

Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond

edited by Anna Ohanyan, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2018, viii, 220 pp., \$36.95, ISBN: 978-1626166202

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BOOK REVIEW

Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond, edited by Anna Ohanyan, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2018, viii, 220 pp., \$36.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1626166202

Margins matter. Whether you are a small state, medium size, or a great power, your neighbors are important for your survival. Regional linkages, or antagonisms are, therefore, at the essence of state building and security. This collective volume, edited by Anna Ohanyan (a distinguished professor of political science and international relations at Stonehill College) focuses on a new concept, dubbed *regional fracture*, in a fresh attempt to uncover the Kremlin's relations with its near abroad. Composed by an experienced team of experts interested in the role that peripheries (shatterzones, shatterbelts, meridionals) play in geopolitics in recent decades, the volume's eight essays tackle theory and praxis in the Balkans, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East, in an effort to demonstrate Russia's ability to assert its authority through a modernized, institutionalized, strategy of divide and rule.

The theory of regional fracture ought to be of interest to a variety of scholars working on the boundaries of major states. By fractured regions, the editor means "distinct systems where regional power applications from external players are common and where regionwide institutions may be proliferating; yet, despite regionally organized applications of power and institutions, key regional processes of governance fail to materialize" (3). This definition is indicative of the style of the chapters to follow. The editor develops this theory further by exploring the increasingly thicker levels of institutionalization of Russian involvement in its "debilitated neighborhoods" (i.e. the Caucasus and Central Asia, but not the Baltics). The upshot is a valuable take on post-communist Russia's foreign policy.

Divided into three parts ("Theory of Regional Fracture," "Lenin's Revenge: Regional Fracture in the Post-Soviet Space," and "Postcolonial Roots of Regional Fracture beyond the Post-Soviet Space") the empirical chapters demonstrate the central concept of the volume with a nicely broad geographical perspective. The core of the book begins with an essay by Robert Nalbandov on Russia and its involvement in the Euromaidan episode ("the Ukrainian Anschluss"), Moscow's "perpetual blood romance in the Caucasus," Moldovan-Russian relations, and the Kremlin's connections to Syria. We are reminded that Putin aims to reassert Russia into the calculus of great power relations. The next essay, by Vsevolod Samokhvalov, features the concept of regional fracture in Ukraine. This insightful approach highlights the multidimensional aspects of conditions in Ukraine, and challenges the more typical East-West binary. The author notes: "the Ukrainian identity project is in fact a more fractured amalgam of various groups of populations that feature sometimes the most grotesque combinations of identity, thereby allowing various identity entrepreneurs to offer numerous imagined micro, meso, and macro communities to various audiences" (73).

In a perceptive chapter on the seemingly permanent fissures in a complex crossroads of the world, the South Caucasus (aka Transcaucasia), Laurence Broers makes one think about the possibilities of unity among the relatively weak and small states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. The latter country is the focus of the contribution by Richard Giragosian, who argues that Armenia's long-held links to Russia are ambiguously advantageous. The author advocates "a more concerted embrace of the West" (117). The following essay, by David G. Lewis, probes Central Asia and the role of shared ideas and norms in this "deeply fractured region" (133). Unsurprisingly, the warning is that illiberalism is on the rise.

The third and final section of the volume is perhaps the most interesting, in part due to the impact of Russian involvement in the Middle East in the past few years. First, Dimitar Bechev

tackles Russian involvement in the Western Balkans, and, predictably, warns against further Russian engagement and advocates better integration with the European Union and NATO. The following piece, by Mark N. Katz, demonstrates that Putin has used the occasion of the Syrian civil war to reassert Russian influence in the Middle East, although at a substantial monetary cost, which may not be sustainable. A fractured Syria, we learn, gives Moscow leverage on the world stage. The conclusion by Ohanyan summarizes the main points and reminds readers of the alternatives to regional integration by imperial powers.


A central theme of these essays is the importance of energy resources, namely natural gas, which connects Russia to its borderlands, and beyond. Another common theme is the imprint of colonialism in post-Soviet space, although here the commentary by several authors, including the editor, is dense. In this case, it is a pity that the authors seem unaware of Terry Martin's pathbreaking work on *The Affirmative Action Empire*.¹ Nonetheless, the book's main point that Russia has benefitted from regional fracture is clearly demonstrated. And a very important point is made regarding Russian participation in the Syrian civil war, and the resultant uptick in Russian involvement in the Middle East. In sum, the "fractured nature of the Middle East has clearly helped to strengthen Russia's position in the great power rivalry of world politics" (11).

This slender but powerful volume offers new ways of appreciating Russia's role in the world today. Unfortunately, the authors appear to assume a greater degree of agency on behalf of the Kremlin than may actually exist in practice. Russian foreign policy, in its periphery, does not follow the type of premeditated divide and rule strategy that Ohanyan et al. suggest; immediate decisions are made as events unfold in the international arena. Furthermore, the general concept of regionalism is assumed by the authors. Given the central importance of the unit called "region," the editor may have provided a clearer definition. In addition, the book exhibits a degree of Russophobia which, although it may not detract from the credibility of the contributions, fails to appreciate the very real and immediate dangers that Moscow faces from an enlarged EU and NATO in its immediate geopolitical vicinity. Russia has suffered repeatedly from foreign incursions onto its soil; one may grant the Russian president (however despotic) the option to manipulate smaller border states with the goal of maintaining homeland security (and fighting terrorism). It appears that the current United States president is also guilty of placing pressure on neighbors. In sum, the type of creative thinking exhibited within *Russia Abroad* marginally advances the goal of global reengagement between Russia and the West.

The explanatory power of the theory of regional fracture is an important counterweight to the standard East-West dichotomies used to explain the geopolitical dilemma of Ukraine, Syria, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the other states reviewed in this volume. *Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond* reminds us that integration is not the only approach to dealing with one's neighbors, although the costs of fragmentation may be ephemeral. It remains to be seen whether or not the concept of regional fracture helps to predict Russia's foreign policy.

Note

1. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Cornell UP, 2001).

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