

Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus.

By Gerard Toal. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xx, 387 pp. Appendix.

Notes. Index. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$29.95, hard bound.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.271

Gerard Toal's book is positioned within the field of critical geopolitics: it questions the existing constructions of space in international politics and calls upon the reader to consider "multiple scales of action and clashing spatial imaginations" (21). Chapter 1 asks a straightforward question, "Why does Russia invade its neighbors?" It offers a convincing critique of the dominant explanations—the liberal approach that sees Russia as an essentially expansionist power, and the realist view, according to which Moscow had legitimate reasons to be fearful of NATO expansion.

As an alternative, Toal develops a complex conceptualization of the post-Soviet space as a geopolitical field. This involves, firstly, introducing a modified version of Rogers Brubaker's "triadic nexus." In addition to the "nationalizing," "homeland," and minority nationalisms, it includes "the normative power center that ameliorates and modifies the nation-building policies of nationalizing states" (35), and the secessionist movements within the metropolitan state. The resulting framework accommodates all key actors: the metropolitan Russian state with its homeland nationalism, the nationalizing states such as Georgia and Ukraine, secessionist minorities both within nationalizing states (South Ossetia) and in the metropole (Chechnia), as well as the normative power of the European Union. Another conceptual level concerns geopolitics proper and includes such notions as geopolitical culture (with corresponding shared discourses), affective geopolitics, and communication strategies producing "tabloid storylines" (51) of world politics.

The subsequent chapters apply this conceptual framework to the Russian case. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of Russian geopolitical culture, which in Toal's view is defined by three competing traditions: westernizing, imperial, and promoting the idea of a "strong Russia." Chapters 3 to 5 focus on Russia's conflict with Georgia, with the fourth chapter offering a particularly detailed and useful account of developments in and around South Ossetia prior to the 2008 war. Chapters 6 and 7 present a summary of the Ukraine crisis, first by telling the story of the annexation of Crimea and then proceeding to the Novorossiia project and the war in the Donbas. The eighth chapter comes back to the critique of the "thin" geopolitical accounts (277) and highlights the need to seek customized solutions to territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which would duly take into account the realities of each case.

While Toal's project is an ambitious one in both theoretical and normative terms, the empirical analysis all too often drifts away from the rigorous theoretical framework outlined in the first chapter. In fact, in International Relations terms, most of the analysis would have to be classified as "first image": stories told in the book are about the top leadership interpreting each other's actions and taking fateful political decisions. Its main protagonists are Mikheil Saakashvili, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and, of course, Vladimir Putin. In the Ukraine chapters, Putin takes the front stage to such an extent that the intra-Ukrainian developments are reduced to the background: all that matters is the conflict between Moscow and the west. What starts as a structure-oriented account of post-Soviet politics becomes a narrative based on individual decision making, in which the great leader is capable of single-handedly changing the geopolitical points of reference: "In deciding to annex Crimea, Putin was shifting the intellectual foundations of his foreign policy practice from great-power geopolitics (competitive statecraft conducted within the existing territorial order) to revisionist imperial geopolitics (competitive statecraft that seeks to remake the existing territorial order)" (245). Even culture becomes an actor of sorts: "Russian

geopolitical culture, born of catastrophic collapse, sought the restoration of Russian power in Europe, the Caucasus, and Eurasia” (276).

Despite its empirical richness, the book never gets to really addressing the reasons why Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine. The crucial question whether we are dealing with two isolated incidents or they do indeed constitute a pattern—does Russia invade its neighbors?—is never even asked. Instead, the author concentrates on the normative dimension of the two cases, which is summarized by the title of a key section in Chapter 4: “Who Started the August 2008 War?” (158). The question of responsibility is without doubt a crucial one, and the book makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate. There is also a fascinating theoretical discussion and dense empirical analysis, which, however, remain somewhat detached from each other.

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The Regional Roots of Russia's Political Regime. By William R. Reisinger and Bryon J. Moraski. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. ix, 268 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$75.00, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.272

With *The Regional Roots of Russia's Political Regime*, William Reisinger and Bryon Moraski have made a very important contribution to how we understand both the origins and the current nature of the political regime in place in Russia. By showing us that Vladimir Putin's power was built on the foundations of the same regional political machines that it continues to depend on, the authors challenge widespread accounts that all one needs to know to understand Russian politics can be found inside the Kremlin or, even more specifically, in the person of Vladimir Putin.

The book's argument is based on exemplary social science research grounded in both deep knowledge of Russia's vast expanse and impressive skill in practicing cutting-edge statistical analysis. After laying out the central argument in a clear and compelling opening chapter, the authors begin their account with the best single summary I have seen of the first quarter century of Russian electoral politics, from 1991 to 2016. Packing a lot into just thirty-two pages without seeming crammed, this chapter in itself will be useful for students and anyone else looking for a concise account of the changes during this time in both the outcomes and practice of elections in Russia. This chapter nicely frames the central question of the book by documenting the increasingly authoritarian nature of electoral politics in Russia under Putin.

The remaining chapters report findings from a quantitative analysis of a great deal of original data, with each chapter peeling away another layer of the proverbial onion to reveal a deeper reality. Rather than recount exactly what each chapter does, I will instead describe some of the most interesting findings.

In line with the book's title, the authors show how Putin inherited a political system from his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, in which a relatively small number of regional political machines led by “governors” (or usually-directly-elected chief executives going by other titles) had developed the capacity to generate extraordinarily high turnout levels in elections and then to deliver these votes to whomever they pleased. If in the 1990s some of these machines were generators of opposition votes, Putin used a variety of carrots and sticks to turn them all to his side, making them in some sense the forward base from which his power would then expand still further as the 2000s progressed.