

differences aside and work toward common goals in a region that desperately needs their valuable perspectives.

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Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus, by Gerard Toal, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190253301

During the course of the past decade, Russia has pursued an increasingly proactive and assertive neighborhood policy. Russia has launched military operations against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014); it has repeatedly meddled in the domestic political affairs of other post-Soviet countries; it has used economic threats and embargoes vis-à-vis neighboring small states; it has established Moscow-led institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); and it has expanded its network of military facilities and bases in the post-Soviet space. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that Moscow's regional policy has received much attention from area specialists and international relations scholars. In recent years, a slew of articles and books have been published on the topic.

Gerard Toal's *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* is an important contribution to this growing body of literature. As the title suggests, the book focuses on the geopolitical tussle between the US and Russia over Georgia and Ukraine. Toal's starting point is that 2008 became a "very significant year in the remaking of post-Soviet space" (92). There are three reasons for this: the official recognition of Kosovo's independence by the US and its allies in February, NATO's Bucharest summit in April, and the Russian five-day war against Georgia in August. These closely intertwined events led to a major rupture in East-West relations.

The root causes of this rupture, however, run deeper. As Toal shows, Russia has had a longstanding ambition to maintain a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. The US, for its part, seeks to promote liberal norms and institutions across the globe, including the former Soviet region. Accordingly, successive US administrations have worked hard for the eastward expansion of NATO. Many former Soviet republics, in turn, seek protection from Russia by teaming up with the US-led NATO alliance, whereas several minority groups within the post-Soviet space look to Moscow for protection. In other words, there are numerous fault lines of conflict in the former Soviet region that—like a Matryoshka doll—are nested within each other.

To shed light on this complex web of relations, Toal draws on concepts and insights from critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitics is an approach to international relations that seeks to expose how political authorities use geopolitical speech acts to justify their decisions. The specific purpose of Toal's study is to identify the competing "geopolitical policy-storylines" (40) of different actors in the run-up to and aftermath of Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. The resulting analysis is highly nuanced, but simultaneously accessible to a general readership. Its main conclusion is that "affective geopolitics involving identity, status and memory" (287) has been the driving force behind Russia's interventions.

The book's particular merit is that it examines in detail the interplay of the local, regional, and global dynamics that have surrounded Russia's military actions in Georgia and Ukraine.

Certainly, there exists a large body of literature on the so-called new great game in central Eurasia, focusing on the strategic interests of major powers. Likewise, scholars have written much about ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Few studies, however, address how the interaction of ethnopolitical conflicts and great power politics has shaped the security environment in post-Soviet Eurasia. Toal's study contributes to fill that gap.

Another valuable contribution is that Toal presents new survey data on the political opinions of the local populations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (excluding the Donbas basin, as this region was not accessible for security reasons). The surveys, which were conducted in late 2014, reveal a complex picture. They demonstrate a strong rural/urban divide and significant differences in opinion between Russian-speakers and ethnic Russians. The latter appear to be much more supportive of Moscow's takeover of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine than the former. As Toal puts it, "Russian-speaking did not necessarily translate into a pro-Russia or pro-Putin orientation" (244). This relates to an ongoing debate among scholars about the extent to which the uprising in eastern Ukraine that erupted in 2014 was driven by local factors and to what extent it was fomented by Russia. Toal comes down in the middle. "While a government crisis in Kyiv was always likely to spur secessionist sentiment among certain groups in southeast Ukraine," he writes, "the escalation of this into armed rebellion in the Donbas and thereafter into irregular and then increasingly regularized war was the result of armed provocateurs from Russia" (239). Regardless of whether one agrees with Toal's conclusion, the survey data presented in the book will be a valuable source of information for future research endeavors.

Additionally, Toal documents in his study that Russia's ambition to reassert its hegemony in the post-Soviet space can be traced back to the early to mid-1990s. At that time, a broadly based consensus emerged among policymakers in Moscow to establish a Russian sphere of influence in the region. This is often overlooked in ongoing debates about Russia's neighborhood policy. Many observers tend to ascribe Russia's quest for regional hegemony to the narrower interests of the Putin government and to the country's turn toward authoritarianism. Toal's study sheds doubt on this line of reasoning.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that *Near Abroad* is extremely well written. The book is interspersed with maps and pictures of the conflict regions and reads in large parts like a detective novel. In short, there is a lot of good to be said about *Near Abroad*. At the same time, it also has some weaknesses.

First of all, the book does not sufficiently address the analytical and methodological challenges that arise from the study of discourses and rhetoric. As Toal himself writes, "actors can consciously create compelling visual spectacles for media consumption and global circulation to further their ends" (14). In the next paragraph, he states that "this book is a series of narrative-driven essays that endeavor to weave together the different perspectives of the actors involved in the struggles described." This immediately raises the question: When do actors use rhetoric as a smokescreen? And when does rhetoric display true emotions, affections, and interests of actors? For example, Toal holds that the leadership in Moscow saw Mikheil Saakashvili as a criminal with genocidal intent. On the very same page, Toal points out that George "Bush himself had used similar language about Saddam Hussein... though his use was part of a public relations campaign to justify invasion" (167). But how do we know? How do we know that the Russian elite genuinely believed that Saakashvili was a reckless and dangerous leader, whereas the Bush government's rhetoric about Saddam Hussein was merely a way to rationalize its decision to go to war against Iraq? At no point does Toal explain how he reaches his conclusions and by what criteria one can assess whether rhetoric must be taken at face value or dismissed as window dressing.

Second, Toal introduces at the start of the book three theoretical concepts (geopolitical field, geopolitical culture, and geopolitical condition), but does not apply them systematically in the subsequent chapters. In effect, the analysis becomes a "thick description" rather than a

theoretically informed explanation. This is not a problem as such, but one is left wondering why Toal introduces the above-mentioned concepts in the first place.

Third, Toal's analysis fails to engage with the extant stock of constructivist-inspired analyses of Russian foreign policy in the field of international relations. In recent years, scholars such as Andrei Tsygankov, Iver Neumann, Ted Hopf, Anne Clunan, and Tuomas Forsberg have provided an array of insightful studies that examine how Russia's national identity discourses and hunt for status have shaped its foreign policy behavior. In fact, several constructivist-inspired studies explicitly address Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. Given the overlap between critical geopolitics and constructivism, it would have been interesting to see how the conclusions reached by Toal differ from or relate to the findings of those existing works.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* is undoubtedly worth reading. Toal's analysis of the interplay between intrastate conflicts and great power politics, the detailed empirical accounts of the wars in Ukraine and Georgia, and the new survey data from eastern Ukraine and Crimea make the book a necessary resource for anyone interested in the international politics of the post-Soviet space. For a theoretically informed explanation of these dynamics and patterns, however, we have to wait for Toal's next book.

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The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, by Veli Yadirgi, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, \$79.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781107181236, \$27.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781316632499

Dealing with the predominantly Kurdish areas in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia of Turkey (ESA), Veli Yadirgi's book does a decent job in understanding the complex interplay of economic and political causes behind the social, economic, and political transformation of the region. Tackling the time-honored tradition of essentially viewing Kurds as primitive and backward, Yadirgi demonstrates the adverse outcomes of the Ottoman and Turkish states' policies of dislocation, dispossession, and annihilation. Analyzing the transformation of ESA over a long time span, the book allows the reader to see the transformation of ESA with a multifaceted perspective, offering insights on the impacts of profound macro-scale changes such as the emergence of nationalism, the birth of modern-nation states, and the integration of the Ottoman and the Turkish states into the capitalist world system.

After a brief overview of the Kurdish question, the book analyzes the two paradigms that are widely embraced by scholars. Inspired by the modernization theory, the first paradigm explains the underdevelopment in ESA with reference to the absence of "commercialization of agriculture," which is usually accepted to be the departure point for the formation of a market-oriented economy (41). Narratives based on this explanation go on to argue that such dynamics were absent from the ESA because of the long-lasting dominance of the Kurdish elite, who possessed "unbreakable authority" and thus were resilient to change. The alternative paradigm, however, claims otherwise. As the Ottoman central state's authority in ESA relied on the