

THE BUCHAREST 9 FORMAT BETWEEN RATIONAL AMBITIOUS GOALS AND REAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract

The 2014 invasion of Crimea, plus the hard policies displayed by Russia in the East Europe produced concern in the region. Most of the states located there, even NATO members felt they need extra defence measures, more cooperation and more help from the alliance. One major step was the formation of the Bucharest Nine format, which, despite its rather informal feature, tried to increase security benefits of its members. The article aims to analyse in a holistic manner the formation, goals, achievements and future perspectives of the B9 format.

Keywords: Bucharest Nine format, NATO, security, Eastern Flank, Ukraine.

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Introduction

The occupation of Crimea in 2014, of Donetsk and Luhansk one year later and the partial occupation of Ukraine in 2022 produced a lot of concern in the region, especially among the states which had territorial disputes in the past with Russia or Soviet Union. Even most of the countries in the region were NATO members, they felt extra measures must be taken. Two states from Central and Eastern Europe were involved in early discussions and organisation and the outcome was the Bucharest Nine format, or B9. The current article aims to analyse the circumstances of formation of B9 and its general working. More precisely, the specific objectives are to research its genesis, its initial steps and last but not least, its achievements. Due to its unusual format and recent formation, little literature can be found regarding this topic. Several texts come in the form of research of package of cooperation efforts in CEE, namely Visegrad Group, Three Seas Initiative or B9 and less often in the form of a singular studies on B9.¹ Consequently, most of information come from official press releases, media articles and texts covering NATO, rather than from academic writings. A significant feature of most of the texts regarding the Bucharest 9 format is the fact that are written by Polish scholars, a sign of the interest and expertise regarding this topic in Poland.²

¹ Vasile Rotaru and Andreas Umland, "How Romania and Poland Can Strengthen NATO and the EU. Two New Cooperation Initiatives Could Improve Regional Security", in *Foreign Affairs*, November 10, 2017; Agnieszka Orzelska-Staczek, Piotr Bajda, "Security Aspects of Regional Cooperation In Central Europe: Visegrád Group, Bucharest Nine, And The Three Seas Initiative", in *Online Journal Modelling The New Europe*, no. 37, 2021, pp. 4-23; Vasile Crețu, Dragoș Ardeleanu, "The Revival of The Intermarium Geopolitical Project. The Three Seas Initiative and Bucharest 9 Format", in *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review*, 19-20/2018, pp. 331-344.

² See, among others, Mirosław Banasik, "Bucharest Nine in The Process of Strategic Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank", in *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, no. 1, 2021, pp. 27-53; Marcin Terlikowski, Veronika Jóźwiak, Łukasz Ogrodnik, Jakub Pieńkowski and Kinga Raś, "The Bucharest 9: Delivering on the Promise to Become the Voice of the Eastern Flank", in *The Polish Institute of International Affairs Policy Paper*, no. 4(164), 2018, pp. 1-8.

The article aims to cover broadly the topic, looking for several elements describing it, instead of focusing on less features, but analysed in detail. By doing so, the objective of obtaining a broad picture on the format may be achieved, based on the joint analysis of all the contributing elements. In order to reach this goal, the paper is structured into four parts: the origins of B9, the formation of it, what was achieved, based on its initial goals, some concluding remarks ending the analysis.

The B9 format is one among other such initiatives common in Central and Eastern Europe. The first was the Visegrad group, formed to help the three, later four founding members (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) to better understand and fulfil the EU and NATO integration requirements. After these states and several other joined the EU and NATO, it became clear that that even following a standard set of regulations, there are still areas that need particular approaches and solutions, more precisely, regional answers to regional issues.

Two were the endeavours in this sense, the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest (Nine) format. On the one hand, the Three Initiatives has more economic goals, with an emphasis on transport and energy infrastructure and the digital sectors.³

On the other hand, although most of the states located in Central and Eastern Europe joined NATO, they still have particular objectives, due to mostly historical reasons. From a security point of view, most of the states in the region have territorial disputes with their neighbours, while some of them had territorial losses due to Russia/Soviet Union intervention in the past (Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, R. Moldova). Despite their historical conflicts, they all felt that facing a new possible threat from Russia, some sort of defence cooperation is necessary.

The trigger was the events of 2014-2015 and to a lesser extent, the ones of 2008, namely the occupation of parts of Georgia, Crimea, and the Eastern part of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. Even being NATO

³ Three Seas Initiative, <<https://3seas.eu/?lang=en>>, accessed on 15 November 2022.

members, most countries felt uncomfortable, due to the inconsistent answer of mainly the European Union, that is of harmless sanctions. The feeling was that Russia was not taken its last step, yet more objectives being on the agenda.

All these countries, either part of the defunct Soviet Union or of the Warsaw Pact, but especially Romania and Poland felt that despite NATO membership, some extra measures are needed. Russia had a decades long policy regarding military development in the Black Sea region, while Kaliningrad, by its simple positioning was enough to create worries in Poland or the Baltic states.

The Genesis of Bucharest 9

Its conception is not clear, yet there are some analyses placing the genesis of the B9 format on the *intermarium* concept proposed by Polish Head of State Josef Pilsudski in the 1920s.⁴

Intermarium was a geopolitical plan proposed by Josef Pilsudski aimed to integrate the countries located between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Sea (and also of the states located between Germany and Soviet Union) into a large defence entity. It was initially based on an alliance (“federation”) of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.⁵ After Ukraine and Belarus were incorporated in the Soviet Union, the initial plan failed, only to be re-initiated, covering most of Baltic and Balkan states, but also those from Central Europe. “The main reason behind “intermarium” was mainly to oppose Russian imperialism through creation of a federation of countries in Central and Eastern Europe.”⁶

⁴ A brief analysis on the connection between Intermarium and B9 in Ksenia Szelachowska, “The Revival of Intermarium: Poland Can Talk the Talk but Can It Walk the Walk?”, in *Stratfor*, 14 January 2016, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/revival-intermarium-poland-can-talk-talk-can-it-walk-walk>>, accessed on 30 October 2022

⁵ Jonathan Levy, *The Intermarium: Wilson, Madison, & East Central European Federalism*, Dissertation.com, 2006, pp. 165–167

⁶ Ksenia Szelachowska, *op.cit.*

Yet, most of these countries preferred smaller scale formats or bilateral alliances, thus the formation of *Little entente*, signed by Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The idea was dropped in just few years, but picked up by Polish President Lech after 2005, in what he saw a cooperation tool regarding energy supply, mainly from Caucasus.⁷ Once again, the plan was abandoned, only to be reprocessed by Andrzej Duda, who in his inauguration speech in August 2015 highlighted a few ideas of how he saw cooperation on security: “We need greater NATO presence in this part of Europe”, with “partners in Central and Eastern Europe, spanning from north of the Baltic Sea basin and down to the Adriatic” and “we must build a community”.⁸

It seems that prior to Duda-Iohannis talks, the topic was already discussed in March 2015, by Iohannis and Komorowsky, when they announced that they “agreed to organise in Bucharest this autumn a new meeting of heads of state in the format that was adopted in July last year in Warsaw”.⁹ According to the same official statement, the previous year Poland hosted a meeting of the heads of state of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) as well as Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁰

Eventually, after much diplomatic efforts, the format was approved on the 4th of November 2015, in the presence of the nine heads of states of

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ “Address by the President of the Republic of Poland Mr Andrzej Duda before the National Assembly”, <<https://www.president.pl/news/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland-mr-andrzej-duda-before-the-national-assembly,35979>>, accessed on 17 October 2022.

⁹ “Romanian President’s Visit Fosters Closer Ties”, <<https://www.president.pl/president-komorowski/news/romanian-presidents-visit-fosters-closer-ties,39076>>, accessed on 18 October 2022

¹⁰ While all the participants of this format were NATO states and the name of Ukraine was carefully avoided in all official statements, at academic level a new form of *Intermarium* with Ukrainian participation was taken into consideration. See, for instance, “The *Intermarium* in the 21st Century: Visions, Architectures, Feasibilities” International Conference, Warsaw, 2017, <<https://www.lazarski.pl/en/news/news/international-academic-conference-the-intermarium-in-the-21st-century-visions-architectures-fea/>>, accessed on 29 October 2022.

the member countries. The event was also to happen just less than one year before the 2016 NATO summit which was scheduled for June 2016 in Warsaw.

Official formation of Bucharest 9

The founding text is “Joint Declaration on Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility”, issued on the 4th of November 2015, at high level meeting in Bucharest.¹¹ Connected to the high-level meeting, the previous day the “Voice of the Flank Security Forum” was organised by the George Marshall Fund, with the clear intention to name the format as the Eastern Flank’s voice within NATO.¹² Its objectives were, as another official statement made it clear was to offer

[Launched at the initiative of the Presidents of Romania and Poland, in Bucharest, on 4th November 2015, at the High-Level Meeting of the States from Central and Eastern Europe, the Bucharest Format (B9) offers] a platform for deepening the dialogue and consultation among the participant allied states, in order to articulate their specific contribution to the ongoing processes across the North-Atlantic Alliance, in total compliance with the principles of solidarity and indivisibility of the security of the NATO Member States.¹³

It is important to observe that the B9 is not a treaty, nor an agreement, in the common sense of the concept. It is the reunion of head of states, even if some countries are parliamentary regimes, with the president having only ceremonial powers. This may be an interesting element, since at the NATO

¹¹ “Joint Declaration on Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility”, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/joint-declaration-on-allied-solidarity-and-shared-responsibility/>>, accessed on 22 October 2022.

¹² Marcin Terlikowski, *op.cit.*

¹³ “Bilateral Visit of President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, in the Republic of Poland and His Participation in the High Level Meeting of the Bucharest Format (B9), on 7-8 June 2018”, <<https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/bilateral-visit-of-president-of-romania-mr-klaus-iohannis-in-the-republic-of-poland-and-his-participation-in-the-high-level-meeting-of-the-bucharest-format-b9-on-7-8-june>>, accessed on 14 October 2022.

high level meetings several heads of government participate, instead of the presidents (e.g. Hungary or Poland).

Among the main objectives of the format, as announced by President Duda, was the presence of more stable troops in the Central and Eastern European member states (NATO bases) and not only rapid reaction forces.

As regarding its organisational structure, due to the fact that it is not based on a treaty, it has no institutions or organs for coordination, except a vaguely mentioned “presidential coordination committee”. This flexibility brings, however, some advantages, namely the absence of legal obligation or organisational structures, not to mention that eliminates criticism for forming organisations that may parallel the EU.¹⁴ Even the working method is under the form of “informal dialogue” as mentioned by President Iohannis in 2018.¹⁵

The main working method is the one of regular meeting, usually held in regularly in Bucharest and Warsaw (exception Kosice 2019) at presidential level, but also at foreign affairs and defence ministers ones; there were B9 meetings at parliamentary level.¹⁶ At some meetings NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was also present, not to mention US President, Joe Biden, in 2021. Important to notice, a B9 format meeting (at presidential level) was held just one day after Russia invaded Poland, even though the meeting took place in an online format.

Informally, there two groups of states, the ones concerned with the Russian threat (Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) while a second one (Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) have a less tensed image on Russia, while admitting the importance of NATO membership.

¹⁴ Agnieszka Orzelska-Staczek, Piotr Bajda, *op.cit.*, p.15.

¹⁵ “Romania Hosts Bucharest Format (B9) Summit at Parliamentary Level. President Iohannis: National parliaments of B9 countries play essential role in equitable sharing of burdens inside NATO”, <<https://www.nineoclock.ro/2018/04/19/romania-hosts-bucharest-format-b9-summit-at-parliamentary-level-president-iohannis-national-parliaments-of-b9-countries-play-essential-role-in-equitable-sharing-of-burdens-inside-nato/>>, accessed on 22 October 2022.

¹⁶ B9 meetings at presidential level: Bucharest 2015, Warsaw 2018, Kosice 2019, Bucharest 2021, Warsaw 2022 (25 February, online), Bucharest 2022 (June).

Results

It is difficult to measure precisely how much of post-2015 security developments were the results of the B9 discussions and how much because of other factors, such as the invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, there are several elements pointing out the fact that defence measures in the area improved significantly after 2015.

The moment of establishing the format was not a coincidence: Poland was preparing to host the NATO Warsaw summit, which took place in July 2016. The efforts were successful: the Summit key decision contained at the very beginning the plan to “enhance NATO’s military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance”, yet only in the Baltic area. Four battalions, one for each country were to be operational by June 2017.¹⁷ Poland took the leading role in the region and the main recipient of security improvements. There are more areas where the impact of Bucharest 9 can be noticed, even if not necessarily implying direct causality.

Firstly, the B9 discussions lead to the shaping of the NATO agenda. The formation of B9 in 2015 was in close connection with the 2016 NATO summit which took place in Warsaw. The very first position on the list of the Warsaw Summit Key decisions was the enhancement of military presence in the Eastern part of NATO, with an emphasis on the Baltic region, as mentioned: four battalions in the corresponding states, with a “tailored forward presence” in the south-eastern flank, with a fully operational Headquarters of a Multinational Corps Northeast in Poland and the establishment of a Headquarters of a Multinational Division Southeast in Romania.¹⁸

¹⁷ Warsaw Summit Key Decisions, <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf>, accessed on 7 November 2022.

¹⁸ Full text of the official statement: “1. Enhanced Forward Presence: At the Warsaw Summit, Allies agreed to enhance NATO’s military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, on a rotational basis. These defensive battalions will be robust and multinational, demonstrating the strength of the

Unfortunately, next NATO summits were dominated by controversial statements or approaches of US President Donald Trump, with shorter or even no Summit Declaration of Head of states and governments.

Next as importance came the 2022 Madrid Summit, where the Bucharest Nine countries acted as a united block, asking for an increase in security in the region, due the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹

Secondly, the B9 format, established right after the Wales summit, which decided to stop the declining of defence budgets and to move towards a target of 2% of GDP spending for defence in the next decade, acted as a stimulating tool for the defence policies of its members.

While all NATO states increased their defence spending, the B9 states were leading this trend (for instance, between 2015 and 2022, Canada had its defence spending increased in 2017 with 27%, in almost all other years having a negative trend).

	2015	2018	2022
Bulgaria	1.25	1.45	1.67
Czech Rep.	1.02	1.10	1.33
Estonia	2.03	2.02	2.34
Hungary	0.9	1.01	1.55
Latvia	1.03	2.06	2.10
Lithuania	1.14	1.97	2.26

transatlantic bond and making clear that an attack on one Ally will be met by forces from across the Alliance. All four battalions will be fully operational by June 2017. Allies also endorsed a tailored forward presence for our south-eastern flank. It will be built around a Romanian framework brigade, under Multinational Division Southeast. This will be supplemented by steps to strengthen the readiness and interoperability of air and maritime forces in the Black Sea region.”, *Warsaw Summit Key Decisions*, 2016, <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf>; see also *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, 2016, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm>, accessed on 2 November 2022

¹⁹ Declaration of the heads of state Bucharest 9 meeting, 10 June 2022, <<https://www.president.pl/news/declaration-of-the-heads-of-state-bucharest-9-meeting-,55290>>, accessed on 27 October 2022

	2015	2018	2022
Poland	2.22	2.02	2.42
Romania	1.45	1.81	1.99
Slovakia	1.11	1.23	2,00
NATO total	2.48	2.41	2.57

Table 1. Spending for defence, as percentage of GDP, 2015 prices²⁰

Due to all these efforts, almost all B9 countries reached by 2022 the 2% target, only Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech Republic being behind the line. Moreover, the Baltic states and Romania are already aiming for a 2,5% target for 2025, even 3% in the case of Poland.²¹ Obviously, the Ukrainian conflict boosted spending, but the trend was significantly increasing in the B9 states after 2015.

Thirdly, B9 states was successful in convincing the NATO partners on the need for more troops in the area, correctly assessing the Russian threat and plan to further invade Ukraine. After the formation of B9 and the Warsaw Summit, in 2017 four multinational battalion-size battlegroups were created in Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia as a forward presence (that is, quasi-permanent), with a Multinational Headquarter in Szczecin (Poland). In few months after the war in Ukraine started, NATO decide to increase it forward presence in four more countries, that is Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. In the latest case, NATO transformed its *tailored forward presence* (mainly command structures) into and *enhanced forward presence* (combat ready battlegroups)

²⁰ Source: NATO, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2022), June 2022, <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220627-def-exp-2022-en.pdf>.

²¹ Esme Kirk-Wade, Sanjana Balakrishnan, "Defence spending pledges by NATO members since Russia invaded Ukraine", *House of Commons Library*, 11 August, 2022, <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/defence-spending-pledges-by-nato-members-since-russia-invaded-ukraine/>> accessed on 3 November 2022

Host nation	Framework nation	Contributing nations
Bulgaria	Italy	Albania, Greece, North Macedonia and the United States
Estonia	United Kingdom	Denmark, France and Iceland
Hungary	Hungary	Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, Türkiye and the United States
Latvia	Canada	Albania, Czechia, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain
Lithuania	Germany	Belgium, Czechia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway
Poland	United States	Croatia, Romania and the United Kingdom
Romania	France	the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal and the United States
Slovakia	Czechia	Germany, the Netherlands and Slovenia

Table 2. The composition of the eight allied battlegroups, as of October 2022²²

²² Source: NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance, 7 December 2022, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm>.



Figure 1. Number of deployed and local troops, June 2022²³

Conclusions

Initiated as rather curious format, the Bucharest Nine succeeded to “put” the Eastern flank on the NATO map. After the occupation of Crimea and Northern Georgia, CEE countries felt that Russia is not going to stop its expansionist plans. With the European Union, even a strong economic block, yet not capable to become a strong defence unit, it was NATO and especially the USA the factor to rely on. It is true that only the defence of Baltic area of the Eastern flank was properly strengthened after the inception of B9, but several structures were added to the Black Sea region also. Despite its informality and lack of measurable objectives, it is evident that the B9 achieved most of its goals.

²³ Source: <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/2203-map-det-def-east.pdf>.

Yet, some questions may be added to the agenda in the future. What role for Turkey and Finland in the future? If Turkey comes into discussion, there is a lack of significant cooperation among this country, Romania and Bulgaria in the field of security, especially the maritime one. What will be the attitude of Hungary in the future inside this format, bearing in mind its friendly attitude regarding Russia? Last but not least, about B9 “enlargement”: one the one hand, will Finland join B9 (B10) in the future? If so, will this further balance the defence weight towards the Baltic part of the Eastern Flank? On the other hand, what will be the relation between B9 and Ukraine, once the war is over? Will there be a B9+ format, as some argue?²⁴

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