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Original scientific article**GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATIONS OF RUSSIA IN THE REGION
OF THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

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SUMMARY:

The aim of the paper is to explore whether contemporary Russian Federation has imaginations of its power in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. Using a theoretical framework based on instruments, notions and tools of critical geopolitics, this paper discusses four discourses that define the territory which is the focus of the research, as well as stressing the most important concepts of contemporary foreign policy of the Russian Federation. Due to the strong influence of NATO's (and the EU's) enlargement policies in this region, the Russian administration tries to preserve its traditional geopolitical sphere of interest in the European continent. Therefore, three sub-regional case studies— annexation of Crimea in the Eastern Europe, the Three Seas Initiative in the Central Europe, and Western Balkan's case study of Montenegro's path to full NATO membership—will be explored to examine this hypothesis. Finally, adequate conclusion, regarding the main hypothesis, is brought..

KEY WORDS:

geopolitical imaginations; Russia; Central and Eastern Europe; annexation of Crimea; Three Seas Initiative; Montenegro – NATO relations

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SAŽETAK:

Cilj rada je istražiti ima li savremena Ruska Federacija imaginacije o svojoj moći u regiji srednje i istočne Evrope. Koristeći se teoretskim okvirom utemeljenim na instrumentima, pojmovima i alatima kritičke geopolitike, u radu se raspravlja o četiri diskursa koji definišu region u fokusu istraživanja, a potom se predstavljaju najvažniji koncepti savremene spoljne politike Ruske Federacije. Zbog snažnog uticaja NATO-ove (i EU) politike proširenja na ovaj region, ruska vlast nastoji da sačuva svoju tradicionalnu geopolitičku sferu interesovanja na evropskom kontinentu. Stoga će da se ispitaju tri subregionalne studije slučaja kako bi se provjerila prethodno navedena hipoteza: aneksija Krima u Istočnoj Evropi, Inicijativa triju mora u Srednjoj Evropi i studija slučaja zapadnog Balkana o putu Crne Gore do punopravnog članstva u NATO-u. Naposljetku, iznosi se odgovarajući zaključak o glavnoj hipotezi.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

Geopolitička imaginacija; Rusija; Srednja i Istočna Evropa; aneksija Krima; Inicijativa triju mora; Crna Gora – NATO odnosi

Introduction

Notion of the territory is the basis of geopolitics. Classical geopolitics, developed at the beginning of the last century, was deeply under the influence of imperialist aspirations where the German Geopolitical School has the most influential role. Still, critical geopolitics, developed after the World War 2, has ability to develop scientific tools when it comes to exploring dispersed geopolitical discourses in all aspects of the political culture on defined territory. These discourses, basic instruments of critical geopolitics, are deeply rooted in national traditions of the self-perception. If or when the self-perception of the nation, due to the lack of information, misperception or intentional oversize of the actual perception, reaches the point where the perception of the other international relations' stakeholders doesn't coincide with theirs, then geopolitical imaginations occur.

Studying geopolitical imaginations means analyzing perceptions that are grounded on the constellation of relationships in international relations based on the power. The power impose a predominant setting on defined territory where the treatment of power as identity allows international subjects to be perceived, regarding their real ability to make wider influence on the regional or global level, at certain way in international relations, usually as small states, super powers, etc. The power as identity is a social construct based upon perceptions of others that recognize this power. If power is not recognized and it tries to perform or impose notions of influence or dominance, then the geopolitical imagination is present.

This paper claims that contemporary Russian Federation has misperception of its power in the specific region – the Central and Eastern Europe. Modern-day foreign policy of this country is marked by several different discourses when it comes to its power. First, and most important, refers to the lack of recognition from the West when it comes to the positioning of Russia as one of the several poles in the multipolar world. The Central and Eastern Europe, the region defined as a place where Russian influence and dominance directly confronts western projects of the Euro-Atlantic integrations, is, hence, the best example. Second, the Russian interpretation of universal values, together with the Russian imperialism, based on notions like promotion of the Russian values, economic interests and protection of Russians living abroad, show potential of Russia to present itself as one of the poles in the international arena. Again, once loyal western neighbors, who are perceived as the traditional sphere of influence of Russia, either though the orthodoxy, pan-Slavism or communism, are now under the focus of the EU and NATO.

To explore whether the Russian power is the geopolitical imagination in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe, this paper uses three case studies from different sub-regions. First, the paper briefly discusses consequences of the violation of the international law and the annexation of Crimea in the Eastern Europe. Secondly, the attention is driven to the Central Europe and the Three Seas Initiative, as a multilateral and geopolitical initiative, whose goal is not only the energy independence, but also establishment of the buffer zone between the west and Russia. And finally, the Montenegrin Crisis and difficulties regarding the accession of this Western Balkan's country into the NATO was another attempt of Russia to keep its influence and dominance in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe.

Place of Power and Imagination in Critical Geopolitics

The discipline of geopolitics, as a field of study that combine geography, history and political science, occurred around 120 years ago with the first scholars that tried to think about politics by adding it the most important geographical dimension – the soil. If the soil becomes “bounded space that is under some sort of political control” (Flint 2017, p. 59), it gets a geopolitical notion of territory which is a ground field of this discipline. Discourses and ideas that soon become a part of, at that time newly-established discipline, are now known under the common name of classical (or imperial) geopolitics. Due to lack of academic approach, the imperialist aspirations and misuse for the territorial conquest, imperial geopolitics as a discipline was completely marginalized after the World War 2. Soon, reaching academically way beyond the classical geopolitics ever was, the critical geopolitics was developed.

While the classical geopolitics was only understrapper of the imperialist aspirations, the critical geopolitics until nowadays puts an effort “to alter international and domestic state power structures through counter-hegemonic discourse/s” (Haverluk et al. 2014, p. 20). Literature on the critical geopolitics uses several variations when it comes to a name. In some cases, it is possible to see notions like radical geopolitics or anti-geopolitics (Mercile 2013; Jones and Sage 2010; Routledge 2009; Thrift and Kitchin 2009) referring to the similar substance as the one of the critical geopolitics to define discourses as “anti” or “interventionist” as opposite instrument to the one used by “classic geopolitics and its links to state power and imperialism” (Haverluk et al. 2014, p. 21). Critical geopolitics' approaches vary according to frameworks of analysis common to each discipline – either geography or political science (Cohen

2015, p. 16). The best ones are which steadily combine both disciplines because they usually have capacity to understand widely dispersed geopolitical discourses in all aspects of political culture on a defined territory.

The definition of the territory depends on the focus of a research and the principle of which scales should be respected. That is the reason why it is crucial to define geographical soil in all means necessary to understand different geopolitical scales of territory – city, region, world, micro, macro, supra, etc. The critical geopolitics, therefore, has very important practice where “we must not limit our attention to a study of the geography of politics within pre-given, taken-for-granted, commonsense spaces, but investigate the politics of the geographical specification of politics” (Dalby 1991, p. 274).

Basic instruments critical geopolitics uses are geopolitical discourses. They emerge under the influence of geopolitical traditions and imagination, “intertwine and form the backdrop of all aspects of geopolitics conceptualized by of critical geopolitics” (Zorko, Mostarac 2014, p. 5). Rooted into a deep tradition of nations, discourses can often suggest dimension of illusion that doesn't fit into an objective reality due to the lack of information, invalid evaluation, misperception or intentional oversize of actual condition. In these cases, geopolitical discourses go step further, towards imagination.

Klaus Dodds illustrates geopolitical imaginations using representations of the United States or the Soviet Union during the Cold War: under Reagan administration the US were introduced like the “leader of the free world”, while the USSR was “the evil empire hell-bent on imperiling Western civilization” (2007, p. 62). Other author, Ó Tuathail, also referring to the Cold War, defines geopolitical imaginations as “the spatial expression of Western ethnocentrism, those enlightenment discourses that spatialize the world according to notions of the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’” (1994, p. 229). In the latter, Ó Tuathail illustrates another good example of geopolitical imaginations. During the various wars in former Yugoslavia, American media used geopolitical imagination of balkanism to create causative-consequence-relations of why wars were happening. History and geography are used here as a tool to explain wars as a product of “ancient hatreds” that is typical for specific area of Balkan Peninsula (Ó Tuathail 1999, p. 114).

The ground idea behind geopolitical imaginations is based upon simplifying “us – them” policy projection that leads deeper in the constellation of relationships based on power. In the world of international relations this constellation shapes

contemporary relations between nations. This means that the power impose itself as the predominant setting when it comes to studying geopolitical imaginations. One of the aims of critical geopolitics is to emphasize that imagination of power refers to the social construct within which is possible to perceive either your own power as dominant one or power of others as threat. Michael Foucault sees the power like a ground field of social relations which is not necessary repressive but, rather, the certain level of power remains within the whole community uniquely, taking from specific source ability to engird power only for itself (Rutar 2017, p. 158).

Applied to critical geopolitics, power remains within defined territory very unequally, shaping the constellation of influence based on power. If stakeholder of defined territory has the most power over other stakeholders on the same territory, s/he is not able to be repressive nor the only accumulator of power where geopolitical imagination does not appear. When it shows up, they cause rupture on the territory that usually leads towards the misbalance in relations. The most powerful stakeholder tries to spread influence over the whole territory and justification is based on argumentations that are deeply rooted in national history. National myths of “long-time-ago glory kingdom” often are used as the geopolitical imagination that justifies territorial or influential aspirations. Projects of “greater” states, such as Greater Israel, Albania, Morocco, Serbia, Ireland... or “pan” movements like Pan-Islamism, Pan-Slavism, Panhispanism, Pan-Germanism... present geopolitical imaginations of nations, ethno – linguistic groups or religious denominations. National imaginations are usually the strongest due to the central role of nation-state in international relations.

International relations’ literature focuses on different analytical perspectives on power. Alen Balwin suggests six different treatments of the power: as identity, goal, means, mechanism (balance of power), competition and capability (2016, pp. 102-122). Most influential perspective is the power as identity where states are perceived, regarding their potential to achieve wider influence in international relations, usually as the small power, the rising power, the super power, etc. The status or the “rank” is usually fixed identity during certain world order and it can’t be rashly changed without serious ruptures of order. However, identity is not necessary fixed fact but rather arbitrary social construct based on the perceptions of others that recognize identity as the fact and the self-perception. If the self-perception does not reflect the perception of others, it is much likely possible that the imagination is present.

To summarize in words of Laura Jones and Daniel Sage, the attractiveness of critical geopolitics is possibly the “sole result of the sexy combination of space and power” (2010, p. 320). Indeed, this combination of the territory and the power intertwined with constructivism, political geography, post-modernism, critical social theories and what could be called new-world-order approaches in international relations allows a researcher in this field of study to have endless possible variations of the theoretical start when it comes to investigating contemporary geopolitics.

In this variation, geopolitics can be used as a tool that emphasize that “political predominance is a question not just of having power in the sense of human or material resources, but also of the geographical context within which that power is exercised: in nearly all international transactions involving some element of opposition, resistance, struggle or conflict, the factors of location, space and distance between the interacting parties have been significant variables” (Gray and Sloan 2013, p. 2) . The answer this paper seeks for is, hence, whether there are or there are not geopolitical imaginations of the power in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe that comes from the region’s strongest and most influential stakeholder – Russian Federation.

Research Framework

This paper uses three study cases that are crucial for understanding contemporary geopolitical imaginations of the Russian power in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe: the current situation regarding Crimea conflict, the project initiated by the Polish and the Croatian presidents, which goal is to connect countries between the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Seas, together with the process of accession of Montenegro into NATO. All three case studies have been selected as a good example of projection of Russian power in its neighborhood.

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in early 2014 was perceived by the west as a rude violation of international order and presents example par excellence of how the current Russian administration sets itself above international law making the geopolitical imagination of Russia as international super power. The Three Seas Initiative, the project designed to unite the region of Europe between the Baltic, the Adriatic, and the Black Seas through the energy infrastructure (atlanticcouncil.org, 2017), geopolitically is designed to make this region energetically independent. Currently, the most of the energy supplies in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe comes from Russia, which makes Russia the most dominant

stakeholder in the eastern parts of the European Union. The Initiative is designed, from geopolitical viewpoint, to suspend projection of Russian power in this region and turn it in another geopolitical imagination. Finally, Montenegrin accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was one of the most interesting processes when it comes to this organization. For a long time, Montenegro, while in the federation with Serbia (and Kosovo), was perceived as the Russian zone of influence on the Adriatic (Mediterranean) Sea. Its full integration in 2017 completely outvoted potential Russian presence in the Mediterranean Sea making another geopolitical imagination regarding Russian access to the warm seas.

These three hypotheses are starting point to explore whether Russia really does have geopolitical imaginations when it comes to its power in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. To explore them, this paper firstly focusses on the geopolitical region of the Central and Eastern Europe in a sense to define these regions in geopolitical terms. Afterwards, it explores crucial segments of contemporary Russian foreign policy and its international importance. Before answering whether there are or there aren't geopolitical imaginations of Russian power in this region, it will draw attention to case studies that are offered in this research framework.

Region(s) of the Central and Eastern Europe: Lack of Consensus

When it comes to defining region(s) of the Central and Eastern Europe there are several things that should be considered. Geographically, Cabo da Roca in Portugal's municipality of Sintra presents the most western part of the European continent, while mountain and river Ural in the Russian Federation, in most cases, presents its most eastern point. Ongoing debate about these facts is very vivid between geographers—but what is more important—it is even more vivid between geopoliticians. Therefore, it is very crucial for understanding possible imaginations of Russian power in this region to define geopolitical borders. This short overview will focus to four crucial discourses that define territory in focus of the research: (1) Mitteleuropa and German Lebensraum; (2) Cold-War discourse of two Europes; (3) post-Cold-War usage of the west and the rest; (4) and waves of the EU and NATO enlargement pushed out Eastern Europe further east from the geopolitical maps.

The concept of Mitteleuropa (from German, Middle Europe) presents intertwined political and geographical notions that refer to “the interaction between natural and cultural features, and eventually the resulting project for the creation of a

form of economic collaboration and political unity or confederation directed against the surrounding political and cultural powers” (Chiantera-Stutte 2008, p. 186). It was first introduced in the 19th century and, simply, presented geopolitical space between the western and the Eastern Europe. However, emerge of the use of this concept, especially by the German Geopolitical School, rooted it in the deep geopolitical imagination of Lebensraum (from German, living space), defined by Fridrich Ratzel in 1897 (Herwig 1999, p. 220).

Ratzel’s ideas later were defined in practical terms by Karl Ernst Haushofer “as the right and duty of a nation to provide ample space and resources for its people” (Herwig 1999, p. 226). Mittleeuropa became an imagination used by the German Geopolitical School, and later by Adolf Hitler, representing a geographical space on which German nation has natural right to spread in order to reach their Lebensraum, a territory that is considered to be German and where German people live. In that time, the Central Europe was basically a territory were two big German-dominated empires ruled: The Second German Reich and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The idea of German Lebensraum, thus, presented imaginative space of Mittleeuropa, a geopolitical reference in between Anglo-Francophone West of the Europe and Russian-dominated East.

Adopted and applied by Adolf Hitler, idea became reality at the beginning of the World War 2. However, joint tasks of the Western countries, led the USA, Great Britain and France, and the Eastern European countries, led by the Soviet Union, not only won against the Nazis, but their action managed to completely push out geopolitics on the margin of academic studies marking it as “imperial”. Moreover, divided Germany and new world order established soon after the end of the War, developed a geopolitical discourse of two Europes. The Cold War that followed between the east and west did not have space for Middle, or better yet Central, Europe in the bipolar constellation of the continent.

As this world order was coming to an end and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed together with the communism in Europe, the new geopolitical paradigm dominated across the globe. The absolute triumphalism of the western ideas, capitalism, liberal democracy and globalization in specific, saw new world order as a single imperial system with the west as its supreme and most dominant factor (Barnet and Cavanagh, 1994). Some, like Francis Fukuyama, went even further asking themselves whether we reached the end of history (Fukuyama, 1989). Process of globalization, in this sense, was meant to be used as a universal spreader of the western values

across the globe due to their triumph over the communism. As it occurs, not only that the west was not perceived and recognized by the rest as the legitimate actor in this process, but also the process of globalization turned out to be rather fragmented and limited to the specific territories. On the European soil, break-up of three existing federations, the Yugoslav Wars and emerge power of the newly established supranational project—the European Union—caused complete transformation of the geopolitical notion of regionalism.

Geopolitically, the Western Europe remained most stable region of the continent, now deeply involved into the European and NATO institutions. These institutions, on the wings of globalization and triumphalism, started to spread their influence further east. Waves of the EU and NATO enlargement pushed out the geopolitical notion of Eastern Europe further east than it was on geopolitical maps during the Cold War. This opened space not only for the Central Europe, but also for a wave of geopolitical notions, usually used within the Euro-Atlantic documents and enlargement policies, such as the South Europe, Nordic countries, Baltic states, Western Balkan, Caucasus Region, etc.

Pushed further east, the Eastern Europe was deconstructed out of existence and led some scholars and politicians alike “to proclaim that not only was the “transition” out of state socialism in Eastern Europe over but that Eastern Europe no longer was a meaningful political or cultural designation” (Ballinger 2017, p. 4). Suddenly, there was almost no country in the Europe, especially the one which showed the Euro-Atlantic aspirations, to identify itself with regional east. However, the dynamic of Euro-Atlantic integration alters from state to state. The most of the former communist countries, that used to be under Soviet influence, finished the process of integration in 2004, forming, in this way, what is nowadays known under the geopolitical notion of the Central Europe. Later, in 2007 and 2013, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, were in bandwagon to this region, leaving behind five (or six; Kosovo?) countries of the Balkan Peninsula and the rest of the Eastern Europe – Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and three Caucasus states. This is the main reason why authors like Zarycki avoid geographical terms when marking regions of Europe and rather use neutral terms, such as numbered zones, where number presents “degree and nature of Western domination” and “their construction of political scenes, which translates Western discourses” (2014, p. 18–19).

Regional geopolitics of the European continent, as seen from this short overview, varies depending on dominant political paradigm at certain time in the history of

this discipline. The mapping of territory is always a political notion and it is not easy to simply draw borders of specific region without taking into account politics. In the case of Europe, presented geopolitical discourses define territory of the Central and Eastern Europe as oppose to the Western Europe. In all four cases, the Western Europe presents a constant of Anglo and Francophone tradition where Germany was westernized into after the World War 2 and the German Unification later, after the collapse of communism.

However, Mittleeuropa – the territory that presented once a Lebensraum of Germans – set itself free from this discourse, but preserved idea of the Europe in-between the west and the east. Finally, the Eastern Europe, once under the strong Russian (Soviet Union) influence, seems to be fading more and more with the spread of the Euro-Atlantic integrations further east. Therefore, the region of the Central and Eastern Europe is best described as a geopolitical polygon where the west meets the east. That is the main reason why this paper presupposes it as a place where modern-day Russian Federation still has political influence and directly confronts the western project of the Euro-Atlantic integrations. In further writing, paper deliberates whether the projection of the Russian power in this region is the geopolitical imagination or not based upon three specific case studies. Before doing so, it is crucial to explore wider ranges of the Russian foreign policy.

Foreign policy of Russian Federation

In contemporary international relations, the Russian Federation is perceived as one of the most powerful stakeholders in the world. Its geopolitical rivalry on the European soil with the EU (and the US) has intensified in the past decade causing various tensions, crisis and conflicts. The source of this renewed rivalry is hard to track, but two practical explanations offered by the professor at Tartu University Viatcheslav Morozov (2015, p. 42) are crucial for understanding the rise of the Russian power: (1) the lack of recognition from the west on the positioning of Russia as a legitimate international stakeholder and (2) the Russian interpretation of the universal values.

The three stakeholders are the most important in the focused region: while the interests of the United States and the European Union are mostly overlapping, the Russian Federation has a wide variety of different interests in the Central and Eastern Europe. To explain this, it is perhaps the best to draw attention to August 2008 when

Medvedev presented the five principles of the Russian foreign policy (Herpen 2014, p. 12). Among these points, the Kremlin's right is particularly emphasized – to protect the Russians wherever they are and the right to intervene on their behalf. Such point of view to its traditional spheres of influence Russia had before the codification of these five principles in the context of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine when it demanded federalization of the state to protect the Russian people or Putin's proposal to Belarus to return to the Russian Federation. After codification, the five principles served as the basis for the invasion to Georgia in 2008 (Herpen 2014, p. 12).

What has been considered as the traditional sphere of influence of Russia, in a wider historical view, can be seen through glasses of orthodoxy, pan-Slavism or communism (Herpen 2014, p. 33). These spheres most recently have been the focus of interest of the European Union and NATO. Both see the area of the Central and Eastern Europe as a space for spreading their influence, but also as a means of geographic and geopolitical convergence in the Middle East and the Caucasus region that are areas rich in natural resources. Additionally, by expanding to traditional Russian spheres of influence, these actors would further weaken Russia's power, which was shaken enough by the collapse of the USSR.

However, contemporary foreign policy ambitions of Russia go sometimes so far that there are authors who claim how involvement of Russia in affairs of its neighborhood, as well as Russian potential to play a role of the global actor, indicate the revival of the 5th Russian Empire – “a geographic space that so far includes the former Soviet Union but may be expanded to include an even greater geographic space” (Suslov and Bassin 2016, p. 149). Indeed, official Moscow tries to equalize its international position with the USA, China or the EU by seeking for the establishment of its domination over the new independent states of the former USSR and for the formation of a sphere of influence for itself in the Central and Eastern Europe (Fedorov 2013). The fact that Russia surrounded itself with dependent and loyal neighboring states – allies who are willing to promote Russian cultural values, economic interests and foreign policy (Dias 2013, p. 262; Nalbandov 2016, p. 194) – has shown its potential to act as a global pole in the multipolar world.

Due to the strong influence of the EU and NATO enlargement policies in what is considered to be Russian sphere of influence, the region of the Central and Eastern Europe is, for the last few years, a polygon of various geopolitical games. Thus, this paper explores three specific case studies where these games are played in order to reach the answer on the question whether the Russian Federation has or has

not illusion of its power in the region in the focus. Geopolitical imaginations of the power, therefore, may also be a cause of the lack of recognition from the west on the positioning of Russia as a global pole in the multipolar world.

Case study #1: Annexation of Crimea

Earlier claimed revival of the Russian imperialism, modeling blurred borders of the 5th Empire, experienced its first staging in the Crimea Crisis. McNabb elaborates that direct product of this imperial project was annexation of Crimea and continued support of separatists in Ukraine's eastern provinces (2016, pp. 58–59). Ukraine's domestic political crisis reached its international realization in 2014 turning it into a direct power clash of the two dominant powers over Ukraine. Russian and the EU's view on the Ukraine was completely opposite, yet, they have one thing in common – the strategic positioning – meaning that whoever exercise its domination over Ukraine most certainly have the free pass towards the Caucasus Region and, further on, to the Middle East, both regions rich in the fossil fuels.

However, the clash of these two stakeholders was consequence of the incompatible and the incomprehensive “philosophies of state sovereignty and interstate relations: Russia's traditional Great Power approach, based on its concept of *derzhavnost* and its pursuit of regional suzerainty; and the EU's shared-sovereignty model, a still-experimental construct in international affairs” (Merry 2016, p. 27). The regime of Vladimir Putin has used ethnic Russians and Russian speakers residing abroad to extend its influence and expand its borders with the aim of re-imperialization of the former Soviet space (Grigas 2016, p. 34). This is the main reason why Ukraine ended up in the armed conflict and the annexation was performed.

The attempt of Vladimir Putin to justify Russian actions in the Crimea was based on insisting that the United States and NATO have done essentially the same thing in Kosovo, where intervention has led to secession (Abazi and Scheidlin 2014, p. 48). According to Abazi and Scheindlin's analysis, the Crimea is not Kosovo and even an attempt to justify intervention in Kosovo is impossible because it cannot be compared with the separation of Crimea and cannot, according to the authors, serve as a justification for the pro-Russian actions since the west certainly had interests in the former Yugoslavia, as a post-Cold War sphere of influence, but no Western country wanted the territory of Kosovo as it is case with Russia and Crimea (Abazi and Scheidlin 2014, pp. 48–49).

The case study of Ukraine Crisis and the annexation of Crimea sums up three key points: Russian interpretation of universal values is arbitrary; concept of *derzhavnost* allows Russia to use Russians living abroad for its imperial goals; and direct clash with another stakeholder presented in the region in focus. Performing all three, Russia tries to play as an international pole in the region. Current situation regarding Crimea indicates continuity in unresolved conflict: the annexation is not recognized by the world, Ukraine is deeply divided and violence of the international law completely changed the perception of Russia in international relations.

Case study #2: The Three Seas Initiative

Twelve EU member countries located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas - Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – supported, in 2016, the Three Seas Initiative, “an informal platform designed to secure political support and facilitate action in specific cross-border and macro-regional projects” (eblnews.com 2016). Since then, there have been several different views regarding the purpose and main goals of the initiative. This case study will elaborate two most important notions that have direct geopolitical reflections regarding the Russian power in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. While first one refers to energetic dimension of independence, other notion discusses about this initiative as a rampart, or better yet, a buffer zone, in context of classical geopolitical ratio of power between the European Union and the Russian Federation.

When discussing about energy security and sufficiency, it is important to bear in mind the concept of securitization. Securitization framework focuses on an examination of political discourse that takes a form of presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object and their acceptance or rejection by a relevant audience (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 25). Main initiators of the Three Seas Initiative, Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, presented energy independence of the countries between three seas as a question of security since the most, if not all, of them deeply depend on Russian energy providers (eadaaily.com 2016; Zwolski 2017). Once this question became political discourse presented by the two leaders among twelve countries involved, it gained a strong support from certain international stakeholder, firstly from the EU, and later by American president Donald Trump who stated during the Initiative Summit in summer of 2017

that the Initiative will ensure that nations between seas remain sovereign, secure and free from the foreign coercion (time.com 2017a).

Trump's statement regarding the liberation of the three seas' countries from the foreign coercion most likely refers to the Russian geopolitical influence. It is, then, obvious to think about this initiative as a geopolitical discourse that, together with energy securitization of the EU's east, target towards establishing a buffer zone, or a frontier, between the west and Russia. Emerge of the Russian power in last decade, as well as its imperialistic ambitions regarding re-establishment of its surrounding areas of influence are perceived by the west as a threat to their values and expansions further east. Even Polish President Duda stated, using the Baltic Chain of Freedom in 1989 as an example – the protest that was designed to draw the global attention on a popular desire for independence of the Baltic States – that a new chain of states should be forged from the Baltic Sea, through Central Europe, to the Black and the Mediterranean Seas (Zwolski 2017, p. 173). It is more than clear that Duda meant, as it was in 1989, on a chain against Russian influence.

Case study #3: Montenegro's Path to NATO

After the referendum voted in favor of Montenegrin independence and breakup of state union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, this country declared its aspirations towards Euro-Atlantic institutions. Even though they managed to relatively quickly adjust its legislative regarding the process of integration in both, the EU and NATO, the political climate in the country, instrumented by foreign influence, managed to slow down Montenegro's access when it comes to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Long historical roots of the bilateral friendship with Russia, as well as significant number of Serbs living in Montenegro, were two most important blockers on the Montenegrin Atlantic path. These two dominant discourses in the political life of the country intertwined at one point: Russian interest groups used predominantly Serbian minority in the country to decrease the support for the integration and provoke political instability. The goal was to preserve Russian geopolitical influence in Montenegro in order to have the partner country that has access through the Adriatic Sea further to the Mediterranean Sea.

Various political instruments were used, mainly by country's opposition, when it comes to achieving this goal. The biggest one, usually referred as the Montenegrin Crisis, started in October 2015 when oppositional pro-Serbian and pro-Russian coa-

lition, the Democratic Front, organized a series of what they called anti-government protests (dw.com 2015). Protests turned into a riot against accession of Montenegro into the NATO, causing deep parliamentary crisis that ended up a year later, with parliamentary elections held on 16th of October 2016, when group of 20 people were arrested and charged by the authorities of Montenegro with attempted coup d'état, among which were also Russian citizens (telegraph.co.uk 2017). Official Moscow denied involvement; however, it did name-called the ratification of Montenegro's NATO membership by a parliamentary vote – instead of a referendum – a violation of democratic norms (rt.com 2017).

The Montenegrin Crisis was the final attempt of Russia to keep its power and influence in this country. Even though Russia perceive the expansion of NATO as the top threat to its security, another geopolitical discourse was crucial for understanding its ambitions in Montenegro and the Western Balkan: official Moscow was seeking to gain a foothold in Montenegro, whose deep-water ports would be a perfect stopover for Russia's naval missions in the Mediterranean (time.com 2017b). Shortly presented script, where political and ethnical tensions were used as puppets to create chaos, in which would Russia managed to project its power and achieve its geopolitical goals, turned out to be unsuccessful. In this case study the concept of *derzhavnost* managed to gather all Russian supporters abroad, especially within Serbian minority living in the country, but wasn't strong enough to divert Montenegrin path towards the NATO, making it the 29th member of the Alliance.

Instead of Conclusion: Imaginations of Power Reviewed

The main presumption of the paper was that there are geopolitical imaginations of Russian power in the Central and Eastern Europe. The offered case studies confirm this hypothesis in three specific cases in three different sub-regions. The direct product of Russian imperial project was the annexation of Crimea which turns out to be, at the time of writing this paper, unresolved conflict. On the other hand, the Three Seas Initiative, empowered by the EU and Donald Trump's administration, targets not only on the energy security of the nations between the three seas, but also on the establishment of the unofficial geopolitical outline, the buffer zone or even the frontier between the west and Russia. Finally, once strong influence Russia had in the region of Western Balkan seems to fade out. Indications of Moscow's involvement in what is called the Montenegrin Crisis and unsuccessful attempt to

destabilize Montenegrin pro-NATO government showed yet another failure of the Russian imperialistic ambitions in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. The Russian power based upon dominance, strategic positioning and disobedience of international laws indicates that it has insufficient capacity to exert the influence, meaning that, in these specific situations, Russia indeed has imaginations of its power.

However, these imaginations presented in case studies do not imply the enervation of Russian global power, which is a basis for another research. One can conclude that appearance of geopolitical imaginations in direct neighborhood, especially on the territory that used to be traditional sphere of Russian influence, in broader sense understood through ideas of pan-Slavism, orthodoxy or communism, can be followed up with the fading of power on global level, but, as it turns out, Russia is still perceived as one of the most powerful stakeholders in international relations. Geopolitical imaginations presented in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe appears under the strong influence of the EU and NATO enlargement policies. They are perceived as a great threat to Russian power in this region and, therefore, a way is open for geopolitical imaginations – as hard as Russia tries to rebuild its imperium, it seems to fail under the torrent of the Euro-Atlantic ideas directed further east, and closer to its national borders.

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