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# Disinformation challenges facing the Three Seas Initiative – frame analysis of the key narratives

By exploiting the potential of social media, disinformation has become an important element of warfare. The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is particularly vulnerable to disinformation, primarily from Russia. One of the reasons for Russia's activities in this region's infosphere is that most CEE countries are members of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In this context, Russian disinformation activities aimed at the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) are particularly interesting. The image of the 3SI created in the media is crucial, for it translates into how the public understands, perceives and recalls this format of cooperation. The article aims to reconstruct the image of the 3SI in cases of Russian disinformation identified by the European External Action Service within the EUvsDisinfo project. The article's methodology is based on a qualitative content analysis of disinformation cases identified by EUvsDisinfo. The article identifies four main frames of disinformation targeting the 3SI, showing that Russian disinformation is focused on undermining the credibility and integrity of this cooperation, both among Initiative countries and between them and their international partners.

**Keywords:**

disinformation, Three Seas Initiative, Russia, hostile narratives, frame analysis

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<https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2024.22.5>

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## Introduction

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but it is undoubtedly becoming more common. Our modern information society, in which information can be rapidly obtained and transmitted on a large scale, has created new conditions for potential disinformers. The phenomenon's importance internationally and to states makes disinformation an attractive tool for various actors (Kupiecki & Legucka, 2023), and the topic has become particularly prominent in the wake of reports of Russian electoral interference – not only in the United States, but also in Europe (Mazarr et al., 2019).

Bennett and Livingston (2018) define disinformation as 'deliberate lies spread as news to advance political goals'. They also warn against the hasty use of the concept of fake news, which, in their opinion, presents the problem as a series of individual cases of falsehood – whereas they use the word disinformation to describe more systematic disruptions of information flows (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 124). Researchers from the RAND Corporation define disinformation differently. They pay attention primarily to the method of operation and define disinformation as 'the deliberate dissemination of combinations of false and true in order to create false impressions' (Mazarr et al., 2019). Darczewska (2019) views disinformation as a collective concept for various tools and methods used to achieve long-term political goals, and emphasizes disinformation's multi-level impact. Disinformation operates in a multitude of communication channels and areas – from politics and diplomacy to the media, the economy and the military. Despite these differences in approach, some similarities are evident as well: the message contains false or partially false information, and the purpose of the communication is to influence recipients, to change their beliefs so they are in line with the intention of the disinformant and bring them benefits.

Disinformation is able to spread so easily because its content refers to narratives that seem rational to some recipients. While the details of the disinformation may be new, the underlying narratives that make it credible have long been developing and are deeply entrenched in society. The overall message and its effectiveness can be enhanced by adding emotional urgency, often through the use of fear (Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 1999). Importantly, people have a natural tendency to think in narratives, which translates into the fact that storytelling makes socio-economic or political ideas seem more understandable, meaningful and credible (Della Sala, 2010). The concept of narrative refers to events told more or less coherently in a plot. Narratives do more than describe events; they construct the way we perceive, remember and communicate them. They influence our reactions, involvement, demands and – more broadly – how

we shape the socio-political environment (Kaiser & McMahon, 2017). In this context, narratives take on the character of political weapons that play a crucial role in the social construction of the world. Disinformation and the narratives spread within it are tools of foreign interference that fit within the concept of hybrid threats (European Council, 2015).

The region of CEE is particularly vulnerable to disinformation, primarily from Russia. One of the reasons for Russia's activities in this region's infosphere is that most CEE countries are members of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and in this context Russian disinformation activities aimed at the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) are particularly interesting. The 3SI is a project launched in 2016 at the initiative of presidents of Croatia and Poland. At present, 13 EU countries have signed up to it: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. The 3SI is an intra-EU cooperation project aimed at strengthening the region economically through cooperation in the transport, energy and digitalisation sectors (Orzelska-Stączek & Kowal, 2019). Importantly, the objectives of the 3SI also include building transatlantic relations (Three Seas Initiative, 2018).

Every country in the 3SI faces disinformation attacks, but their intensity depends on a given country's strategic importance for Russia. For example in Poland, Russia actively conducts large-scale disinformation operations, eagerly drawing on narratives about Polish identity and the spectre of losing it (Zawadzka, 2018; Rosińska, 2021). The Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – are also targets of Russian disinformation. Using the example of Lithuania, Kuczyńska-Zonik (2022) has identified Russia's primary disinformation goals in this region: undermining trust in the state, weakening Lithuania's credibility in the international arena and strengthening social divisions, mainly related to the presence of the Russian national minority in Lithuania. It should be noted that, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, there has been a significant intensification of Russian disinformation operations in CEE (OECD, 2022).

By exploiting the potential of social media, disinformation has become an important element of warfare. As mentioned above, 3SI countries are particularly vulnerable to hybrid threats and disinformation – the image of the 3SI can be manipulated easily because there is little awareness of the Initiative itself in society and significant discrepancies in how it is understood in different 3SI countries. The research problem addressed in this article is how the 3SI is presented in disinformation that has been identified by the European External Action Service (EEAS) as part of the EUvsDisinfo project.

## 1. Methodology

This article aims to reconstruct the image of the 3SI in cases of Russian disinformation identified by the EEAS within the EUvsDisinfo project.

The EEAS is the diplomatic service of the European Union, established in 2011. Its responsibilities include managing the EU's diplomatic relations with other countries outside the bloc, and conducting the EU's foreign and security policy (European External Action Service, 2021).

EUvsDisinfo is the EU's flagship project and is led by the East StratCom Task Force, which operates within the EEAS' Strategic Communication and Information Analysis Division (AFFGEN.7). EUvsDisinfo comprises a team of specialists in communication, journalism, the social sciences and issues related to Russia. Through data analysis and media monitoring in 15 languages, EUvsDisinfo identifies, collects and presents instances of disinformation from pro-Kremlin media disseminated in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries. These cases are added to the EUvsDisinfo database, the only publicly available, searchable repository of this type (EUvsDisinfo, nd), which today contains over 16,000 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation.

The methodology in this article combined research on existing sources, including a review of the literature on the subject, with a qualitative content analysis of disinformation cases identified by EUvsDisinfo from the beginning of the 3SI up to December 2023. The qualitative analysis served to identify the key themes used in narratives about the 3SI. These were extracted from the EUvsDisinfo database. The earliest identified instance of 3SI disinformation was entered in the EUvsDisinfo database in 2019, and the most recent on 2 February 2023. To find disinformation cases in the EUvsDisinfo database, the search term 'Three Seas Initiative' was used. Thirty cases of disinformation from the EUvsDisinfo database were found and content-analysed.

The East StratCom Task Force uses the definition of disinformation from the Action Plan against Disinformation (European Commission, 2018): 'Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to

public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary'.

The analysis used a particular type of interpretation – the concept of frame analysis, popularised by Goffman (2010) – which falls within the mainstream of interpretive research. Framing refers to constructing a scheme for interpreting reality, the essence of which is the selection and prioritisation of facts. The result is a framework that simplifies, structures and explains the reality presented (Olczyk, 2021). According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting specific fragments of reality and emphasising them in the transmitted information to influence recipients: 'it means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audience'. Analysing the frames used in disinformation messages is particularly important because 'frame theory predicts that the use of certain interpretation patterns in messages influences the recipients' perception of the reported reality' (Olczyk, 2010). The research procedure was inductive. The frames were identified after conducting a qualitative analysis of the research material – cases of disinformation found in the EUvsDisinfo database. Frames reconstruction and contextualisation were then carried out.

The following hypothesis was adopted: disinformation targeting the 3SI focuses on undermining the credibility and integrity of this cooperation, both among Initiative countries, and between them and their international partners.

In this article, disinformation is understood as defined by Kupiecki et al. (2022) as the doctrine and practice of states or non-state actors intentionally using manipulated or falsified information to induce a desired change in a specific group of recipients in a planned field of influence.

The research procedure involved searching for answers to the following questions:

1. What interpretive framework for presenting the 3SI can be found in the cases of Russian disinformation?
2. What is the scope of the framework identified in the cases of Russian disinformation about the 3SI?

The study aimed to identify and reconstruct the interpretive framework, and was based on qualitative methodology.

## 2. Interpretive frames used in identified cases of disinformation

Although Russian disinformation is more likely to focus on hitting specific countries (OECD, 2022), adapting the message to a given socio-political situation, messages about the 3SI addressed generally – to the region of CEE – can also be found. What is especially important is that the manipulated information is often authentic, but used out of context and weaponised by the disinformers, who know that lies based on a grain of truth are more likely to be believed and shared.

Disinformation can be analysed in terms of the goals and intentions of the hostile actor. In this context, the function of using framing is persuasion – the narrative is intended to build a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards a given entity (Kołodziej, 2017). In the instances of disinformation collected, the main goal was to polarise state and non-state actors, for which a modified ‘us and them’ construct was used – in this case, ‘you and them’. In this way, the image of the ‘enemy’ was created and emphasised in the broader context of the 3SI. The analysis made it possible to identify four frames (Table 1):

1. ‘The United States – an anti-Russian hegemon that keeps the 3SI countries on a propaganda leash’;
2. ‘Poland – an anti-Russian pseudo-power using the 3SI as a step towards regional domination’;
3. ‘Russophobic countries of Central Europe – the 3SI Anti-Russian Union’;
4. ‘The West exploiting 3SI countries – the policy of dripping wealth’.

Table 1. **Frame characteristics.**

Frame	Examples from the analysed cases
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>‘The United States – an anti-Russian hegemon that keeps the 3SI countries on a propaganda leash’</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3SI is ‘the American concept implemented in order to promote the disintegration of existing European structures’.</li> <li>• The 3SI countries are to be ‘kept’ by the Americans on a ‘propaganda leash’.</li> <li>• 3SI countries are ‘secondary vassals of the USA’ and a list of potential ‘Brexit’s for the Americans in case ‘relations with Berlin/Brussels require it’.</li> </ul>

<p><b>'Poland – an anti-Russian pseudo-power using the 3SI as a step towards regional domination'</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'The 3SI is based on (Poland's) phobia of the Russian threat.'</li> <li>• The 3SI is to be an ill response to '(Poland's) painful history and (its) equally painful ambitions'.</li> <li>• 'Poland is supposed to play a pseudo-power role in this mythical Three Seas.'</li> <li>• 3SI is a manifestation of Polish 'gigantomania'.</li> </ul>
<p><b>'Russophobic countries of Central Europe – the 3SI Anti-Russian Union'</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'The 3SI is a completely anti-Russian initiative.'</li> <li>• '(The 3SI would constitute an integration format based on) an anti-Russian unification of states.'</li> </ul>
<p><b>'The West exploiting 3SI countries – the policy of dripping wealth'</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The creation of the 3SI – a project aimed to economically strengthen the region – is said to be proof of the EU's impotence.</li> <li>• 'The so-called old EU countries are better developed and have capital capable of investing, and therefore also of blackmailing smaller (3SI) countries.'</li> </ul>

Disinformers constructed the frames in such a way that they contain an element of truth. Disinformation includes the deliberate spreading of distorted and/or false information. The desired effects of disinformation activities reflect the interests of a specific actor – in this case, Russia.

## **2.1. 'The United States – an anti-Russian hegemon that keeps the 3SI countries on a propaganda leash'**

The frame presenting the United States as an enemy – not only to the 'exploited' (EUvsDisinfo, 2019b) countries of the 3SI, but primarily to Russia – was the one most frequently used in the material analysed. In the context of the 3SI, the USA was presented as having two different roles, each of which amounted to 'taking control of the European continent' (Sozh.info, 2020). It was suggested that 'the idea of the Three Seas Initiative belongs to the US from beginning to end', and further, 'the American concept is implemented in order to promote the disintegration of existing European structures' (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). In this context, the United States was presented as the initiator and author of the 3SI, intent on 'introducing another form of American hegemony in the post-Soviet areas surrounding Russia', creating an economic and political element of the 'American anti-Russian ring' (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). Proof of this was to be the fact that the 3SI 'activates precisely when the President (of the United States) wants to bargain something from his European so-called allies' (also referred to contemptuously in the research material as 'vassals') (Sputnik Poland,



2020a). Thus, the 3SI countries are to be 'kept' by the Americans on a 'propaganda leash' and used as a tool in disputes between Washington and Brussels (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). In this context, it is worth noting that the frame presenting the United States as an enemy is also used to describe its alleged rivalry with the European Union. According to this view, the 3SI would be 'directed against both Russia and Western Europe' and constitute a 'Europe-bis' for the US, or a 'second-speed Europe', 'the next stage of NATO development' (Sputnik Poland, 2021a).

The second role given to the USA in the analysed messages was that of 'godfather', 'patron' and 'behind-the-scenes director' of the 3SI (Sputnik Poland, 2020b). In this sense, the United States would supervise the functioning of the 3SI and exert decisive influence over its decisions. The 3SI, as a bloc of 'pro-American, anti-Russian and Eurosceptic' countries that want to build their own identity, is to be 'fed by the American political class guided by its interests' – the scale of 'independence [of the 3SI participating countries] will be determined by the interests of the United States' (Sputnik Poland, 2020b). Moreover, disinformation messages include claims that from the territory of the 3SI the United States can 'conveniently' influence both Russia and Western Europe, thus creating a 'geopolitical buffer' (Sozh.info, 2020). These theses also refer in a broader context to another American priority: neutralising Chinese influence in Europe. A manifestation of this would be using the 3SI countries to save American industry – transferring American factories from China to Central Europe. The following quotes can be used to demonstrate this narrative: 'The Americans are trying to show these [Three Seas Initiative] countries that it is not in their interest to cooperate with China. Moreover, this is clever – first of all, because without investing any funds, they [the Americans] outline the prospects for the economic development of the Three Seas countries' (Sputnik Poland, 2020b); '[the 3SI] is another collar intended to prevent the countries of CEE from doing mutually beneficial business with their natural Eurasian partners' (Sputnik Poland, 2021b).

The role of the United States as the primary decision-maker in the 3SI is also presented in the claim that the countries participating in the 3SI are to be 'secondary vassals of the USA' and constitute a list of potential 'Brexit's for the Americans in the event that 'relations with Berlin/Brussels require it', that is, 'if the European entity had to be weakened in the emerging multipolar world' (Sputnik Poland, 2021b).



## 2.2. Poland – an anti-Russian pseudo-power using the 3SI as a step towards regional domination

The frame presenting Poland as an enemy was used primarily to polarise relations among the Three Seas countries. One of its forms was to present the 3SI as a ‘projection of Polish geostrategic thought’ through which Polish elites want to ‘take on the role of the leader of Central Europe’ (Sputnik Poland, 2020b). According to the collected disinformation materials, the 3SI is to be a response to ‘[Poland’s] painful history and equally painful ambitions’ (EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

One of the suggestions made was that Poland’s desire to lead regional formats, in this case the 3SI, is a manifestation of Polish gigantomania, and the idea of the Three Seas itself is simply the old ‘Intermarium after rebranding’ (Sputnik Polska, 2021d). Also emphasised was the ‘anti-Russian’ nature of the 3SI, allegedly based on ‘(Poland’s) phobia towards the Russian threat’ (Sputnik Poland, 2020c) – a phobia that, moreover, is unjustified: ‘The Polish border is safe. Money for security would be better spent in the social sphere. The “Russian threat” is greatly exaggerated’ (Sputnik Lithuania, 2021). The United States also plays an important role in this frame, in which Poland is to act as the ‘guardian of the region’ and ‘a subcontractor in the process of seizing territories of the former Soviet Union’ (Sputnik Poland, 2021d). The presence of the American military on Polish territory is described as a ‘real danger’, causing ‘understandable surprise’ among other countries: ‘Poland has long been part of a world straight out of George Orwell’s dystopia’ (Sputnik Poland, 2020c). The importance of the American military presence for the state’s foreign policy is said to be almost ‘exotic’, complementing the ‘surrealistic message about the alleged integration of the Three Seas’, through which Poland is supposed to ‘compensate and suppress certain complexes’: ‘Poland is supposed to play a pseudo-power role in this mythical Three Seas’ (Sputnik Poland, 2020c).

Another way of introducing this frame was to set messages in the context of the protests in Belarus. Poland’s political activity related to the protests is described as further evidence of ‘Poland’s desire to dominate the region’ (EUvsDisinfo, 2020a). The following quote confirms this narrative: ‘Today, Marshal Piłsudski’s idea to revitalise Poland “from sea to sea” is more popular than ever’ (Sputnik Lithuania, 2021). Such hypotheses refer to a broader narrative suggesting that Polish foreign policy includes plans to take control of Belarus and Ukraine, and to

create a buffer zone between Poland and Russia (EUvsDisinfo, 2020a). These plans are evident not only in the 'illusory' integration within the 3SI but also in other initiatives, including the creation of the Lublin Triangle (EUvsDisinfo, 2019a).

In the disinformation cases collected, there is an attempt to evaluate the 3SI as yet another Polish geostrategic idea: 'home-grown geopolitical concepts emerging on the Vistula River [...] may even be reasonable because they are presented as an attempt to integrate the interests of the countries of the region' (Sputnik Poland, 2021d). Despite some 'reasonable aspects', cooperation within the 3SI faces a significant problem – 'this project is aimed against Moscow and the reintegration of the former USSR, and this effectively discourages potential participants other than Poland' (Sputnik Poland, 2021d). The example of Polish-Czech relations was given, with the claim that, after the verdict in the Turów mine case, the two countries 'have no chance of reaching an agreement at all' (Sputnik Poland, 2021d). It was further predicted that things would be similar with other countries 'traditionally interested in good relations with Russia, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria and Belarus' (EUvsDisinfo, 2020a). Taking this into account, Poland – according to the disinformants – could probably only count on the involvement of the Baltic states which, in the collected disinformation messages, are also accused of having a Russophobic foreign policy.

Disinformation about the 3SI in its narratives very often attacks Poland for a specific reason – Poland is one of the initiators of the 3SI and has been actively participating in this format from the very beginning. Poland is considered one of the countries relatively resistant to Russian disinformation, and openly pro-Russian messages do not find many supporters in Polish society. This is due to, among other reasons, the difficult history of both countries and the general awareness of Vladimir Putin's policy. However, the weakness is properly constructed, often masked disinformation. Russian narratives in Poland are based mainly on three elements: first, the Russophobia of Polish society and the Polish authorities; second, building a sense of threat; and third, maintaining antagonisms between Poland and its neighbours and allies. Therefore, the message is intended to show the destabilisation of the Polish state and society, and suggest conflicts and isolation of Poland in the international arena (Olech & Dobrowolska, 2022; Wóycicki et al., 2017). This approach can be observed, for example, in the analysed cases. Poland, as one of the initiators and an active participant of the 3SI, is a topic convenient for building hostile narratives. Russian disinformation

targeting Poland often emphasises Polish gigantomania, for example, by using narratives about alleged Polish territorial claims against other countries (Olech & Dobrowolska, 2022). In this case, the expression of gigantomania is Poland's involvement in the 3SI.

### **2.3. Russophobic states of Central Europe – the 3SI Anti-Russian Union**

Another frame presents the 'Russophobic' countries of Central Europe as the enemy. The general argument put forward in most of the collected cases of disinformation is the starting point for further considerations: '[The Three Seas Initiative] is a completely anti-Russian initiative' (Sputnik Poland, 2021f). One way of introducing this frame was to suggest that the 3SI has a 'very stable anti-Russian component' in the form of the Baltic states and Poland (Sputnik Poland, 2021f), whereas the remaining Three Seas countries do not agree on pursuing a permanent anti-Russian policy. Thus, the disinformation focused on creating an internal polarisation between 3SI Russophobic countries and those that would prefer to maintain good relations with Russia. This narrative is reflected in the following quote: 'The participants of the Three Seas Initiative, apart from Poland and the Baltic countries, certainly do not speak with permanent anger and a negative attitude towards the Kremlin. Russia is very close to the Three Seas region' (Sputnik Poland, 2021f). It should be noted that instances of disinformation using the argument of anti-Russianism and the Russophobia of some 3SI countries appeared before Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Another way of introducing this frame was to place it in the broader context of US interference in Europe. In this sense, the USA, 'not interested in independent European states', was trying to create 'local formats beneficial [for itself]' in the EU (Sputnik Poland, 2021e). The 3SI, as an assembly of Russophobic countries, would constitute a format for integration based on an 'anti-Russian unification of states' (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). Such an anti-Russian format of international cooperation is a tool the United States can use to create a 'buffer zone along Russia's western border', also called a 'cordon sanitaire' (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). In this context, 'the creation of transport and digital infrastructure under the Three Seas Initiative can enable the deployment of military units and equipment. One day, plans may

change, leading to the emergence of another problematic region from a security point of view' (Sputnik Poland, 2021f).

## **2.4. The West exploiting 3SI countries – the policy of dripping wealth**

Disinformers were also keen to use a framework designed to polarise new and old EU Member States. Relations between Warsaw and Berlin were an essential component of such narratives. The materials analysed contain information suggesting that 'a completely different country, Germany, may take over the Three Seas Initiative promoted by Poland' (Sputnik Poland, 2021c). This was supposed to be evident and real for two reasons. First, 'Berlin has greater potential to play a leading role in CEE than Warsaw' (Sputnik Poland, 2021c). In this context, it has been described in two ways: as a 'primary vassal' of the United States, controlling the 3SI countries on behalf of the US, or as a state that would interfere uninvited in Washington's affairs in CEE (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). Second, 'in the political sphere, Warsaw does not present itself as an attractive partner for other countries in the region due to its maniacal Russophobia and growing unpredictability' – a country that 'is not taken seriously by anyone' cannot count on a leadership role, which is why Germany would take over the 3SI (Sputnik Poland, 2021c).

In addition to introducing the above framework using the example of specific countries, the materials collected contain general references to the EU being 'stuck in bureaucracy' (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). The EU was portrayed as incapable of acting and helping Member States, especially those in the eastern part of the EU. The fact that the 3SI aims to economically strengthen the region means that the EU has not been able to do so – proof of the EU's impotence (Sputnik Poland, 2020a). Emphasis was placed on the 'old EU' countries and the 'trickle-down policy' they were supposed to implement towards CEE countries (Sputnik Poland, 2021d). In this context, the 'policy of dripping wealth' was described as follows: 'the so-called old EU countries are better developed and have capital they can use to invest, and therefore also to blackmail, smaller [3SI] countries' (Sputnik Poland, 2021d).

## Conclusions

The image of the 3SI created in the media is crucial, for it translates into how the public understands, perceives and recalls this format of cooperation (Olczyk, 2010). This applies in particular to the use of disinformation, one of the tools of influence foreign states use. It also relates to the research problem discussed in this article – how the 3SI is presented in cases of Russian disinformation identified by the EEAS within EUvsDisinfo.

The study confirmed the hypothesis set out at the beginning. Disinformation targeting the 3SI focuses on undermining the credibility and integrity of this cooperation, both among 3SI countries, and between them and their international partners. Disinformation includes deliberate actions aimed at spreading manipulated and/or false information. Four ‘enemy’ frames were used to create an unfavourable image of the 3SI:

1. ‘The United States – an anti-Russian hegemon that keeps the 3SI countries on a propaganda leash’.
2. ‘Poland – an anti-Russian pseudo-power using the 3SI as a step towards regional domination’.
3. ‘Russophobic countries of Central Europe – the 3SI Anti-Russian Union’.
4. ‘The West exploiting 3SI countries – the policy of dripping wealth’.

All those frames were constructed to contain an element of truth, though manipulated. Among other things, disinformers used the involvement of the US and the EU in the 3SI – both are strategic partners of it (as is Germany, also used in the narratives) – as well as the political idea of the Intermarium, put forward by Piłsudski in the interwar period.

The ostensible goals of cooperation within the 3SI were questioned, with only anti-Russian motivations being found. The Initiative itself and its authorship were presented either as a project of the United States, which was said to indirectly or directly steer the 3SI, or as a project of Poland, a reflection of its imperial plans from times gone by and its current complexes, combined with ‘chronic Russophobia’. The messages concerning the 3SI were constructed to emphasise any divisions within the Three Seas countries – as well as those between the Initiative and its international partners, such as the USA or the European Union. In this context, the 3SI was described

as a manifestation of Polish gigantomania, and Poland itself was described as the only country that believed in the success of the project. Additionally, this was woven into the broader context of Russophobia in some countries of the Initiative (particularly Poland and the Baltic states), with the argument that the creation of the 3SI was essentially motivated by anti-Russian feeling, and the disinformers eagerly drew on the element of the United States, which they presented as either the actual author of the 3SI or as its 'godfather', supervising cooperation through its European vassals. On this basis, the transatlantic aspect of the 3SI was a critical and sensitive topic from the perspective of Russian interests in the region. Much less effort was spent on criticising the countries in the western part of the EU. They were written off as unable and unwilling to help the 3SI countries. Their involvement in Central Europe was described as a 'trickle-down policy', in which they used their superior wealth as a form of blackmail against the smaller and weaker CEE countries. This was presented as one of the impulses for creating a new format of economic cooperation.

Each of the four frames emphasised negative aspects of the project, playing on emotions and trying to drive in wedges. The disinformation messages were selected and simplified to facilitate the reception of the manipulated information and to consolidate it in recipients' awareness and memory, thereby influencing the public's perception of this format of cooperation. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that disinformation constructed in this way is used to form perceptions not only of regional cooperation – in this case, the 3SI – but more broadly, perceptions of the entire European Union, and more narrowly, of bilateral cooperation between specific countries.

## Funding



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*The publication is co-financed from the state budget under program of the Minister of Education and Science called "Science for Society" project no. NdS/543014/2022/2022 amount co-financing PLN 1,500,000, total project value PLN 1,547,200. (Polska/Poland)*

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