

ARTICLES

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THE RISE OF GEOPOLITICS IN POLAND AND EASTERN EUROPE: THE THREE SEAS AND THE BUCHAREST NINE INITIATIVES

ABSTRACT

In this article, the renaissance of geopolitical reflection in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is analyzed and an attempt is made to explain its causes by giving examples. The process will be shown through a case study of Poland's security policy and the international initiatives it has started: the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and the Bucharest Nine (B9). Both projects will be interpreted as geopolitical projects which focus on overcoming the historical peripherality of the CEE region, by reducing the development gap (within the EU) and decreasing the risk of possible threats to security (within NATO). However, TSI and B9 projects are still largely funded or inspired by external actors.

Key words

geopolitics, NATO, Three Seas Initiative, Bucharest Nine, security

Introduction

In this article, the renaissance of geopolitical reflection in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is analyzed and an attempt is made to explain its causes by giving examples. The process will be shown through a case study of Poland's security policy and the international initiatives it has started: the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and the Bucharest Nine (B9).

The CEE region has different characteristics from the rest of the continent. Feudalism prevailed here into the modern period, and numerous medieval states collapsed under the onslaught of imperial states such as Turkey, Russia and the Habsburg monarchy (Brenner, 1991; Kochanowicz, 1991). Economic historians note that the region was characterized by ethnic diversity, underdeveloped cities, and low levels of technology and infrastructure. As a result, in the 16th century, the region became a periphery of Western Europe providing raw materials, and industrialization did not occur until the 20th century (Wallerstein, 1974). CEE states were the sites of numerous invasions, civil wars and border changes for around three hundred years. The region was also twice devastated by world wars and then dominated by the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the breakup of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, another era dawned. The states of the region joined the process of European integration and began to catch up in many areas of life (Piątkowski, 2018). It was a period of dominance of liberalism in the world economy. Liberal thinking promoted the ideas of freedom, the rule of law, democracy, cooperation and rationalism (Gray, 1995). The main goal of the Eastern European elites became liberal modernization. It was believed that accession to the Western center of the world economy would lead to stabilization in the CEE region, as it had been plagued by unrest for centuries. However, liberal optimism was vitiated by the financial crisis of 2008–2011 and by Russia's aggressive policies. These issues have changed the attitude of CEE states towards international politics.

In this paper, the theoretical framework inspired by the new geopolitics and a center-periphery approach is followed. The actions of state elites are investigated in order to develop a case for the creation of international linkages via geopolitical projects such as the TSI and B9 initiatives.

1. The peripherality of Eastern Europe as a starting point

The CEE region has for centuries been characterized as peripheral. Here peripherality means more than just geographical remoteness; it means dependence in political, economic and cultural spheres. Being on a periphery means non-possession of important resources, technologies and symbols (Danson, De Souza, 2012, 3–10). In contrast, richer regions are described as core because they have the highest quality of life, resources, technology and prestige. Authors such as Raul Prebisch (1959), Johan Galtung (1971), Stein Rokkan (1980, 1982, 1983) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) have aptly described the process of domination of cores over peripheries. Richer regions make poorer areas dependent on them and domination is visible in three main fields: political control, economic domination and cultural standardization. As a result of the interaction of centers/cores with peripheries, poorer regions become dependent on richer ones and breaking this dependency is difficult (Babones, 2012, 2013). Therefore, peripheral states have come up with different strategies to deal with peripherality. The first strategy is modernization and catching up with richer states through imitation. The second is to value the national culture and create a conservative alternative to the domination of richer states. These two strategies often intertwine.

For the past two centuries, the CEE region has been characterized by dualism in all areas of life. In the politics of the region there were pro-modernization and traditionalist parties. The modernization narrative was associated with the ideas of the Enlightenment, rationalism and liberalism. The traditional narrative promoted conservatism and religiousness. While the modernization narrative was associated with the development of capitalism and industry, the traditional narrative was associated with landed gentry and agrarian ideas. Modernists believed that quality of life should be improved and international cooperation should be encouraged, but this often led to dependence on other states. According to traditionalists, a state should rather be inspired by its past and heritage which, however, entailed numerous conflicts. These two agendas have greatly influenced the ambivalence of the region's elites (Zarycki, 2014). On the one hand there is a readiness for change and modernization, and on the other hand there are fears of loss of identity and traditional conflicts that concern identity, religion and the nature of the state.

In an effort to describe this dispute in the language of international relations, two approaches will be useful. The pro-modernization approach can be explained in the language of liberalism. The traditional approach can be explained using the language of geopolitics. In earlier papers, the author used

the core-periphery model in an attempt to understand the development gap of the CEE region compared to Western Europe (Pawłuszko, 2018). It was about analyzing the economic development of the region, its geo-economy. Here, there is an exploration of a second important area: the security of the region, and its geopolitics.

2. The return of geopolitics

Why has the language of geopolitics become popular again? Textbooks on geopolitics usually include an introduction devoted to its founders as a field of study who include R. Kjellén, F. Ratzel, A. Mahan, H. Mackinder, K. Haushofer and N. Spykman (Dodds, Kuus & Sharp, 2013, pp. 1–4; Kelly, 2016). Pre-war times were a period of colonialism, an era of European empires, and a time of ideologies (Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, Fascism). Wars between states were natural and often desirable and various ideas of that time grew out of this context. Initially, the interest of geopolitics was knowledge of the geographical determinants of the development of states. However, geopolitics soon began to create theoretical visions of political conquest, develop new theories of war, and justify the need for various conflicts. Because of its entanglement with the dangerous ideologies of the 1930s, geopolitics disappeared from the world intellectual map for several decades.

The first postwar work to use geopolitical categories was Saul B. Cohen's 1963 book entitled *Geography and Politics in a Divided World* (Cohen, 1963). Contemporary American authors note that in the period from the end of the war to the mid-1980s, the term "geopolitics" was basically not present in the English language. On the other hand, geopolitical concepts were consciously used at the time by politicians. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and Immanuel Wallerstein's center-periphery models (Wallerstein, 2001), promoted over the years by Colin Flint and Klaus Dodds (Dodds, 2005, pp. 172–190; Flint 2001), were considered a return to geopolitical thinking.

In the late 1980s trends changed (Parker, 1985). This was influenced by both the course of events and scientific innovations causing a shift in thinking. These events included the end of the Cold War, ending (globally) the military rivalry of two political blocs and (locally) Russia's domination of Central and Eastern Europe. It also turned out that popular theories of neo-realism and liberalism were in great trouble in explaining systemic world changes. For decades, issues of historical cultural differences and the circulation of ideas in states other than world powers were ignored. Meanwhile, many new states were created and new

wars broke out for reasons the liberal West found difficult to predict and understand.

The second group of causes includes the emergence of constructivism and postmodernism, followed by the entry of “new geopolitics”, or critical geopolitics, into the debate (Mamadouh, 1999). The last decade of the 20th century also saw the return of qualitative research in the social sciences and humanities, strengthened by the development of globalization and new information technologies.

The popularization of this new geopolitics took place starting in the second half of the 1990s. The credit for this should be given to such academics as John Agnew (1998), Gerard Toal (Ó Tuathail, 1996), Klaus Dodds (2000), Yves Lacoste (1993), and Colin Flint (2001). Critical geopolitics, as it was called, was no longer concerned with geographical territories. Instead, non-geographic “spaces” such as media, cyberspace, relationships and stereotypes became its focus (Agnew, 1994). John Agnew and Gerard Toal argued that the goal of geopolitics should be the study of spatial expectations among elites, journalists and the public in different countries (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). This was long before terms like “fake news” and “information warfare” were popularized. Critical geopolitics became so influential that in 2013 the global publisher Routledge/Ashgate published a research companion devoted to this concept (Dodds, Kuus & Sharp, 2013). Moreover, the popularization of this trend has influenced the revival of traditional (now called “classical”) geopolitics over the last five years. Terms such as power, strength, authority, spheres of influence, cores and peripheries, have begun to be associated again with geopolitics. The following table presents the main geopolitical concepts developed in the 21st century.

Table 1. Two schools in contemporary geopolitics

Area	Classical geopolitics	Critical geopolitics
Level of analysis	States and relations between them	People and policymakers
Modernism vs Postmodernism	Modernism – an attempt to describe the world as it is. Correspondence theory of truth. Positivism	Postmodernism – an attempt to describe attitudes towards the world. Consensus theory of truth. Post-positivism
Attitude towards classical geopolitics	Classical researchers see themselves as neutral and focused on solving issues of state governance	Critical researchers believe that the world is not given, but interpreted, and positivist biases and myths must be deconstructed

Table 1.

Area	Classical geopolitics	Critical geopolitics
Ontology	There is an external cognizable world. Geography affects political actions in observable ways. The study of this impact is called geopolitics. Some objectivity can be seen in the fact that academics from different periods came to similar conclusions e.g. Mackinder, Spykman, Brzeziński, Cohen and Gray.	People create culture, and culture creates our subjectivity, which is hidden in language. Language is full of hidden assumptions. Critically reconstructing meanings allows an understanding of geopolitical thinking and action. Geopolitics are power relations in space, mediated by various cultural patterns and practices.
Epistemology	Classical. Experts are able to find cause-and-effect relationships between geography and politics. They are also able to make generalizations based on these observations. The object and the observer are separate from each other and neutral.	Critical. The objects of observation and the observer are not neutral and do not form an obvious relationship. Experts are not objective and rational, and neither are bureaucrats, politicians, advisors and the media. All produce narratives that need to be addressed.
Attitude towards hegemony	Classical. World powers have a lot of potential that can be measured. There are core-periphery relationships between countries with greater and lesser potential. Geopolitical knowledge enables a strengthening and uses this potential in political practice.	Critical. Geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics, especially in the relationship of dominant world powers. Geopolitical knowledge allows for an understanding of the social construction of hegemony, its meaning, resources, roles and symbols. Toal believes that geopolitics is a statesperson's philosophy, understood as governmentality. This mentality and its products should be studied.
Aim of the research	Creates theories to explain the impact of geographic factors on foreign policy. Objective mechanisms can be discerned and our hypotheses tested for objective explanations.	Classical geopolitics is based on materialist assumptions of which it is unaware and which need to be critically shown. Facts do not speak for themselves, so the goal of critical geopolitics is to discover ways to "create geography" in people's minds.
Time	The geographical environment is permanent and should be taken as something constant and objective. "Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed."	Decisions are made in people's heads. Globalization, glocalization, deterritorialization change the functions of material things according to needs. A natural boundary can be, for example, a barrier, a symbol, a protection, an aid or a hindrance. Time changes the context.

Table 1.

Area	Classical geopolitics	Critical geopolitics
Emancipation	Not a subject of interest.	Breaking free from stereotypes and prejudices against various groups is very important for a researcher.

Sources: Kelly (2006, pp. 24–53); Dodds (n.d.).

The past two decades or so has seen a renaissance of geopolitics in Eastern Europe. The language of geopolitical metaphors has permeated the world of politics, media and experts. This is noticeable especially in Russia and Poland, where think tanks, geopolitical academic societies and new journals have emerged. Geopolitical ideas have become very popular in public discourse as well as on social media.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a considerable proportion of Polish geopolitical publications concerned the reception of geopolitical concepts from the first half of the 20th century. The Polish Geopolitical Society (PTG) was founded in 2008 and geopolitical periodicals were published: the *Geopolitical Review* was established in 2009 and the *European Journal of Geopolitics* in 2013 (see Polskie Towarzystwo Geopolityczne – Polish Geopolitical Society, 2021). Then, in the first half of the second decade, geopolitical textbooks and historical works gained a significant role. Meanwhile, after 2015 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the importance of “geopolitical intelligence” and interdisciplinary analyses of the current situation has increased. Geopoliticians began to be an environment of relevance to Polish conservative political parties as they viewed the world as a traditional arena for historical confrontation of military and economic power.

Most Polish public “think tanks” have recently typically focused on geopolitical issues. Analytical publications monitor politics and the economy in the CEE region, often from a geopolitical perspective. The Center for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, OSW) monitors issues of Russia and the CEE. The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) analyzes European issues and the transatlantic context of international order. The Institute for Western Affairs (Instytut Zachodni, Poznań) studies German and Baltic policy, and the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IES, Lublin) mainly analyzes Poland’s cooperation with the V4 countries, Ukraine and focuses on new geopolitical initiatives in the region. Most of the publications deal with “fact tracing” and offer predictions of events. Many of them contain

recommendations resembling typical “geopolitical intelligence” as known from the American think tank industry.

Geopolitical thinking in terms of spheres of influence, axes, armaments, conflicts, summits, treaties and alliances has become far more attractive than the liberal analyses of democratization, modernization and integration which were popular in the first decade of the 21st century. It seems that the development of policy expertise and its media influence could inspire the potential for creating new geopolitical projects in Polish foreign policy, as discussed below.

3. Poland in the geopolitics of Central and Eastern Europe

Poland is a major country in the CEE region. In 2019, Poland was classified as the 22nd world economy (Worldometers, 2021), 23rd military power (Global Firepower, 2021) and 35th in the global ranking of the quality of life (UNDP – HDR, 2021). Poland’s economic and political history is a good illustration of the specificity of the CEE region. As a country, Poland experienced centuries of domination by the gentry, a long feudal era and a loss of independence due to the conquest of its territory by its neighbors (Kochanowicz, 1991; Kula, 1976). The Northern Wars, Napoleonic Wars, numerous national uprisings and two world wars were fought on Polish territory. Like other countries in the region, post-war Poland went from communism to democracy, membership of NATO and of the EU. Currently, Poland is looking for a new strategy for future decades of development.

The intellectual disputes of the Polish elite are symptomatic of a peripheral country trying to emerge from its historically weak position in world politics (Piątkowski, 2013). Two schools of Polish security policy have formed over the past two decades. The first is associated with the liberal parties and can be described as pro-European. The other is associated with conservative parties and is generally pro-American. Despite the dispute, their goal remains common: building a strong position for Poland in Central and Eastern Europe. Both parties understand the concept of a regional security complex, or the recognition that most threats to states are generated in their immediate neighborhood (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Beyond that, liberals and conservatives differ on almost everything: ideas, priorities, partners, rhetoric, language and practice.

Liberals believe that European cooperation is crucial for Polish security. European countries are Poland’s major trade and technology partners, and for the last two decades the economy has been a priority in liberal thinking. Liberals assume that Warsaw’s strong economic and diplomatic position would allow

it to play a role as a European leader, and this would also strengthen Poland's position towards Russia. In the security sphere, this means closer military cooperation with NATO and EU countries and an openness to American initiatives. This was more or less the policy in the first half of the 2010s and it resonated in general tone with European partners and the administration of Barack Obama in the US.

The way of thinking of conservative parties is rather geopolitical in nature. Geopolitical thinking emphasizes the importance of traditional bilateral diplomacy and argues in terms of spheres of influence. In this view, priority is given not to economic relations, but to political-military and energy relations. Much more attention is being paid to the problem of conflict in the region while symbolism and history are also important. The conservatives' priority is to develop bilateral strategic cooperation with the US. Warsaw wants to become Washington's main partner in the region and seeks the special relationship with the Americans that Israel, Turkey and South Korea have. Polish politicians know that their country is too weak to openly declare itself a regional leader, so they try to win the favor of their neighbors through various geopolitical projects such as TSI in the economic field and B9 in the security field. These projects are meant to communicate the emergence of a new space of regional consensus (Sienkiewicz, 2016) which could create a symbolic impression of CEE unity and increase the political and economic status of the entire region. The success of the agreements could also strengthen Poland's diplomatic strength as the largest CEE country.

In outlining these intentions echoes of the theses of the American strategist George Friedman are found, he advised Poland to be a "US aircraft carrier" in Eastern Europe (Friedman, 2010). Polish conservatives have been trying to take advantage of the growing antagonism between the US and Russia and China to strengthen personal relations with Washington and maintain the interest of the US in the CEE region as NATO's eastern flank. The main European allies have been treated with reserve by the Polish government as Warsaw, due to historical memory, is uncertain about the behavior of Germany and France in case of a possible conflict with Moscow. In the era of Donald Trump, this meant an increase in the number of Polish-American political and military initiatives, numerous high-level visits, as well as armament and energy contracts.

4. Geopolitics in the economy: the Three Seas Initiative

Several ideas were formulated in the 20th century to strengthen the CEE region. In Poland, these included Oskar Halecki's Jagiellonian Idea, the ideas of regional federalism and Prometheism (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2018; Gizicki & Łoś, 2019; Halecki, 1937; Halecki, 1962; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2017). The broader idea, of course, was the *Intermarium* project, which would bring together countries from Finland to Romania. The project was discussed in 1922 but was abandoned after the Treaty of Rapallo. Later, the paths of the countries in the region parted and the poorer countries of the continent competed for investment from the richer ones. Poland preferred to sign non-aggression treaties with Germany and the USSR rather than build a bloc with countries in the CEE region. In addition, ethnic and border conflicts were still active. During World War II, the CEE region was dominated by Germany and after the fall of the Third Reich, the Soviet Union gained dominance and in the second half of the 20th century, it blocked all horizontal agreements between Eastern Bloc countries. After the fall of communism, joining NATO and the EU became the main policy goals of the countries in the region. By 2007, this goal had been met for most CEE countries.

Ideas of creating joint geopolitical and geo-economic projects emerged in the 2014–2015 period in the intellectual circles of the Polish right wing in opposition to the liberal pro-European policies pursued by the government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk. In 2016, the new right-wing government, building on the previous (liberal!) concept of the Eastern Partnership, decided to refer to the pre-war idea of the *Intermarium*. The new project was called *Trimarium* or the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and it was defined as one of the main objectives of Poland's new conservative foreign policy. The Dubrovnik Statement was adopted in 2016 (Dubrovnik Statement, 2016) and Polish politicians deliberately supported Croatia, a smaller state, as the initiator of the project to avoid being accused of Polish "imperial" ideas. Poland does not have the economic or political potential to lead a large international grouping, while smaller states feared Polish-Russian antagonism. Ultimately, the project was presented as a regional lobby in the European Union to promote the development of European infrastructure on a north-south axis.

In the following years, the TSI adopted a formula of annual summits of the region's leaders which gave the impression of the existence of a political bloc and increased the geopolitical rank of its partners through the effect of synergy (Świder, 2018; Ukielski, 2016). However, none of the countries, including Poland, had the potential to finance new initiatives and integrate the region on

new terms (Ukielski, 2018). As a result, US and EU representatives were allowed to participate, and this was where the funds for investment in the region were to come from. TSI summits were attended by Donald Trump (in 2017) and Jean Claude Juncker (in 2018). The adoption of the name Three Seas Initiative suggested that the project was infrastructural in nature; instead of “hard” geopolitical arguments, the rhetoric of “soft” geo-economics and economic diplomacy was adopted. The final geo-economic objective of the TSI would be to overcome the historical peripherality and isolation of the CEE region, to create a new economic center in Europe and to deepen cooperation within the EU, especially on a north-south axis.

From official documents, the Three Seas Initiative is today a grouping within the EU which aims to strengthen infrastructural, energy and economic cooperation (Three Seas Initiative, 2021). Controversial political and military topics were not included in official TSI conference agendas. In such a situation, the economic format of the TSI attracted the interest of Germany, the EU’s economic leader. Berlin has always had strong interests in the region for historical reasons and the territory of the former East Germany shares a common economic history with CEE countries. Comments by German leaders and EU politicians about the need to Europeanize the region through investment cooperation with wealthier countries, however, has caused nervousness in Poland which had hoped to be a symbolic leader (Kowal & Orzelska-Stączek, 2019). Nevertheless, the concept of the “New Europe” bloc proved to be a good format for discussing the region’s identity and provided an opportunity to critically address the “multi-speed Europe” issue. In effect, the official purpose of the TSI would be to accelerate the development of CEE, strengthen regional cohesion and enrich transatlantic ties (especially energy cooperation).

It seems that the TSI project has so far not been able to fulfill its geopolitical vision because of the relative weakness of the participating countries. The region’s legacy of economic peripherality and institutional weakness will remain a significant burden until the economic potential of the TSI states reaches the EU average. As Marcin Piątkowski has pointed out, the level of wealth of both Poland and the entire region is today at its highest in history, but it cannot be guaranteed that it will stay like that in the future (Piątkowski, 2013). The ability of states in the region to cooperate and define common challenges is in itself a historic achievement. However, it remains a success mainly in the area of symbolism as there is a lack of tools to stimulate further cooperation at the international level. A small grant fund has been successfully established and a regional business forum has been held (Three Seas Initiative, 2021). CEE

is still an underdeveloped area of Europe: the twelve countries of the TSI cover an area of 1.2 million km² with approximately 110 million inhabitants, but only just over 10% of the EU's GDP is produced there (Soroka & Stepniewski, 2019). The modernization needs of the region far exceed the potential of emerging TSI funds and the European Investment Bank estimates that these needs exceed €500 billion (Wiśniewski, 2019).

Paweł Kowal emphasizes that the main problems of the TSI are a lack of solid foundations, a lack of plans to institutionalize cooperation, dependence on current conditions and external actors, a lack of a stable financial base and of a common list of priorities, and the still existing historical background (Kowal & Orzelska-Stączek 2019, pp. 91–92). These are serious arguments and each requires a “roadmap” of sorts, proposing potential solutions over time. Importantly, the flagship projects of the TSI, i.e. energy terminals and expressways (*Via Baltica*, *Via Carpathia*) are mainly financed by external bodies. As a result, the region is dependent on support from the US, EU and China (especially *Belt and Road Initiative*; *16+1 Format*), while failing to create new pan-European initiatives on its own.

The very notion of the TSI includes a group of CEE countries working together within the EU to improve development conditions. The need for dialog on this issue stems from the infrastructural and economic backwardness of this part of Europe. The very notion of the TSI in geopolitical terms can be, of course, understood in many ways. For proponents of classical geopolitics, the notion describes a project of expansion or political emancipation of the CEE region from former external influences. For researchers of the geo-economy of the region, the TSI is a project for stimulating economic development and eliminating the development gap in living conditions in the CEE region. For critical geopoliticians, the TSI would be an ideological project; an attempt to present a different vision of a “new Europe” and an attempt to strengthen the political subjectivity of a region that for centuries has been treated as “poorer” and “inferior”. Finally, the TSI as a geopolitical project has mainly a symbolic role.

5. Geopolitics and security: Bucharest Nine project

The Bucharest Nine (acronym: B9) emerged in 2015 as a joint project between Poland and Romania, the two largest countries on NATO's “Eastern Flank”. Its form is very similar to TSI: two CEE countries are trying to create a platform for regional intergovernmental consultation in a selected field. The proposed form is *de facto* conference diplomacy, meetings of national leaders in the form of

summits. According to the geopolitical view, the focus is on such direct contacts rather than on tedious discussions of lower-level politicians within the framework of permanent international organizations. Therefore, the TSI secretariat is usually established only for the purpose of organizing one particular summit. In addition, intergovernmental and interparliamentary meetings take place. The initiative is also a political forum that lobbies for the region's interests in broader structures such as NATO and the EU.

There are more similarities to TSI: TSI combines 12 countries in the region and the B9 project combines 9 (Popławski, 2020). While in the TSI the key issue is to overcome backwardness (in the EU), the aim of the B9 project is to strengthen the military position of the CEE region (in NATO). Also in this situation, the united region needs a political patron, as small CEE countries do not have significant military capabilities. Combined, all B9 military spending is no more than one large NATO country, such as Italy. Therefore, the regional agreement could allow small CEE countries to negotiate independently with large ones. The patron of the B9 group within NATO would, of course, be the United States (see "The eastern flank," 2021).

Poland is in the top twenty countries that spend most on the armed forces. In the last few years, Poland has been spending circa 12 billion USD on military affairs in order to strengthen its potential especially on the "Eastern Flank" of NATO. According to SIPRI, Poland spent as much as 50% more on defense in 2018 than in 2009. SIPRI also pointed out that among world regions it was Central Europe that recorded the most noticeable increase in defense expenditure as compared to 2017 (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2020). The reason is obvious: the military threat from Russia (Gerasymchuk, 2019).

Specific areas of current defense spending in Poland are dependent on technical modernization. In March 2018, a contract worth over 20 billion PLN was signed for the first two (out of eight planned) batteries for the Wisła medium-range missile system. In February 2019 Polish Ministry of National Defence signed an order for the first HIMARS rocket launcher squadron (of the planned three). Currently around three quarters of contracts concluded in 2018 were foreign agreements, mainly with the United States. The Polish government also upheld the plan to upgrade 128 Leopard 2A4 tanks to the 2PL version, and ordered the upgrading of over 300 older generation T-72 tanks. In 2016, the contract for 96 "Krab" howitzers with accompanying vehicles was signed, the largest order for the Polish armaments industry in 2015–2019. In 2020, Poland signed an agreement with the US for the supply of 32 fifth-generation F-35 combat aircraft. Since 2016, Poland has been developing a new type of military formation: territorial

defense forces (WOT) of 25,000 soldiers (from a planned 50,000) (Ministry of National Defence, 2021).

Allocation of Polish defense expenditure on modernization remains ambitious. Nevertheless, the Polish armed forces still need new combat helicopters, new tanks and new warships. Most military modernization programs (for the period 2013–2022) have been delayed or postponed (Duda, 2017) and to cover this agenda, Poland has launched a new 15-year modernization plan (2021–2035) which the Ministry of National Defence has estimated at over 524 billion PLN (133 bln USD). Poland is one of seven NATO allies to spend at least 2% of its GDP on defense and encourages other NATO members to raise military spending. In 2014, at the Newport Summit, the NATO allies agreed to increase their defense budgets to reach a level of 2% GDP by 2024 (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014).

From Poland's perspective, as one of the initiators of the B9 group, a strategic partnership between the CEE region and the US in the field of security should be pursued. During the presidential term of Donald Trump, Polish politicians sought to conclude as many political and military bilateral agreements as possible to position themselves as the region's leader and representative in relations with the US ("Poland-U.S. Cooperation," 2020). In fact, Polish military spending accounts for half of that of the entire region. Poland's cooperation with the US between 2015 and 2020 resulted in more than a dozen contracts for the delivery of armaments and energy resources from the US to Poland. The United States has agreed to support militarily NATO's "Eastern Flank" and, as expected by Polish authorities, has spoken negatively about the Nord-Stream 2 pipeline. Polish authorities assume that the presence of American and allied troops increases the deterrence potential of the Polish Armed Forces and that energy cooperation effectively diversifies energy supply to the Polish economy. Both sectors are key to strengthening Poland's resilience to Russian actions, and this is also mentioned in the new National Security Strategy for the Republic of Poland of May 12, 2020 (National Security Strategy for the Republic of Poland, 2020).

By investing in closer relations with the US, Warsaw wants to be a reliable partner in the region, and the B9 geopolitical project would serve as a useful format to extend cooperation with the US to the entire CEE region. The B9 initiative would allow the CEE region to independently define and articulate its security interests consistent with the theory of a regional security complex. The "Eastern Flank" constantly remains a very important area for strengthening inter-operational capabilities in NATO via projects such as the development

of military airports and the creation of VJTF units (in 2020 VJTF was led by the Polish 21st Podhale Rifles Brigade).

What is really undermining NATO's position is public skepticism among leaders and societies in western Europe. The Pew Research Center survey (NATO Seen Favorably..., 2020) showed that support for NATO has fallen by about 20 percentage points over the decade in France and Germany. 57% Germans and only 49% of the French think positively about NATO. Even worse results were given after the question of whether NATO should help a member attacked by Russia: only 34% of Germans and 41% of the French answered "yes". B9 countries are aware of weakened military cooperation and the inadequate presence of West European soldiers in multinational corps and during joint military exercises.

The enhancement of Poland's and the entire region's activity within the scope of security is also driven by the Crimean crisis and Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine after 2014. As many as six of the nine countries of the B9 initiative have a land or sea border with Russia while Poland and NATO's so-called "Eastern Flank" have increased military spending (Shlapak & Johnson, 2016). The B9 countries also refer to declarations from NATO summits in Newport and Warsaw (Soloch & Pietrzak, 2016) and want, as soon as possible, to increase NATO's military spending, strengthen solidarity by increasing the allies' military presence on the "Eastern Flank", and, as in TSI, count on the expansion of communications infrastructure in the region (Hodges, Bugajski & Doran, 2019). In this case, on military infrastructure in particular.

Poland hosted the "Defender 2020" exercise in spring 2020, which was one of the largest deployments of US forces in Europe since the Cold War. The key combat episodes took place on Polish training grounds while further plans for cooperation with the US are in progress (Gotkowska, 2020). In 2019, the Pentagon's military investment on NATO's "Eastern Flank" was more than USD 920 million – the US spent nearly 50 % more compared to 2018 and almost seven times as much as in 2017. This shows that maintaining US military presence in NATO and strengthening the military infrastructure on NATO's "Eastern Flank" is a priority. Poland is the second biggest beneficiary of US military investments in Europe: the Pentagon has spent over 144 million USD here. The US decided to continue investing in Powidz which is referred to as the military hub for US forces in Poland (see Hodges et al., 2020). Investments will be provided especially around two of the largest training centers for land forces in Drawsko Pomorskie and Żagań.

What is more, the US has provided funding for a number of projects in European countries, particularly on NATO's "Eastern Flank" (Hodges, Lawrence & Wojcik, 2020). Storage facilities have been developed in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia: the construction of ammunition storage and handling installations is underway at the Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase near Constanta, Romania, at Novo Selo Rangene near Burgas in Bulgaria, and at Malacky airport near Bratislava. An operational and training base for US special forces will be created at an undisclosed location in Estonia, the first such base on NATO's "Eastern Flank".

The challenges for the B9 project remain similar to TSI. These include a lack of stable financial support, differences in the potential of the states in the region, historical military and technological weakness, and a high vulnerability to external actors. There is also some risk connected with the fact that the political patron of the B9 initiative, the US, under President Trump focused primarily on securing Washington's economic interests in the form of energy investments (see Bieliszczuk, 2017). Private American companies involved in the TSI operate in gas (LNG supplies to Poland), nuclear (exchange of Russian fuel for American), power (conventional power plants) and renewable energy (wind turbines) sectors. A natural recipient of American funds would be the project for the Poland-Ukraine Gas Pipeline. The US, Poland and Ukraine signed a memorandum on energy cooperation in the summer of 2019, assuming, among other things, financial support for joint projects. This pipeline could be used to develop LNG supplies from the US through Poland to Ukraine. However, Kiev is not part of the European Union and has not been included in the TSI. This means that if the US funds support LNG supplies through Poland, they are more likely to be directed to TSI countries. Poland has not yet attracted the interest of CEE customers to the LNG terminal in Świnoujście while the military dimension of cooperation emphasized by the B9 has also not yet been adequately exploited.

Nevertheless, the B9 project, as the voice of NATO's "Eastern Flank", might strengthen the region's voice in work on NATO's new strategic concept (Terlikowski et al., 2018). For this reason, politicians are considering geopolitical expansion of the B9 format to include Ukraine. Poland and Lithuania had already invited Ukraine to join a smaller format, called the Lublin Triangle, which is intended to support Ukraine's economic and political aspirations toward EU and NATO structures (Đorđević, 2020). Official support for Ukraine, however, would be seen in Moscow as an attempt at confrontation. Geopolitical thinking in Eastern Europe is about spheres of influence and international rivalry,

therefore, new geopolitical initiatives (military, economic or symbolic) may become an excuse for counter action.

Conclusions

In the paper, the geopolitical inspirations of initiatives in the CEE region are highlighted. Projects such as TSI and B9 attempt to strengthen the region's political and material potential (classical geopolitics, geo-economics) and create new spaces for communication (critical geopolitics). These initiatives, called here "geopolitical projects", are also examples of building a new "geopolitical imagination". It is about changing the perception of the CEE region in international relations. As noted, CEE has historically been a peripheral region, economically underdeveloped and politically dependent on neighboring powers. The region's peripherality is also grounded in culture and mutual perception, a "region of rival small states on the borders" of Europe with Russia and Turkey. The TSI and B9 initiatives provide a platform to stabilize interstate relations in the CEE and are an opportunity to change the image of the region. They are also probably the first initiatives to combine the interests of almost all CEE countries. For Poland, the largest country in the region, the TSI and B9 projects are attempts to go beyond old geopolitical priorities. The idea is to focus on European relations on a north-south axis instead of the previous east-west. Such a perspective offers Poland not only avoidance of traditional confrontation with Germany and Russia, but also the strengthening of Warsaw's prestige in the so-called "new Europe" through attempts to bring the region closer to the US. This is potentially a major shift in Polish geopolitical imagination.

However, it seems that both TSI and B9 are still not well established in European diplomacy and the material achievements of states in the CEE region can only be assessed over a period of years. Therefore, it is still not known if the initiatives described will survive the next decade. It is also difficult to write about overcoming peripherality in geopolitical terms if the TSI and B9 projects are still largely funded or inspired by external actors. Above all, the CEE region needs pragmatism, the combined use of its own geopolitical imagination and credible liberal institutions that enable agreement with the leading countries of the Western world.

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