, focusing on leaders' negotiations and bargaining, or the socio-psychological mechanism of face-to-face meetings and its impact on interpersonal relations between leaders that help explain outcomes of a summit such as an agreement, localizing summits to leader-level interactions"¹⁴. Diplomats pay close attention not only to the words uttered during negotiations, but also to the emotional cues conveyed through the tone of speech, the choice of words, and the body language. This emotive information provides insights into how one perceives a situation. Diplomacy is a unique means of communication, as it allows

⁶ B. Surmacz, „Dyplomacja na szczycie” (*Diplomacy at the top*), *Teka Komisji Politologii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych*, Vol. 11, Issue 3, 2016, p. 100.

⁷ M. Constantinescu, "Summit Diplomacy. Conceptual Repositioning in the context of Africa + 1 Meetings", in D. Voicu (ed.), *România Occidentală. Africa: Challenges and Opportunities for Contemporary Diplomacy*, Vol. 2/2023.

⁸ B. Surmacz, „Dyplomacja na szczycie”, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁹ E. Plischke, "The President's Image as Diplomat in Chief", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 1985, p. 550.

¹⁰ D.H. Dunn, (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summitry*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1996.

¹¹ P. Seib, *The Future of Diplomacy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 6.

¹² R. Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2, 2010, p. 347.

¹³ M. Ku, "Summit Diplomacy and the logic of performance in international politics", prepared for New Wave Realism Conference IV, The Ohio State University, December 9-10, 2022. Available at: https://mershoncenter.osu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-11/KuM_NewWaveRealism2022.pdf. Accessed on: 26.03.2024.

¹⁴ M. Holmes, "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions", *International Organization*, Vol. 67, Issue 4, 2013. DOI: 10.1017/S0020818313000234.

diplomats to exchange at individual level expressions of intent, thereby communicating the intentions of the government they represent. This exchange would be lost, weakened, or distorted if it unfolded through impersonal and inconsistent channels¹⁵. It is worth considering the gradual depreciation of summits in contemporary times, as they have become more frequent, and political leaders may not always be inclined to or capable of attending, thus diminishing the significance of such summits¹⁶. T. Naylor conducted research that sheds light on the limitations of online meetings compared to in-person summits. The research indicates that eliminating the summitry's performative and interpersonal dimensions fundamentally hinders online meetings from achieving the same level of success as in-person summits. This suggests that the use of online platforms for business or academic meetings may not be as effective as in-person gatherings, particularly when it comes to achieving the desired outcomes¹⁷.

In addition to the varying interpretations and modes of communication employed at summit meetings, there are also various ways of classifying diplomatic summits¹⁸. One way is to classify them according to the rank of the representatives attending the event. Summits where a state is represented by the head of state or prime minister are of the utmost importance: their status in diplomacy is the highest, and they are involved in the most crucial decision-making processes¹⁹. The ministerial summits form another category. Meetings between foreign ministers are more often held than others due to their special competencies. As regards the level of institutionalisation, there are two main types of diplomatic summits: institutionalised and ad hoc. The institutionalised summits are organised by international organisations, such as the European Union or NATO, and are usually overseen by a particular institution responsible for these procedures within the organisation. Ad hoc summits are events organised for a specific purpose. Frequently, ad hoc meetings address significant global developments, such as the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that occurred on February 24, 2022. The President of Poland called for a Bucharest Nine meeting in Warsaw to deliberate on security issues just one day after the invasion. In other instances, meetings may be convened to discuss regional policies, as the topic of recurrent migration during the reunions of the prime ministers in the Visegrád Group in 2015 and 2016.

2. Different forms of summit diplomacy: the Visegrád Group, the Bucharest Nine, and the Three Seas Initiative

This article delves into three major international formats in Central Europe: the Visegrád Group, the Three Seas Initiative, and the Bucharest Nine. These formats comprise Central European nations that are members of the European Union. Their decision-making process in these formats primarily involves high-level political leaders, such as heads of state, prime ministers, and ministers who shape international policies. The

¹⁵ S. Wong, "Emotions and the Communication of Intentions in Face-to-Face Diplomacy", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, 2016, p. 144.

¹⁶ Y. Dalton, *The Future of Summit Diplomacy*, 2018. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331262257-The_Future_of_Summit_Diplomacy. Accessed on: 26.03.2024.

¹⁷ T. Naylor, "All That's Lost: The Hollowing of Summit Diplomacy in a Socially Distanced World", *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, 2020, pp. 583–598.

¹⁸ G.R. Berridge, *Diplomacy. Theory and Practice*, Basingstoke - New York, 2005, pp. 167–174.

¹⁹ A. Caramerli, "Summitry Diplomacy: Positive and Negative Aspects", *Acta Universitatis Danubius. Relations Internationales*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2012, p. 24.

formats rely heavily on summit diplomacy, which is critical to their functioning. Before 2015, the Visegrád Group was the main cooperation format of the region. However, the establishment of the Bucharest Nine and the Three Seas Initiative one year later marked a significant rise in the importance of summit diplomacy for regional cooperation.

2.1 The Visegrád Group

The Visegrád Group (originally known as the Visegrád Triangle) is the oldest of the examined formats. It was established on February 15, 1991, when the presidents of Poland and Czechoslovakia and the prime minister of Hungary signed the “Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in pursuit of European integration”²⁰. However, even after 30 years, it has not yet established a permanent cooperation framework like the Benelux or the Nordic Council. Its most significant achievements, namely the Central European Free Trade Agreement (1992) and the establishment of the International Visegrád Fund in 2000, date from the first decade of its existence²¹. Along with the signed documents, the political leaders’ meetings (during which common positions on aspects of European policy were agreed on) represented an additional benefit. The Visegrád Group boasts the broadest range of personal formats developed by all the forums discussed. In addition to summit diplomacy (involving heads of state, prime ministers, or ministers), meetings occur among other officials, such as parliamentary speakers, general prosecutors, and even at the level of directors in individual ministries. In the Visegrád Declaration of 1991, V4 is defined as a “new form of political, economic and cultural cooperation of these countries”. The declaration emphasises its geographical scope, and the fact that all participating countries must agree to cooperate²². It is important to note that this is the only format (out of the three discussed herein) without explicitly defined priorities. While Bucharest Nine focuses on security issues, and the Three Seas Initiative on digitisation, infrastructure, and energy security, the Visegrád Group allows for more flexibility in choosing specific topics, based on current issues of significance to the four countries. As such, this format encompasses ministerial meetings with varying scopes of competence, and gatherings of officials from other state institutions. However, according to the definition outlined in this article, some of these summits – e.g., summits of representatives of national parliaments, mid-level government officials, as well as deputy ministers and secretaries of state – cannot be classified as summit diplomacy. Such meetings are held in the framework of the Visegrád Group, but not within the other two formats discussed.

²⁰ *Visegrad Declaration 1991*. Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>. Accessed on: 04.03.2024.

²¹ E. Kuźelewska, and A. Bartnicki, „Grupa Wyszehradzka – nowe wyzwania bezpieczeństwa i perspektywy współpracy” [*Visegrád Group – new security challenges and prospects for cooperation*], *Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej (Yearbook of European Integration)*, nr. 11, 2017, pp. 103-118.

²² *Visegrad Declaration 1991*, *op.cit.*

Table 1. Visegrád Group - Prime Ministers' summits

Year	Date	Country	City	Additional representatives
2015	June 19	Slovakia	Bratislava	
2015	September 4	Czechia	Prague	
2015	December 3	Czechia	Prague	President of the Republic of Korea
2016	February 15	Czechia	Prague	Prime Ministers of Macedonia and Bulgaria
2016	June 8	Czechia	Prague	
2016	June 28	Czechia	Prague	
2016	July 21	Poland	Warsaw	
2016	July 27	Poland	Warsaw	
2016	September 6	Poland	Krynica	Prime Minister of Ukraine
2016	December 15	Belgium	Brussels	
2017	March 28	Poland	Warsaw	
2017	May 11	Poland	Warsaw	
2017	July 4	Hungary	Budapest	President of Arab Republic of Egypt
2017	July 17	Hungary	Budapest	
2017	July 19	Hungary	Budapest	Prime Minister of Israel
2019	February 7	Slovakia	Bratislava	German Chancellor
2019	September 12	Czechia	Prague	Western Balkan Countries
2020	July 3	Poland	Warsaw	
2020	July 17-18	Belgium	Brussels	Prime Ministers' summit on the margins of the European Council
2020	August 19	Belgium	Brussels	Prime Ministers' summit on the margins of the extraordinary European Council on the situation in Belarus
2020	September 11	Poland	Lublin	
2020	September 24	Belgium	Brussels	President of the European Commission
2020	October 1	Belgium	Brussels	Prime Ministers' summit in the margins of the European Council
2020	October 2	Belgium	Brussels	Prime Ministers of Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain
2020	October 15	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit in the margins of the European Council
2020	October 29	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit in the margins of the European Council
2020	November 19	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit on the margins of the European Council
2020	December 10	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit on the margins of the European Council
2021	January 21	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit ahead of the European Council
2021	February 17	Poland	Cracow	
2021	February 25	Online	Online	

2021	March 25	Online	Online	V4 Prime Ministers' summit ahead of the European Council
2021	May 7	Portugal	Porto	
2021	May 24	Belgium	Brussels	V4 Prime Ministers' summit on the sidelines of the special European Council session
2021	June 30	Poland	Katowice	
2021	July 9	Slovenia	Ljubljana	
2021	November 4	Hungary	Budapest	President of the Republic of Korea
2021	December 13	Hungary	Budapest	President of the French Republic
2022	March 8	United Kingdom	London	Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
2022	November 24	Slovakia	Košice	
2023	June 26	Slovakia	Bratislava	

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from the official Visegrád Group website:

<https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

Table 2. Visegrád Group - Presidential summits

Year	Date	Country	City	Representation
2015	October 8	Hungary	Balatonfüred	President of Croatia
2021	February 9	Poland	Jurata	
2022	October 11	Slovakia	Bratislava	

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from the official Visegrád Group website:

<https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

2.2 Bucharest Nine

The Bucharest Nine is an association of 9 countries created to address the security concerns of NATO's Eastern Flank. This format is the outcome of a joint initiative put forward by the President of the Republic of Poland and the President of Romania during NATO's Eastern Flank Summit in Budapest on November 4, 2015²³. That summit resulted in the adoption of a declaration outlining the main goals of the new format, which include a commitment to the idea of a strong Atlantic alliance, and the need to strengthen NATO's military presence in the region and to adapt the organization in response to the security threats posed by the Russian Federation²⁴. According to Konrad Pawłowski, the Bucharest Nine is a practical forum for security dialogue and consultations of Central European countries. Cooperation in the Bucharest format complements the economic and infrastructural cooperation implemented within the Three Seas Initiative concerning the vital dimension of political and military cooperation, necessary for deepening regional solidarity and integration in Central Europe. The platform focuses on security-related issues; the events organised thus far have only included political leaders at the presidential level (7 times), foreign ministry level (6 times), and ministry of defence level (3 times).

²³ Joint Declaration on "Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility", Bucharest, November 2015.

²⁴ K. Pawłowski, *Bukaresztańska Dziewiątka: współpraca państw wschodniej flanki NATO (Bucharest Nine: cooperation between NATO's eastern flank countries)*, Instytut Europy Środkowej (Institute of Central Europe), Policy Paper 4/2020, p. 16.

Table 3. Bucharest Nine - Presidential summits

Year	Date	Country	City
2015	November 4	Romania	Bucharest
2018	June 8	Poland	Warsaw
2019	February 28	Slovakia	Košice
2021	May 10	Romania	Bucharest
2022	February 25	Poland	Warsaw
2022	June 10	Romania	Bucharest
2023	February 23	Poland	Warsaw

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from open access research.

Table 4. Bucharest Nine (B9) – summits of Ministers of Foreign Affairs

Year	Date	Country	City
2016	November 8	Romania	Bucharest
2017	October 9	Poland	Warsaw
2020	March 10	Lithuania	Vilnius
2021	October 27	Estonia	Tallinn
2022	March 31	Slovakia	Bratislava
2023	March 31	Poland	Łódź

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from open access research.

Table 5. Bucharest Nine – summits of Ministers of Defence

Year	Date	Country	City
2018	March 12	Romania	Bucharest
2019	April 4	Poland	Warsaw
2021	November 25	Romania	Bucharest
2022	June 6		Video conference
2023	April 26	Poland	Warsaw

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from open access research.

2.3 The Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is the most recent political and economic cooperation format reuniting 13 countries. It focuses primarily on trade and investments in joint initiatives in critical areas for 3SI: transport, energy, and digital technologies²⁵. The 3SI is a versatile and informal political platform at the presidential level, which brings together thirteen EU members from the region between the Adriatic, Baltic, and

²⁵ M. Gołębiowska and Ł. Lewkowicz, „Nowe szanse rozwoju dla Europy Środkowej: współpraca gospodarcza w ramach Inicjatywy Trójmorza” [New development opportunities for Central Europe: economic cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative], Instytut Europy Środkowej (Institute of Central Europe). Available at: <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/nowe-szanse-rozwoju-dla-europy-srodkowej-wspolpraca-gospodarcza-w-ramach-inicjatywy-trojmorza/>. Accessed on: 26.03.2024.

Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Its primary goal is to foster increased convergence and cohesion, while decreasing the development gap between various regions and member states of the EU. This could be accomplished by enhancing interconnectivity in energy, transport, and digital technology across the region²⁶. A challenge for developing the Three Seas Initiative economic partnership resides in the varying degrees of involvement of the individual participating countries²⁷. On the one hand, some countries perceive the 3SI as a possibility to strengthen their role on the international stage and, above all, in the EU. On the other hand, they perceive it as one of the pillars of European security. The initiative aims to develop cooperation among its members within the European Union, and to strengthen transatlantic relations²⁸. However, it focuses more on economic issues aiming to enhance the economic integration of the region. It is worth remembering that the 3SI format is currently a non-institutionalised one, despite the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund²⁹. The heads of member states coordinate mainly the political activities, and all eight summits have so far been held at the presidential level. Except for 2018 and 2023, the Three Seas Initiative summits were held in different countries³⁰.

Table 6. Three Seas Initiative - Presidential summits

Year	Date	Country	City
2016	August 25-26	Croatia	Dubrovnik
2017	July 6-7	Poland	Warsaw
2018	September 17-18	Romania	Bucharest
2019	June 5-6	Slovenia	Ljubljana
2020	October 19	Estonia	Tallinn
2021	July 8-9	Bulgaria	Sofia
2022	June 20-21	Latvia	Riga
2023	September 6-7	Romania	Bucharest

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from open access research.

The Central European region boasts unique regional formats. Within the V4,

²⁶ M. Sebe, "Romania: Transforming the Three Seas Initiative into a strategic opportunity. A short overview", in A. Sprüds and M. Vargulis (eds.), *Three Seas Initiative: Mapping National Perspectives*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022, p. 143.

²⁷ A. Orzelska-Stączek and P. Ukielski, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza z perspektywy jej uczestników [The Three Seas Initiative from the perspective of its participants]*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk (Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences), Warsaw, 2020, p. 11.

²⁸ P. Kowal and A. Orzelska-Stączek, „Inicjatywa Trójmorza. Geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie” [*The Three Seas Initiative. Origin, goals and functioning*], Wydawnictwo Instytutu Studiów Politycznych PAN [Publishing house of the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences], Warsaw, 2019.

²⁹ A. Orzelska-Stączek, „Fundusz Inwestycyjny Inicjatywy Trójmorza: Geneza i etapy rozwoju” [*The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund: Origin and Stages of Development*], *Studia Polityczne (Political Studies)*, Vol. 51, nr. 1, 2023.

³⁰ M. Sebe, "The Three Seas Initiative – one year after the Riga Summit: full steam ahead?", p. 59, in A.-M. Anghelescu and I. Oneaşcă (eds.), *Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit: Advancing the common agenda*, EIR Working Papers Series, No. 46, 2023, European Institute of Romania, Bucharest.

the representation of countries varies greatly (from presidents and prime ministers to constitutional ministers, parliamentarians, general prosecutors, and other government officials). It is essential to clarify that the scope of summit diplomacy – as defined in this article – may not encompass all the meeting types mentioned. Specifically, the definition covers meetings up to and including the ministerial level, although the others serve, too, as a valuable means of enhancing cooperation. On the other hand, the B9 summits are mainly held at the presidential level, with foreign affairs ministers and national defence ministers also participating. The 3SI summits ensure a high level of representation, as they reunite presidents of different countries. However, in their absence, other high officials, such as prime ministers or speakers of national parliaments, may participate. Another notable aspect is the frequency of the meetings, with those of the Visegrád Group and Bucharest Nine occurring irregularly. At the same time, the Three Seas Initiative summits are held once a year in different countries, except for 2023, when Romania hosted the summit for the second time. Finally, we should underline that each format has its unique focus. The Visegrád Group has the broadest range of competencies, covering various topics related to regional cooperation, including European policy. The Bucharest Nine focuses mainly on security issues, while the Three Seas Initiative primarily focuses on transport, energy, and digitalisation.

3. Different forms of summit diplomacy within regional cooperation formats in Central Europe

J. Melissen pointed out that bilateral and multilateral diplomacy became more important in Central Europe following the Cold War, as each state from this region started to independently conduct its foreign policy towards neighbouring countries³¹. In Melissen's view, the more independent countries are, the more willing they are to pursue a meaningful regional policy. As D. Druckmann stated: The fascination with summit diplomacy frequently rests on the belief that leaders exert significant influence and are independent enough from other factors (e.g., domestic pressure groups) to change the direction of a country's policy. Some may hope for such changes (e.g., away from war), others may fear them (e.g., changes leading to bad deals)³². According to B. Witham, organising summits with leaders can strengthen interstate relationships and address priority issues at the highest political level. The various formats of diplomacy mentioned in this article centre on summit meetings, which often result in non-binding declarations that provide a general summary of the event, and set priorities for the period until the next summit. Witham argues that the media, particularly social networking sites, play a crucial role in promoting summit diplomacy. Today, with widespread and instant access to information, and the media reporting every step of the diplomatic negotiations, summit talks have turned into staged spectacles. "The outcome of each summit is agreed to meet the political needs of participating leaders. Meetings at the summit level are the most visible aspect of modern diplomacy. Because these meetings are highly publicized, their outcomes can become a façade of diplomatic success", as J. Melissen articulated³³.

³¹ J. Melissen, *Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age*, Discussion papers in diplomacy No. 86, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2003.

³² D. Druckman and P. Wallenstein, "Summit Meetings: Good or Bad for Peace?", *Global Summitry*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, winter 2016, pp. 71–92.

³³ J. Melissen, *Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age*, *op. cit.*

Leaders who rely on majorities to take these meetings at face value can benefit from this and convince the public that they are ‘doing something’. The organisation of summits may also be perceived as a form of “soft power” wielded by particular states. This phenomenon reflects the ability of states to leverage their political, economic, and cultural influence to shape the international agenda and promote their interests. Such summits can serve as a platform for states to showcase their leadership, build alliances, and advance their geopolitical objectives. In this sense, the organisation of summits is a strategic tool for projecting power and influence in the international arena³⁴. Undoubtedly, an additional issue is the increased role of the media. Diplomatic summits become an arena for the leaders to present their country’s position. However, it is also a great opportunity for them to reveal their position to the media, allowing the latter to influence their voters³⁵. Effective communication is crucial in various domains, including politics. In reality, leaders do not rely solely on costly signals to gauge the sincerity of other leaders. They also count on their impressions of others, which they consider reliable indicators of authenticity³⁶.

Formats based on summit diplomacy are commonly used in Central Europe due to the region’s high concentration of small countries: i.e., a part of the region of Central Europe having under 10 million inhabitants connects primarily small countries (i.e., those with less than 10 million people in an area of up to 80,000 km²)³⁷. Even the four countries that exceed these limits do it only slightly³⁸. The public administration must allocate adequate resources for the proper organisation and the services needed when a state hosts or participates in a summit. By limiting the format to annual meetings in one country (like the 3SI and the B9 do), or to a few smaller events (as the V4 does), small countries can participate to the same degree as countries with broader human, financial, and organisational resources. For the larger Central European countries, like Poland or Romania, the organisation of diplomatic summits can provide an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of their foreign policies, and to strengthen their position in the region. These countries have more staff and funding, allowing them to broadcast the agendas in various formats and, most importantly, to organise individual meetings.

This is particularly clear in the case of the Bucharest Nine, where six out of the seven presidential summits were held in Romania (3) and Poland (3), and only one in Slovakia. Meetings in defence ministry formats are another example: so far, three such meetings have been held in only two countries – Poland (1) and Romania (2) – within the B9 framework. A more significant distinction can be observed in the case of the diplomatic ministerial meetings, which took place in Slovakia (1), Estonia (1), Lithuania (1), Romania (1), and Poland (2).

³⁴ B. Goldsmith, H. Yusaku, K. Matush, “Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion? Identifying the Effect of High-Level Visits”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 115, Issue 4, 2021, p. 1342.

³⁵ E. Gilboa, “Diplomacy in the Media Age: Three Models of Uses and Effects”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, 2001, pp. 1–28.

³⁶ T. Hall, and K. Yarhi-Milo, “The Personal Touch: Leaders’ Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, Issue 3, 2012, p. 560.

³⁷ A. Orzelska-Stączek, „Inicjatywa Trójmorza jako szansa i wyzwanie dla małych państw” (*The Three Seas Initiative as an opportunity and challenge for small countries*), in Piotr Bajda (ed.), *Small states within the European Union. Challenges – dilemmas – strategies*, Warsaw 2023.

³⁸ P. Bajda, *Małe państwo europejskie na arenie międzynarodowej. Polityka zagraniczna Republiki Słowackiej w latach 1993-2016* (A small European state in the international arena. Foreign policy of the Slovak Republic 1993-2016), Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej (Center for Political Thought), 2018, p. 57.

The Three Seas Initiative organises summits annually, with meetings at the presidential level having been organised in Croatia (2016), Poland (2017), Romania (2018), Slovenia (2019), Estonia (2020), Bulgaria (2021), and Latvia (2022), and again in Romania last year (2023). Relying on the political leaders' meetings in international formats can avoid incurring additional costs for the national diplomatic service because the country that hosts the summit covers most of the expenses. It is worth noting that, within the Visegrád Group, the summits are usually organised by the state that holds the rotating V4 Presidency. The Visegrád Group changes its presidency annually. By contrast, the Three Seas Initiative allows participant countries to declare their intent to take over the presidency, a responsibility that involves organising the summit of the Heads of State. Only the Bucharest Nine does not have the institution of the presidency³⁹.

Findings

In a globalised world, it is not easy to imagine diplomacy functioning without direct meetings between the most influential country leaders. The general conclusions regarding summit diplomacy indicate that contemporary diplomatic summits are becoming an arena in which politicians' singular task is to encounter their counterparts and articulate their position on various issues of concern. It is also there that decision-makers make their positions known to the media and thus have an impact on national voters. Therefore, these summits constitute an integral part of the diplomatic process and the institution of diplomacy. Summit diplomacy is an essential mechanism for managing a state's foreign policy. The same applies to the Visegrád Group, the Bucharest Nine, and the Three Seas Initiative. Although the priorities of the formats discussed herein differ, all operate based on summit diplomacy. As a result, the country that initiates a particular event most often decides on the agenda. The Visegrád Group's meeting format allows for more flexibility than the Bucharest Nine, and the Three Seas Initiative, as it goes beyond organising events at just the presidential or ministerial level. A look from this angle on the functioning of the formats enables us to adjust a given format to the current needs. Only within the Three Seas Initiative format, the presidential-level meetings have a relatively cyclical character. Every year, the 3SI summits are organised in the country currently holding the presidency. This allows flexibility in the agenda, and enables the host country to schedule the summit at a convenient time. The summit diplomacy formula is used in Central Europe because this region consists mainly of small or medium-sized countries with limited human and financial resources. Summit diplomacy is essential, especially for smaller countries, due to the benefits of cost reduction for diplomatic exchanges. The development of the formats mentioned above is limited, and can only be updated during successive meetings. It seems improbable that this process will change in the coming years.

³⁹ The word "presidency" is not included in the declarations adopted after the B9 summits.

Table 7. The summit diplomacy formats of the V4, the B9, and the 3SI

Feature/Format	Visegrád Group	Bucharest Nine	Three Seas Initiative
Meeting frequency	Irregular - mostly several times a year	Depending on the security needs	Once a year
Level of representation	Various levels of representation, including Prime Ministers, Presidents, ministers, deputy ministers, MPs, and others.	Presidents, Ministers of Defence, Ministers of Foreign Affairs.	Presidents
Participating Countries	V4 member countries. Occasionally the format includes additional countries.	B9 member countries. Occasionally the format is expanded to include additional countries and NATO.	3SI member countries. Occasionally the format is expanded to include additional countries and international organisations.

Source: Table by the author, on the basis of data from open access research.

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