

The Carpathian Gambit. Ukraine Stops Waiting for an Invitation

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A few days before the first summit of the Carpathian Integration Initiative, scheduled for September 2026 in the Ivano-Frankivsk region, Warsaw still does not know whom it will send. Volodymyr Zelensky has invited representatives of seven states of the region to the summit, Poland among them, he is steering the project personally, some leaders have already confirmed their attendance and more than five hundred business representatives are expected on site, and yet Poland's decision on the level of its representation still has not been taken [1]. This hesitation is itself a diagnosis. A country that considers itself the leader of Central Europe cannot decide whether to take part in the initiative at all, because it does not know whether it is facing an opportunity or a threat.

The Polish press read the new initiative reflexively, as Ukrainian competition for the Three Seas Initiative and an attempt to build a separate bloc in the region. Diplomats speak of duplicating formats, of dispersing resources, of expanding Ukraine's position at the expense of existing structures [2]. This reading is in a sense understandable, but mistaken, and doubly so. It misreads what the Carpathian Initiative is, and it overlooks what is genuinely new in it. Both errors are worth taking apart, because they obscure something far more important than a single summit. Ukraine is ceasing to be merely a participant in integration projects created by others and is beginning to design regional architecture itself. Poland will have to learn to operate in this new reality. The question is therefore not whether it can still lead in its own region, but whether it can help shape formats of which it is no longer the sole author.

Not a Bloc, but a Reach for an EU Instrument

Let me begin with what the Carpathian Initiative actually is, because this is where the first misunderstanding lies. It is not a competing political or military alliance, but an attempt to create a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians, on the model of arrangements that have functioned in the European Union for years for the Baltic Sea region (Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland), the Danube region (nine EU states, from Germany and Austria to Romania, and five from outside the Union, including Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine) and the Alpine region (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland) [3]. The idea is not entirely new either, because Kyiv presented it as early as May 2026 at a summit of cities and regions, and the September meeting is to be the first full summit of the initiative, at which the first investment agreements are to be signed. A macro-regional strategy is not a bloc, it is an EU mechanism that allows a group of regions from several states to reach jointly for funds and to coordinate investment in infrastructure, transport, energy and environmental protection. Kyiv wants such a strategy for the Carpathians, covering forty-three regions of eight states, to be adopted at EU level before the start of the next budget perspective, that is by the end of 2027 [4]. The aim is therefore very concrete and

very prosaic, access to money from the next EU budget rather than the building of an alternative political format. That this is not merely Zelensky's rhetoric is shown by the support the initiative has already gained in EU institutions. In November 2025 the European Committee of the Regions, during a meeting of its Ukraine task force, backed the platform and the launch of an EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian area [5]. Kyiv is thinking from the outset about capital from beyond the region. Zelensky announced that business representatives from the Middle East would be invited to the September summit to discuss investment in the Carpathians. In all, more than five hundred business representatives from various states are expected to take part, and the Ukrainian government is preparing a list of concrete agreements and projects to be presented at the summit. This is no longer merely the convening of neighbours. Ukraine convenes the states of the region, ties the format to EU funds and at the same time brings in capital from outside the region, and so begins to behave like a state trying to play the role of a regional organiser rather than merely a participant in others' arrangements.

The Carpathian Initiative covers part of the same region and similar areas of cooperation as the Three Seas Initiative, but this does not mean that the two formats serve the same function. The Three Seas Initiative is a presidential format, based on annual summits of heads of state, conceived as a geopolitical and infrastructural platform reinforcing the cohesion of the Union and the transatlantic bond [6]. A macro-regional strategy, by contrast, is an administrative instrument of the Union, tied to its cohesion policy and its budget. These are two different tools that can function in parallel, not two competing clubs. Austria, Slovakia and Romania have long taken part both in the Three Seas Initiative and in the Danube strategy. The mere fact that the Carpathian Initiative covers part of the same region and similar areas of cooperation does not therefore mean that it duplicates the Three Seas Initiative. The two formats operate on different levels, through different instruments, and can complement one another.

From Participant to Co-author

That being so, the question remains why Ukraine reaches for a new format instead of pursuing the same aims solely within the Three Seas Initiative. The answer is not an accusation against anyone, but follows from the change in the role Kyiv is beginning to play in the region. Within the Three Seas Initiative Ukraine is and remains an associated partner, because full participant status belongs solely to member states of the Union, to which Ukraine does not yet belong [7]. It has in fact been seeking a place in this format for some time. As early as January 2021 Volodymyr Zelensky and the president of Moldova Maia Sandu signed in Kyiv a declaration of interest in taking part, and both states obtained associated-partner status at the Bucharest summit in 2023, on the occasion of Greece's admission as the thirteenth full member [8]. The Carpathian Initiative gives Ukraine a different role. In it Ukraine is not an invited partner, but the initiator and co-author of the format. It therefore does not replace the Three Seas Initiative, but creates an additional space of cooperation in which Kyiv can set the direction.

Here it is worth being precise, because Ukraine is not alone within the Three Seas Initiative in the category of associated countries. Associated status is today held also by Moldova and, since 2025, by Albania and Montenegro, that is likewise by Western Balkan states that do not belong to the Union [9]. The barrier therefore does not run between Ukraine and the rest, but between full membership, which requires accession to the Union, and association, which is available to candidate states. The difference in behaviour is nonetheless striking. Albania and Montenegro treat association as an antechamber to the Union and build nothing parallel. Ukraine, formally in the same position, behaves differently, because it is the only one of this group with enough weight and ambition to move from participant in others' formats to author of its own. This change of role has, moreover, its own prehistory, worth remembering so as not to overstate its novelty. Ukraine has co-created regional arrangements before, from GUAM in the 1990s, through the Lublin Triangle with Poland and Lithuania in 2020, to the Association Trio with Moldova and Georgia in 2021. It did so, however, always in the post-Soviet space or among states aspiring to the Union, never as the initiator of a format in the very heart of Central Europe. What is more, Ukraine already participates in an EU macro-regional strategy, because it belongs to the Danube strategy, and in 2022 it even held its presidency [10]. The Carpathian Initiative is therefore the first case in which Kyiv neither joins someone else's macro-regional strategy nor co-creates an arrangement among fellow candidates, but itself designs such a strategy for a region in which, over the past decade, it was Poland that built its own leadership ambitions.

This is the key to understanding the Carpathian Initiative. It is reached for by a state that is today different from what it was before 2022. Four years of war and parallel accession negotiations have taught Kyiv that agency is built oneself, rather than waited for until someone grants it. The Carpathian Initiative is therefore two things at once for Ukraine, an anchor in the Union for the duration of the war, because it ties Ukrainian regions to the EU budget and coordination, and proof of a new role, because it shows that Ukraine can not only accept an invitation but also issue one itself to eight states of the region. The Carpathian Initiative is not, moreover, an isolated case. In recent years Ukraine has increasingly moved beyond the role of a state seeking support and has itself begun to create relationships, offer its own resources and initiate cooperation. This is visible in the Global South, where Kyiv has expanded its diplomatic presence, entered new security partnerships and begun to use its war experience as an instrument of foreign policy. Now a similar change is visible much closer to Poland. The Carpathian Initiative shows that Ukraine is becoming an active player also in its immediate neighbourhood, not merely participating in the existing architecture but trying to co-create it.

The Alleged Duplication, Honestly

It would be dishonest to pretend that Poland's concerns have no basis at all. Some of the Carpathian Initiative's projects do indeed overlap with what the Three Seas Initiative has been doing for years. The hydrogen corridor linking Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania, and the motorway with charging infrastructure for electric vehicles running from Ivano-Frankivsk through Hungary and Czechia to Katowice, are ventures that could equally well feature in the catalogue of Three Seas investments [11]. Both formats bet on the same axes, that is transport, energy and connections

between the states of Central Europe. In this sense the risk of dispersing resources and duplicating efforts is real and should not be played down.

But from the fact that both instruments cover the same projects it does not yet follow that they compete. It means rather that they require coordination. The hydrogen corridor does not become less necessary merely because it has appeared in two initiatives, and the motorway to Katowice will not be built twice. If Poland treats the Carpathian Initiative as an instrument complementary to the Three Seas Initiative, the overlap of some projects may become an argument for cooperation rather than against it. It allows the EU macro-regional strategy to be used to secure financing for investments that lie in Poland's interest anyway. Only if Warsaw were to regard the Carpathian Initiative as a competing format and limit its involvement could the overlap of projects turn into real competition, because decisions on some of them would be taken without Polish participation. The threat of which the diplomats warn does not therefore stem from the mere existence of the initiative, but may become the consequence of leaving it without Polish influence.

Ukraine as an Initiator of Formats

The Carpathian Initiative fits, moreover, into a broader mechanism that I earlier described as deconcentration, that is the building by states of parallel ties within many arrangements at once, so that no single centre holds a blocking position. The Carpathian Initiative is precisely another layer of the Ukrainian network. The Three Seas Initiative gives Kyiv access to the existing architecture, the Carpathians give initiative, the Union gives financing, and bilateral relations give additional channels. Ukraine does not choose between these arrangements but adds them one to another, and this is exactly the logic that in other middle powers we observe with approval, and which in a neighbour, precisely because it is happening in our own backyard, we begin to fear.

There is a bitter irony in this. For a decade Poland has been building the Three Seas Initiative as proof of its leadership in the region, and now, when a neighbour designs a new format in Central Europe itself, it reacts not with an attempt to help shape it, but with fear of duplication. Yet the true measure of leadership in a region where a second capable initiator appears no longer consists in being the sole author of formats, but in being able to co-create also those one did not think up.

Conclusions for Poland

From this analysis follows a conclusion simple to state, though hard to carry out. Poland should neither block nor ignore the Carpathian Initiative, but take co-authorship in it. For the alternative to Polish participation is not the absence of the initiative, but an initiative without Poland, built by Kyiv and pursued with those partners of the region who will come to the September summit regardless of whom, and whether at all, Warsaw sends. Absence will not stop the project, it will only deprive Poland of influence over its shape.

In practice this means three things. First, Poland should send high-level representation to the summit rather than an official, because in formats of this kind the level is a political message, and hesitation that lasts until the final days is the worst possible message. Second, it should seek to embed the Carpathian macro-regional strategy in the logic of the Three Seas Initiative, so that the two instruments complement rather than diverge from each other, which is feasible, because they operate on different levels and reach for EU funds through different channels. Third, and most importantly, it should treat the very fact that Ukraine is now designing its own formats as a signal that the model in which it was Warsaw that initiated and Kyiv that was invited has just ended. It is in Poland's interest to stop treating Ukrainian initiatives as competition merely because they did not originate in Warsaw, and to enter them as a co-author rather than an observer, because a neighbour that has begun to design architecture itself will go on designing it anyway, with Poland or without it.

The Carpathian Initiative is in essence a test, and not of Ukrainian intentions, but of Polish strategic imagination. It can be read as a threat to be defended against, and then Poland will behave like a state guarding a shrinking set of possessions. It can also be treated as a lever worth using, and entered as a co-author. The choice between these two attitudes matters more than the Carpathian Initiative itself, because a similar question will keep returning with every subsequent format arising in our neighbourhood. Ukraine will no longer merely wait for a place in an architecture created by others. Increasingly it will try to create that architecture itself. For Poland the question is therefore not how to stop this process, but how to become its co-author.

Notes

[1] Michał Potocki, "Ukraina chce integrować ze sobą regiony karpackie", *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 24 August 2026, updated 25 August 2026; Office of the President of Ukraine, "Президент обговорив із представниками гірських громад виклики й перспективи розвитку гірських територій", 13 August 2026.

[2] Michał Potocki, "Ukraina chce integrować ze sobą regiony karpackie", *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 24 August 2026, updated 25 August 2026.

[3] European Commission, "EU Macro-Regional Strategies: What is an EU Macro-Regional Strategy?"; European Commission, "Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies", section on EU macro-regional strategies.

[4] Congress of Local and Regional Authorities under the President of Ukraine, "Карпатська інтеграційна ініціатива: від політичної ідеї до інструменту розвитку макрорегіону", 27 May 2026; Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, "Україна та сусідні держави будують довгострокові механізми співробітництва в Карпатському регіоні", 26 May 2026.

[5] Lviv Regional State Administration, "Карпатська інтеграційна ініціатива отримала європейську підтримку: робоча група ЄКР проголосувала за нову стратегію", 28 November 2025; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Supporting Regional Cooperation and Implementing the Carpathian Integration Initiative: Oleksandr Korniienko Meets with the President of the European Committee of the Regions", 15 June 2026; Office of the President of Ukraine, "Президент обговорив із представниками гірських громад виклики й перспективи розвитку гірських територій", 13 August 2026.

[6] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza"; Chancellery of the President of Latvia, "At the summit in Riga member states of the Three Seas Initiative agree on closer partnership with Ukraine", 20 June 2022.

[7] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza"; Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, "Ukraine becomes associate member of the Three Seas Initiative", 12 September 2023.

[8] Office of the President of Ukraine, "Joint statement by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President of the Republic of Moldova Maia Sandu", 12 January 2021; Chancellery of the President of Latvia, "At the summit in Riga member states of the Three Seas Initiative agree on closer partnership with Ukraine", 20 June 2022; Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, "Ukraine becomes associate member of the Three Seas Initiative", 12 September 2023.

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Inicjatywa Trójmorza", as of 2026.

[10] European Commission, "EU Strategy for the Danube Region"; Office of the President of Ukraine, "Joint declaration of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda and President of Poland Andrzej Duda following the Second Summit of the Lublin Triangle", 11 January 2023.

[11] Michał Potocki, "Ukraina chce integrować ze sobą regiony karpackie", Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 24 August 2026, updated 25 August 2026; Agnieszka Kasprzyk, "Ukraina chce nowego sojuszu. Inicjatywa może być konkurentem dla Polski", Interia, August 2026.