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Poland's role in the Three Seas Initiative: perspectives from Russian academia and experts

Rola Polski w Inicjatywie Trójmorza: perspektywy rosyjskich środowisk akademickich i ekspertów

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the issue of the Three Seas Initiative and Poland's role in Central Europe in the Russian academic and expert narrative. The research is based primarily on Russian scientific articles and expert publications in the Russian media – mainly on the Internet. The general conclusion from the conducted research is as follows: the Russian academic narrative, in its perception of the Three Seas Initiative, tries to notice various factors influencing the political situation and regional cooperation in Central Europe, treating Central European countries as entities initiating integration processes in the region. In turn, the Russian expert narrative is dominated by the view that this is a project implemented by the Anglo-Saxon countries, in which the decisive factor is the United States, which is interested in consolidating its geopolitical primacy in Central Europe and displacing Russian and Chinese economic and political influences from this area. Russian experts also point to Poland's historically motivated, nostalgic ambitions to play a leadership and hegemonic role in the region and to strengthen, with the help of Washington and London, the position of the Central European region vis-à-vis the continental powers of Europe – Germany and France.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative, Russia, Poland, Central Europe, the United States

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie zagadnienia Inicjatywy Trójmorza i roli Polski w Europie Środkowej w rosyjskiej narracji akademickiej i eksperckiej. Badanie opiera się przede wszystkim na rosyjskich artykułach naukowych oraz publikacjach eksperckich w rosyjskich mediach – głównie internetowych. Ogólna konkluzja z przeprowadzonych badań jest następująca: rosyjska narracja akademicka w swojej percepcji Inicjatywy Trójmorza stara się dostrzegać różne czynniki wpływające na sytuację polityczną i współpracę regionalną w Europie Środkowej, traktując państwa środkowoeuropejskie

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jako podmioty inicjujące procesy integracyjne w regionie. Z kolei w rosyjskiej narracji eksperckiej całkowicie dominuje pogląd, że jest to projekt realizowany przez państwa anglosaskie, w którym decydującym podmiotem sprawczym są Stany Zjednoczone, zainteresowane utrwaleniem swojego geopolitycznego prymatu w Europie Środkowej oraz wyparciem rosyjskich i chińskich wpływów ekonomiczno-politycznych z tego obszaru. Rosyjscy eksperci wskazują też na polskie motywowane historycznie nostalgiczne ambicje do odgrywania przywódczej i hegemonicznej roli w regionie oraz wzmocnienia, przy pomocy Waszyngtonu i Londynu, pozycji regionu środkowoeuropejskiego względem kontynentalnych mocarstw Europy – Niemiec i Francji.

Słowa kluczowe: Inicjatywa Trójmorza, Rosja, Polska, Europa Środkowa, Stany Zjednoczone

Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative was established in September 2015 on the initiative of Poland and Croatia, with its main goal being to strengthen cooperation between the countries of Central Europe. The name refers to the area located between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, although the project is also open to members from outside this region. Currently, 13 countries belong to the Three Seas Initiative (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Austria, and Greece, and two associated countries, Moldova and Ukraine). The Three Seas project is a multilateral format of international regional cooperation, an economic and political initiative, intended as an informal platform to support infrastructure projects in the transport, energy, and digital communications sectors. It can also be considered as a platform for reconciling the interests of the Central European countries expressed in the forum of the European Union.

Russia's massive conventional aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 destabilised the security architecture in the entire Central European region and increased the threat of military conflict or even war for the countries located in this area. Particular danger is felt primarily in the Baltic countries, but significant concerns about the escalation of the war in Ukraine have appeared in other countries of the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Alliance as well as in other countries of the region. Therefore, the Three Seas Initiative is becoming a format consolidating the region also in the geopolitical and security policy dimensions.

The creation and development of the Three Seas Initiative has been noted in Russia, and although this issue is not of particular in-

terest to Russian society, it is not ignored. It is the subject of analysis and interpretation in academic, expert, and journalistic (journalistic) circles. Russian politicians speak less often about this project (general statements), which most often happens on the occasion of subsequent summits of the Three Seas format. Russian academic studies on this matter are also available in modest numbers. Although the Three Seas issue is not dominant or frequent in the Russian public debate, it is worth paying attention to¹. This will allow us to recognise patterns and the thought processes used to interpret this issue in Russia. A fundamental characteristic (especially of the Russian academic narrative) is the frequent setting of this issue in correlation with Poland's regional role.

1. Russian interests in Central Europe – a historical and contemporary perspective

The end of World War II and the Yalta order (1945) allowed the Soviet Union to establish its extensive sphere of influence in Central Europe, and the Baltic countries were directly incorporated into the USSR. For the remaining countries in the region, with the exception of Yugoslavia and Albania – which retained their independence from Moscow, this meant the loss of sovereignty and transformation into satellites of the Soviet empire. The prospects for a change in the geopolitical situation in Central Europe appeared in the second half of the 1980s on a wave of systemic reforms (*perestroika*) in the USSR, the liberalisation of the communist system, and ultimately its collapse in 1991. As a consequence, the Baltic countries returned to a group of independent states. The new political situation enabled the countries of the region to regain sovereignty, transform their political systems, and westernise their foreign policy. Over the course of a few to a dozen years, until recently, the countries of the region dependent on Moscow gradually became members of the Euro-Atlantic structures – the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) and the European Union.

1 There are few studies in Poland on Russia's attitude towards the Three Seas Initiative. Basically, two can be indicated: P. Bielicki, *Stanowisko Rosji wobec Trójmorza*, "Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2022, no. 1(57), pp. 159–184; Ł. Kobiński et al., *Trójmorze – analiza dyskursu medialnego. Rosja, Białoruś, Ukraina, Niemcy*, Warsaw 2021.

The largest country resulting from the disintegration of the USSR is Russia (Russian Federation), also undergoing a period of capitalist transformation. After several years of rapprochement with the West but also with the West's final rejection of Russian claims to domination in the post-Soviet area, Moscow found itself in an increasingly clear and obvious conflict of interest with both the United States, the leader of the West, and the Central European countries². The biggest problem for Russia in Central Europe has become NATO's expansion to the east and the membership of the region's countries in this alliance³. Moreover, the Kremlin became fearful of Western influences in countries that it considered part of the Russian Orthodox civilisation and the Russian cultural area – Ukraine and Belarus. Moscow pursued a policy of rapprochement with the most influential and strongest EU countries – Germany, France and Italy, implementing infrastructure projects together with them enabling the transit of Russian raw materials to the West. At the same time, these countries de facto, at least tacitly, recognised Ukraine, Belarus, as well as Moldova and Georgia, as within Russia's sphere of influence. Due to negative historical experiences, this situation aroused dissatisfaction and serious concerns among some Central European countries (Poland, the Baltic countries), whose reservations were supported by the USA and Great Britain – which are strongly interested in weakening Russian influence on the Old Continent.

Therefore, the Kremlin began to perceive Central Europe as a zone of strong Anglo-Saxon influence, which Washington and London would want to transform into a "cordon sanitaire", isolating Russia from its partners in Western Europe. Additionally, support for pro-Western political forces in Ukraine and Belarus by Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn contributed to the increase in tensions in the relations of the Russian Federation with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Moscow's most important interests in Central Europe have, therefore, become focussed on counteracting the expansion of NATO infrastruc-

2 M. Smith, *Pax Russica: Russia's Monroe Doctrine*, London 1993; A. Włodkowska-Bagan, *Rywalizacja mocarstw na obszarze poradzieckim*, Warsaw 2013.

3 И. Павловский, *Политика национальных интересов России. Вектор развития современной России*, Москва 2008 [I. Pavlovskiy, *Politika natsional'nykh interesov Rossii. Vektor razvitiya sovremennoy Rossii*, Moscow 2008].

ture in the region, limiting the influence of the region's countries on Russia's relations with Western Europe, and minimising the influence of Central European countries on shaping the West's policy towards Ukraine and Belarus, but also Moldova and Georgia.

2. Russian academic narrative towards the Three Seas Initiative

As mentioned in the introduction, there are only a few studies on the Three Seas Initiative in Russian science; however, an attempt to create a discourse around this issue was made within the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences. A feature of Russian scientific studies on the Three Seas Initiative is the recognition of the widest possible range of factors, circumstances, stages, and political motivations leading to the creation of this format of regional cooperation. These studies, especially those published by two authors – Maria Rusakova and Lyubov Shishelina (from the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences), are also characterised by the greatest objectivity.

Maria Rusakova and Lubow Shishelina present the Three Seas Initiative in the historical process, describing individual forms of cooperation between the countries of the region evolving towards the current Three Seas format⁴. Shishelina sees the genesis of the Three Seas idea in the Jagiellonian Empire in the second half of the 15th century, and then its continuation in the form of the Polish-Lithuanian Union of Lublin (1569), and later Józef Piłsudski's concept of the Intermarium, pointing, however, to the anti-Russian motivations of the latter two projects⁵. Rusakova, searching for the origins of the Three Seas Initiative, focuses on the post-communist era and describes such forms of regional cooperation as Pentagonale and Heksagonale (1989), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (1990), CEFTA (1990), the Visegrad Group (1991), the Eastern Partnership (2008) as well

4 М. Русакова, *Польша и новые тенденции в центральноевропейском региональном строительстве*, «Современная Европа» 2021, № 1, с. 52–61 [M. Rusakova, *Pol'sha i novyye tendentsii v tsentral'noyevropeyskom regional'nom stroitelstve*, "Sovremennaya Yevropa" 2021, no. 1, pp. 52–61]; Л. Шишелина, *Идея «Триморья»: от возникновения до сегодняшних дней*, «Научно-Аналитический Вестник ИЕ РАН» 2018, № 5, с. 33–38 [L. Shishelina, *Ideya Trimor'ya: ot vznikhnoveniya do segodnyashnikh dney*, "Nauchno-Analiticheskiy Vestnik IYe RAN" 2018, no. 5, pp. 33–38].

5 L. Shishelina, *Ideya Trimor'ya*...

as the Carpathian Euroregion (1993) and the Carpathian Convention (2003). This author treats the Three Seas Initiative not as a finale, but more as a starting point for subsequent regional initiatives – such as the Lublin Triangle (2020). Rusakowa sees the key role of Poland in all these forms of cooperation, which in her opinion is the most active Central European country in the sphere of regional integration. According to this author, the Council of the Baltic Sea States is an important element of European architecture, used by Poland to support the post-Soviet Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) in order to stabilise the region. However, Warsaw was disappointed with Pentagonale and Heksagonale because, in their historical context, these formats were more reminiscent of Austria-Hungary than the Jagiellonian Empire. In turn, CEFTA and the Visegrad Group were, from the Polish perspective, successful projects, serving as a coordination forum for close Euro-Atlantic integration of the Member States and other countries in the region. The Russian researcher sees the Eastern Partnership, established on a Polish-Swedish initiative on the basis of the European Neighbourhood Policy, as an attempt to export European influence filtered through Polish interests (a Polish vision of security policy) to post-Soviet countries – Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. The author points out that in 2019, Poland, in the face of Russian policy towards Ukraine (its annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas), proposed to tighten the political and economic relations of the Eastern Partnership countries, both among themselves and with the EU. Another manifestation of Poland's activity in the region was the establishment of the Lublin Triangle in 2020, with the participation of Lithuania and Ukraine, which, in addition to emphasising the historical and contemporary strong ties between the three countries, is an expression of institutional support for Ukraine and its territorial integrity (the official call for Russia to withdraw from Crimea and Donbas). The consequence of this event was a tightening of the partnership between Warsaw and Washington and, as a result, an increase in the contingent of American troops in Poland⁶.

6 M. Rusakowa, *Pol'sha i novyye tendentsii...*

According to Lubow Shishelina, the Three Seas Initiative is an expression of Poland's historic aspirations for regional domination and the desire to play a special role in Europe. The author sees the Three Seas project as an attempt to counter the Weimar Triangle, in which Poland is the weakest element – mainly in the decision-making sphere, but also remains an important element of the policy of the main European powers because no other Central European country is covered by a similar format. Being one of the originators and leaders of the Three Seas Initiative, Poland strengthens its position on the Old Continent, especially in relation to Western European countries⁷.

Another Russian author, Marta Zubovic, representing the Diplomatic Academy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focuses on the geo-economic aspect of the Three Seas Initiative, treating it in this dimension as a reaction to the war in Ukraine⁸. This is related to the demand of the countries of the region to reduce their dependence on Russian energy carriers and to build meridional energy infrastructure⁹. Zubovic emphasises Washington's desire to increase Poland's regional role and transform the Three Seas Initiative into an instrument for pursuing American interests in Europe – primarily influencing and putting pressure on the policies of Germany and France, mainly in the context of forcing Berlin and Paris to give up Russian energy resources¹⁰.

3. The Three Seas Initiative in the Russian expert narrative

Unlike the Russian academic narrative, the Russian expert narrative shows the Three Seas Initiative as a project invented far outside Central Europe – namely in the USA. Therefore, the countries of the region are not the causative entity, but at most – the participating entity. Russian analyst Władisław Gulewicz from the Strategic Culture Foundation claims that the Three Seas Initiative is a Croatian initiative enthusiastically supported by Poland, but in fact, the entire project was

7 L. Shishelina, *Ideya Trimor'ya...*

8 M. Zubovic, "The Three Seas Initiative": *Perspectives of Energy Sector Development within the Croatian Foreign Policy*, "Проблемы Постсоветского Пространства / Post-Soviet Issues" 2019, no. 6(1), pp. 84–91.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

conceived by a team led by the special envoy and coordinator for International Energy Issues and the head of the Office of Resources Energy at the US Department of State, Amos J. Hochstein¹¹. The American politician sees natural gas as a weapon and the Three Seas as an instrument for stopping Russian gas infrastructure projects (Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2). Prominent members of the Atlantic Council think tank also participated in the planning of the Three Seas Initiative: Frederic Kempe, Ian Brzezinski, John Roberts, and reserve general James Jones (president of Jones Group International), who are the authors of the document *Completing Europe – From the South-North Corridor to Energy, Transportation and Telecommunications Union* (September–August 2014)¹².

In the opinion of Vladislav Gulevich, the main goal of the Three Seas Initiative is to displace Russian natural gas from the European market, as evidenced by the statement of Polish President Andrzej Duda at the summit in Dubrovnik in September 2016, where he stated that the Three Seas Initiative was established to end the domination of one gas suppliers to Europe. The true intentions of the main animators of the Three Seas format – the Americans – are reflected in the statement of James Jones, who believes that Russia uses energy resources as a lever for the “divide and rule” strategy towards Europe. Further, Jones, quoted by Gulevich, claims that by connecting the north and south of Europe in terms of energy supplies, the Three Seas Initiative will defeat the enemy with its own weapons, support the stability and independence of those sensitive Central European countries that are under pressure from Moscow, but not have the guarantees provided for in NATO Article 5. Linking non-EU Western Balkan countries to the Three Seas Initiative will weaken Russia’s ability to use energy as a tool to undermine the independence of countries in the region¹³.

11 В. Гудевич, *Троёморье – американский «забор» между Россией и Европой* [V. Gulevich, *Troyemor'ye – amerikanskiy "zabor" mezhdru Rossiyey i Yevropoy*], Фонд Стратегической Культуры [Fond Strategicheskoy Kul'tury], 12 September 2016, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2016/09/12/troemore-amerikanskij-zabor-mezhdru-rossiej-i-evropoj-42456.html> [12.04.2024]; RussiaPost.su, 12 September 2016, <https://www.russiapost.su/archives/89772> [12.04.2024].

12 *Completing Europe – From the South-North Corridor to Energy, Transportation and Telecommunications Union*, related by D. Koranyi, I. Brzezinski, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/completing-europe-from-the-north-south-corridor-to-energy-transportation-and-telecommunications-union/> [12.04.2024].

13 V. Gulevich, *Troyemor'ye...*

Vladislav Gulevich also writes about the historical context of the Three Seas Initiative, believing that this concept refers to the Polish Intermarium program by Józef Piłsudski, although its roots reach even deeper – to the 15th–16th centuries. The Russian expert notes Poland's efforts to link Kiev with the Three Seas Initiative, claiming that Poland is trying to involve Ukraine in the project in three areas; political and military integration with NATO, energy independence from Russia, and overcoming historical animosities between Poles and Ukrainians¹⁴.

Another Russian expert, Ilya Zakharkin from the Ritm Yevrazii (The Rhythm of Eurasia) portal, emphasises the interest in the Three Seas Initiative from the US, which wants to allocate USD 1 billion for the implementation of the project¹⁵. The main reason for Washington's interest is the possibility of making the countries in the region independent of Russian natural gas supplies and more dependent on American supplies of this raw material. The project is the result of the increase in anti-Russian sentiment in Central Europe with direct cooperation from the US. Although Warsaw declared that the Three Seas Initiative was not of a geopolitical nature, the facts and the undoubted American interest – especially during Donald Trump's presidency – contradict this. However, the US authorities do not show any clear willingness to finance the project, waiting for the participating countries themselves to act in this area. In July 2019, the Three Seas Initiative summit in Ljubljana proved that one of the main goals of the project is the geopolitically motivated transformation of the energy market, as evidenced by the presence of representatives of the US Secretary of Energy. The officially declared main goal of the project is the construction of broadly understood meridional transport infrastructure.

Ilya Zakharkin concludes that infrastructure projects are expensive and the energy demand of most countries in the region is low, so these countries may be reluctant to invest in expensive terminals and gas pipelines to transport expensive American gas. US political

14 Ibid.

15 И. Захаркин, «Триморье» – политическая авантюра европейцев или стратегический проект США? [I. Zakharkin, "Trimor'ye" – politicheskaya avanturya yevropeytsev ili strategicheskii proyekt SSHA?], Dzen.ru/ritmeurasia, 27 May 2020, <https://dzen.ru/a/Xs5PyblCEwQTUR9r> [12.04.2024].

involvement is a form of compensation to its regional allies for the reduction of US financial support for the region; American activity results from the fact that Washington has begun to perceive the Three Seas Initiative as a factor strengthening US security and an instrument for pursuing its interests in Europe¹⁶. The launch of this project is a manifestation of pressure on Russia from the anti-Russian lobby on the Old Continent. Actions taken as part of the Three Seas Initiative lead to Europe's dependence on expensive American gas at the expense of cheap Russian gas.

Another Russian analyst, Leonid Savin from the Geopolitika portal, sees Great Britain's involvement in the Three Seas project¹⁷. The author draws attention to the initiative of Daniel Kawczynski, a British parliamentarian of Polish origin, trying to persuade the British government to support the Three Seas concept and make it a permanent direction in British foreign policy¹⁸. Kawczynski pointed to (*Report: Three Seas Initiative and the Opportunities for Global Britain*)¹⁹ the role of the USA and supplying Central Europe with American energy resources in the context of stopping Russia's energy domination in the region; to limit Chinese expansion in the Balkans, also in technological terms (5G telephony). The Three Seas Initiative provides the UK with the opportunity to demonstrate its global ambitions by participating in regional infrastructure projects and contributing to reducing the influence of Russia and China in Central Europe. This was confirmed by the speech of the head of British diplomacy during the Sofia summit in July 2021, in which the minister emphasised the strategic importance of the region. In turn, Japan, for which Beijing is a serious rival and a source of threats, should participate at the (counter)investment level in stopping China's geoeconomic expansion in Central and Eastern Europe. London's involvement in the Three Seas infrastruc-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Л. Савин, *Инициатива Трех морей и глобальная Британия* [L. Savin, *Initsiativa Trekh morey i global'naya Britaniya*], Геополитика.ru [Geopolitika.ru], 8 October 2021, <https://www.geopolitika.ru/article/iniciativa-treh-morey-i-globalnaya-britaniya> [12.04.2024].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Report: Three Seas Initiative and the Opportunities for Global Britain. By the Chairman of the APPG on Poland, Daniel Kawczynski MP in cooperation with George Byczynski, Filip Derewenda, Domanok Lissak*, <https://emerging-europe.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Report-on-the-Three-Seas-Initiative.pdf> [12.04.2024].

ture and trade projects may compensate Great Britain for the decline in its international importance caused by Brexit. The Three Seas is not a competitor or alternative to the EU. However, as Leonid Savin states, this project is an instrument to strengthen the position of the Anglo-Saxon powers in the region in the context of limiting and eliminating Russian and Chinese influence as well as pushing the largest powers of continental Western Europe – Germany and France – to more peripheral positions²⁰.

Sergei Pavlenko from the Strategic Culture Foundation states that the initiators of the Three Seas project are officially Croatia and Poland, and unofficially the USA. The Three Seas Initiative serves the American goal of driving Gazprom out of Europe. The expert analyses the attitude of the elites of individual member states towards the idea of the Three Seas Initiative²¹. He sees the most enthusiastic, even euphoric attitude towards the entire concept in the Polish presidential camp, pointing to Andrzej Duda's words that the Three Seas Initiative creates opportunities for Poland that it has not had since the 17th century and that the emerging opportunities should be exploited. He also refers to the statement of Krzysztof Szczerski (then Secretary of State in the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland) that the Three Seas Initiative follows the path that united Europe once followed with the Coal and Steel Community, and the Three Seas begins with roads and energy. On this basis, Pawlenko concludes that from the Polish perspective, the Three Seas Initiative is an alternative to the EU, and in a historical sense it is based on Józef Piłsudski's concept of the Intermarium²².

According to the Russian analyst, finances are a real obstacle to the Three Seas project. Poland declares a contribution of 1 billion EUR, but other countries, especially Romania (the second largest

20 L. Savin, *Iniitsiativa Trekh morey...*

21 С. Павленко, «Троеморье» как американская альтернатива связям Европы с Россией и Китаем [S. Pavlenko, "Троеморье" как американская альтернатива связям Европы с Россией и Китаем], Фонд Стратегической Культуры [Fond Strategicheskoy Kul'tury], 1 November 2020, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2020/11/01/troemore-amerikanskaja-alternativa-svjazjam-evropy-s-rossiej-i-kitaem-52165.html> [12.04.2024]; Русская народная линия [Russkaya narodnaya liniya], 1 November 2020, https://ruskline.ru/opp/2020/11/01/troemore_kak_amerikanskaya_alternativa_svyazyam_evropy_s_rossiej_i_kitaem [12.04.2024].

22 Ibid.

country in the Three Seas Initiative), even though the USA, according to Mike Pompeo's declaration, intends to allocate 1 billion USD to the project, are not willing to participate financially. Therefore, Pompeo stipulated that the responsibility for the financial security of the project rests with the member states. Another obstacle to the consolidation of the Three Seas Initiative is the conflicting interests of individual countries and the contradictory visions of political elites in individual countries. Pavlenko referred to the statement of Croatian President Milan Zoranovic, standing in opposition to Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, that the Three Seas is unnecessary and will worsen relations with Germany and Russia. Similar conflicts around the Three Seas Initiative occur within the Bulgarian political class. The president of Slovenia (until 2022), Borut Pahor, supported the Three Seas but wanted Germany to participate in it, which is contrary to US interests²³.

Citing Australian and American sources, Sergei Pavlenko sees the Three Seas Initiative as a project aimed at Chinese interests – the “One Belt, One Road” project and the “17+1” project supported by China, grouping Central European countries around the One Belt and Road project. The Russian expert referred to Donald Trump's letter to Albanian Prime Minister Edi Pame, in which the US president praised Albania for its active participation in the Three Seas Initiative (Albania is not a member of the Three Seas Initiative) and at the same time reprimanded it for its participation in Chinese projects²⁴. Joe Biden shows solidarity with Donald Trump in relation to the Three Seas Initiative, promising Poles that this project will remain a regional priority for the US. Although the biggest enemy for the US – in the opinion of American politicians – is China, Washington's support for the Three Seas Initiative is an element of geopolitical competition with Russia – the main geopolitical and geo-economic opponent in the Central European region (implementing the NS-1 and NS-2 infrastructure projects)²⁵.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

At the end of the sequence of Russian expert opinions on the Three Seas Initiative and Poland's role in this format of regional cooperation, a statement by General Nikolai Patrushev (head of the National Security Council of the Russian Federation until May 14, 2024), a close associate of Vladimir Putin, will be quoted, and also two academicians – economist Andrei Konoplanik and military expert Vladimir Kozin. Nikolai Patrushev stated that the American Three Seas Initiative proves the revival of the over-one-hundred-year-old idea of a “cordon sanitaire” on Russia's western border²⁶. The US is not interested in the independence of European countries, which is why it is trying to create convenient local formats even within the EU, e.g., the Three Seas Initiative, consolidating the countries of Eastern Europe. This project is advertised as a constructive integration format, but in fact, it creates a new anti-Russian union of states. Patrushev's statement on the Three Seas issue was a fragment of a broader statement by the Kremlin politician about US global policy, including the “fiasco of American policy in Afghanistan” and Washington's tightening of relations with Great Britain and Australia in the AUKUS format²⁷.

In turn, Andrei Konoplanik, a member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Academy of Sciences for systemic research in the field of energy and advisor to the general director of “Gazprom-Export”, expresses the view that the goal of the US-Eastern European Three Seas Initiative, which has been implemented since 2016, is in fact a reincarnation of the “Intermarium” – a former project of Józef Piłsudski, which is the energy isolation of Russia from Europe and the desire to replace Russian natural gas with gas from the USA²⁸. Washing-

26 А. Назарова, Патрушев назвал «инициативу трех морей» возрождением идеи «санитарного кордона» у границ России [A. Nazarova, Patrushev nazval “initsiativu trekh morey” vrozozhdeniyem “sanitarnogo kordona” u granits Rossii], Взгляд [Vzglyad], 21 September 2021, <https://vz.ru/news/2021/9/21/1120087.html> [12.04.2024]; Патрушев обвинил США в дестабилизации ситуации по всему миру [Patrushev obvinil SSHA v destabilizatsii situatsii po vsemu miru], Известия IZ.RU [Izvestiya IZ.RU], 21 September 2021, <https://iz.ru/1224733/2021-09-21/patrushev-obvinil-ssha-v-destabilizatsii-situatsii-po-vsemu-miru> [12.04.2024].

27 Patrushev obvinil SSHA...

28 Эксперт рассказал об энергетическом проекте США для изоляции России. Профессор Конопляник: США реализуют энергопроект “Триморье” на востоке Европы для изоляции России [Ekspert rasskazal ob energeticheskom projekte SSHA dlya izolyatsii Rossii. Professor Konoplanik: SSHA realizuyut energoprojekt “Trimor’ye” na vostoке Yevropy dlya izolyatsii Rossii], Прайм [Praym], 19 May 2022, <https://1prime.ru/energy/20220519/836929337.html> [12.04.2024].

ton will also strive to take over and fill the infrastructure in Ukraine with its raw material (especially the huge underground storage facility in the western part of the country with a capacity of 32 bcm), to use the infrastructure built during the Soviet period and to transport its gas to Western Europe²⁹. The US goal is to establish American control over the key section connecting the Ukrainian hub with the Austrian hub (in Baumgarten), from where natural gas can be transported through branches to Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, and other Western European countries³⁰.

However, Vladimir Kozin – a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences and the Academy of Military Sciences of Russia, associated with the Kremlin (as an advisor), spoke extensively about Poland's role in Central Europe, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. According to Kozin, Poland is one of the main spokespersons of the Russophobic crusade because it suffers phantom pain due to the loss of its former greatness³¹. Warsaw dreams of regaining the Eastern Borderlands and, therefore, may become the main beneficiary of the collapse of Ukraine, taking over its western part and, if Russia objects, even Odessa and Kiev³². Poland manifests imperial ambitions and Russophobia, supported by Washington and London. The Three Seas Initiative is a projection of Polish dreams of a Central European empire “from sea to sea”, clearly referring to the concept of Intermarium. The Three Seas Initiative is being implemented by strengthening partnership relations between 12 countries in the region, but Poland will strive to dominate the region. However, according to Kozin, due to excessive divergences and conflicting interests of member states, this project does not seem to have any real prospects. The US domination over Western Europe and the collapse of the USSR created a geopolitical opportunity for Central European countries

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 *Война с Триморьем: России придётся ответить на вызов, какого не было со времён Петра Великого* [Woyna s Trimor'jem: Rossii priydotsya otvetit' na vyzov, kakogo ne bylo so vremen Petra Velikogo], Царьград [Tsar'grad], 13 June 2022, https://tsargrad.tv/articles/vojna-s-trimorem-rossii-priydotsya-otvetit-na-vyzov-kakogo-ne-bylo-so-vremyon-petra-velikogo_562639 [12.04.2024]; Русский Дозор РД [Russkiy Dozor RD], 13 June 2022, https://rusdozor.ru/2022/06/13/vojna-s-trimorem-rossii-priydotsya-otvetit-na-vyzov-kakogo-ne-bylo-so-vremyon-petra-velikogo_1178588/ [12.04.2024].

32 Ibid.

to be more than just a “geopolitical footbridge” between Western Europe and Russia; It is debatable whether Central Europe will become a new influential geopolitical player. The formation of the Three Seas and progress in this process will be a serious geoeconomic problem for Russia. However, China and Western European countries will experience a similar problem. Within the global division of labour, Western Europe is a producer of high technologies, Russia is a producer of raw materials, and the People's Republic of China is a producer of basic goods. By placing another ambitious entity (the Three Seas) on the road between these entities, striving to obtain a high transit rent, the USA and Great Britain will receive an effective instrument for controlling trade between China and Western Europe and between Russia and Western Europe, controlling European industry and transfer of European technologies to the Russian Federation³³. Vladimir Kozin puts forward the thesis that Russia will find itself in a state of geopolitical war with the Three Seas, which, being controlled by Washington and London, will be the most serious challenge for Russia in its western neighbourhood since the times of Peter the Great³⁴.

Conclusions

The Russian academic narrative tries to be in line with the canon of scientific explanation of a given issue, therefore, it tries to objectively present the situation in the Central European region and describe the political processes taking place there (regional cooperation and its nature), showing the role and motivations of key actors. Therefore, in this context, Russian scientific studies devote a lot of attention to Poland and its regional policy. Compared to other countries in the region, Poland stands out due to the size of its territory, demographic potential, and unique history, being the largest and strongest Central European country. It is in the process of constantly searching for its new role in Central Europe and Europe in general, based on the level of historical tradition and the sentiment of the Jagiellonian and noble Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Poland has been successful in its

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

policy, an example of which is the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative, which was noticed in Germany and Russia. Russian scientific studies indicate that Warsaw's policy towards Belarus has failed. At the same time, they recognise the role of the United States in supporting Polish integration efforts in Central Europe, showing Washington as a mainly supporting rather than initiating institution. From the Russian academic perspective, Poland is a sovereign state that makes sovereign decisions regarding the creation of the political and economic shape of the Central European region. The nature of these activities is largely determined by Russia's policy towards Ukraine. Poland's political, economic, and demographic potential justifies its aspirations to play a key role in Central Europe and become one of the pillars of European architecture.

Russian analytical studies and the mass media perceive Poland's regional role and the Three Seas Initiative in a completely different way. According to their narrative, Poland and other Central European countries are not sovereign because they are stuck in asymmetrical relations (dependencies) with the USA and cede their sovereignty to Euro-Atlantic structures. In this perception, the Three Seas Initiative is an American project driving a Central European geostrategic and geoeconomic wedge between Germany and Russia. This wedge serves as a "cordon sanitaire", isolating the Russian Federation from the countries of Western Europe, and also undermines the historically established position (also in the symbolic dimension) of Russia in the Balkans. In this context, Poland is trying to resurrect its imperial project from the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and aim it at Russia.

The perception of the Three Seas Initiative in the Russian expert narrative seems to be conditioned by official Russia's peculiar understanding of the principle of sovereignty (the Kremlin doctrine of sovereign democracy). Therefore, from this perspective, the Three Seas format is a project that reflects American guidelines for Central Europe rather than the actual aspirations of the countries in the region, whose interests are contradictory on many issues. In Russian analytical logic, Poland has ambitions to play a leading, hegemonic role in the Central European region and is trying to realise its "dreams of power" – "from sea to sea". Such attempts to explicate the issue are part of the traditional Russian great-power or imperial discourse, in which all efforts

of Russia's neighbours to strengthen their security (in various areas) are called anti-Russian actions inspired by geopolitical rivals or opponents of the Russian state. A similar tone is maintained in the majority of the Russian journalistic narrative, which is dominated by Russia-centric interpretations of the international system. Poland's actions to strengthen and expand the Three Seas Initiative are presented as a manifestation of Polish imperialism, oriented under Washington's tutelage towards the destruction of Russia as well as building a counterweight to German-French domination in Europe³⁵. In this context, it will be difficult for Russians to rationalise the energy security policy of most Central European countries, which treat Russian hydrocarbons as a political weapon of the Kremlin and an instrument for restoring its influence in the region. Seeing the objective reasons for the conflicting nature of Polish and Russian interests in Central Europe will be seriously difficult given such narrative tendencies.

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- 35 Examples of such narrative are found in the following articles: Т. Нечаева, *План по окружению России враждебными странами активно реализуется, Варшава получила подряд на это от «большого брата»*. Отрезать Россию от морей – США сделали ставку на Польшу и «Междуморье» [T. Nechayeva, *Plan po okruzheniyu Rossii vrazhdebnymi stranami aktivno realizuyetsya, Varshava poluchila podryad na eto ot "bol'shogo brata". Otrezat' Rossiyu ot morey – SSHA sdelali stavku na Pol'shu i "Mezhdumor'ye"*], Красная Весна [Krasnaya Vesna], 19 June 2021, <https://rossaprimavera.ru/article/a72c7fef> [12.04.2024]; В. Федорцев, *В Германии опасаются возникновения новой Речи Посполитой, которая расколёт Евросоюз* [V. Fedortsev, *V Germanii opasayutsya vozniknoveniya Rechi Pospolitoj, kotoraya raskolet Yevrosoyuz*], RGRU, 7 June 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/06/08/kiеv-maniat-trehmorem.html> [12.04.2024].

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