



Samuel Charap, Timothy J. Colton. *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia.* New York: Routledge, 2016. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-138-63308-7.

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Realist accounts of the Ukraine crisis often boil down to the claim that if country A attacks country B, then it is C's fault. Many realists take great pains to establish a long list of Russian grievances or eternal "national interests," but do nothing to explain the enormous leap to justifying destructive military action to defend these interests. Realist accounts, on their own, are insufficient to explain the current crisis.[1]

Realists often ignore postcolonial theory. But why should former imperial powers have a "sphere of influence" in their former empire? We expect them to adjust; otherwise Secretary of State Dean Acheson's 1962 jibe about Britain having "lost an empire and ... not yet found a role" wouldn't make any sense.[2] We expect former imperial powers to be raging against the dying of their light, but that is another point entirely. The "arguments" of many Western realists rely upon one enormous suppressed premise--namely, that everything is America's fault. Russia's regional hegemony is therefore justifiable because it is somehow a lesser imperialism, and one that is opposed to American mondialism.

Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton offer a more sophisticated realist approach to the current Ukrainian crisis. They condemn analyses that one-sidedly condemn Russia (my work)[3] or the West (John Mearsheimer's work),[4] or that artificially

impute different motives to different sides--that "decry Western policy as deliberately hostile and portray Russian actions as having a 'rational and empirical basis,' as Richard Sakwa does" (p. 25). [5] Instead, Charap and Colton focus on the "dynamic interaction" (p. 25) between geopolitics, geo-ideas, and geoeconomics, on both sides of the fence. Their approach is thus similar to Gerard Toal's use of "critical geopolitics" in his 2017 book, *Near Abroad*.

Charap and Colton's main argument is that "the conflict in and over Ukraine is that of the negative-sum game, a ruinous scenario in which every major player loses" (p. 21), and that "the negative-sum outcome we behold today is a product of zero-sum policies pursued by Russia, the US and the EU" (p. 23). In Russia's case, this is its proprietorial attitude to its "near abroad," but Charap and Colton lay most of the blame on the "institutional outreach" (p. 27) of NATO and the EU since the 1990s.

Taking Russia first, Charap and Colton state that "it should astonish no one that a country of Russia's capabilities and ambitions will seek influence over its periphery" (p. 24). The terminology is a problem here. Talking about sovereign states as Russian "periphery" and calling them the "in-Betweens" (p. 51) risks creating a circular argument. But Charap and Colton are making more

than the standard post-imperial argument. Russia, they argue, is not just the former center of the empire. Russia is exploiting “structural dependencies” and the reality that “the prerequisites of national power in post-Soviet Eurasia are more asymmetrically distributed than in any comparable global region other than the Americas” (p. 53)—an uneven distribution only recently exacerbated when the “legacy of Soviet planning augmented Russia’s latent centripetal power.” This is true for now, but could change. Ukraine’s “structural dependency” on Russian gas (p. 155), for example, has now ended. Ukraine has not bought gas from Gazprom since November 2015. Charap and Colton do mention the fall in demand for Russian gas as Ukraine’s economy nose-dived in 2013-15, but they argue that “if and when its economy recovers, Ukraine will have little alternative to re-establishing the gas relationship with Russia” (p. 154). In fact the economy is tentatively recovering and political decisions have been taken to get gas from elsewhere.[6]

The West, on the other hand, failed to devise an “inclusive post-Cold War architecture” that incorporated Russia (p. 27). Charap and Colton quote Mary Elise Sarotte’s nice metaphor that the West adopted a “prefab” approach—not abolishing or transcending NATO, but simply expanding institutions that already existed, after an initial period of debate in the early 1990s.[7] This has created a “contest” over the “in-Betweens” “stretching over a quarter-century” since 1989 (p. 29). That contest has had its ups and downs. In the 1990s “competition was low-grade and muffled by situational factors, but competition all the same” (p. 55). But the contest reached a new level of intensity after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the launch of the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy in 2009. There was an (awkwardly simultaneous) “intermission” during Presidents Dmitry Medvedev’s and Barack Obama’s early years; but, argues Charap and Colton, “this intermission arose from contingent, circumstantial factors that served to paper over the underlying

problem without a serious effort to negate its causes” (p. 105). And the “intermission” was in any case over by “late 2011 and 2012” (p. 111). Since 2014, “Russia and the West have doubled down on the very approach to the region that led to the current stand-off” (p. 165). So rowing back will be difficult. For example, “even if Minsk II can somehow be implemented, the core contestation between Russia and the West over Ukraine will be no closer to resolution” (p. 145).

There is much to admire in the details of these arguments, but I see three main problems. First, Charap and Colton put too much emphasis on the international dimension and too little on the internal causes of the crisis, particularly on Russia’s side. Second, the trouble with realist arguments is they think Russia is real, but behind all the talk of Russian “national interests” is all too often hyperbole and propaganda. Third, despite annexation, war, and mayhem in the region, it is not clear that everyone has “lost.” Finally, there are some slips in the detail of the argument.

Charap and Colton dismiss the claim that Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea and fomented trouble in east Ukraine for largely domestic Russian reasons. “By the time [Viktor] Yanukovych’s government fell” in February 2014, they argue, “Putin had effectively addressed the challenges of 2011-12” (p. 26). He had been reelected in March 2012, and the badly led Bolotnaya opposition faded away, but it was not dead and buried. If it had been, the Kremlin would not have engaged in the even tighter repression than Charap and Colton describe after 2014.

But the key point is that Putin’s recovery after 2012 was not particularly impressive. His approval ratings were still on the slide through 2012 and 2013—and heading down towards a dangerously low 60 percent.[8] Putin had not improved his public image enough. The Russian system needs the artificial propaganda-drama (in Russian, *dramaturgiya*) that had been lost in 2011. It was partly restored for the presidential election in

2012, but via a turn towards “conservative values” and a harder-edged assertion of Russian supremacy in Eurasia that would have immense consequences. The Russian system also needs Putin’s mega-ratings to be above 80 percent for the same reason that Václav Havel described in his great 1978 essay “The Power of the Powerless”: just as the shopkeeper displays communist slogans to show his loyalty to the then ruling ideology, in the Russian system Putin needs 80 percent-plus support to show that everyone buys the official propaganda line as a similar sign of loyalty. It took the annexation of Crimea to get Putin’s ratings back above 80 percent.

Russia is a propaganda state. For all their faults, Western states are not. It is not trivial that Russia’s interpretation of the Color Revolutions was based in daft conspiracy theory (p. 75). It is important that Crimea is not an ancient Russian land. It was not inevitable that Russia would suffer “trauma” after 1991 (p. 39). That is how the Russian government has spun its recent past. NATO expansion does not seek to destroy Russia. It may have been badly explained (though President Bill Clinton did a better job of reassuring Russian president Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s), but it is Russian propaganda and Western commentators who have chosen to treat it as an existential threat.[9]

Conversely, when Charap and Colton list the mistakes that were made by the Ukrainian government in 2014, like language policy and too few ministers from the east (p. 125), these are all important and worthy of mention, but they did not establish *casus belli*, not without the element of hysteria inserted by Russian propaganda—and by Russian special operations. It is too simplistic to say that “Russia seized on a wave of anti-government protests that were now breaking out across southern and eastern Ukraine” organized by “local activists” (p. 131). We know that Russia played a big part in organizing these protests itself.

It is also questionable to say that by early 2014, “the focus of the [Maidan] protests was now on ousting Yanukovich” (p. 122), leading to his “violent overthrow in February 2014” (p. 18). The protest temperature went up on February 21, 2014 (the day after the sniper killings), because many people did not like the peace agreement that kept Yanukovich in power; but it was still in place. Yanukovich ran away, partly because he sensed physical danger, but it had not reached his doorstep. There is no footnote for Charap and Colton’s discussion about police desertions on the day before Yanukovich’s flight (p. 124), though, to be fair, the possibility of physical threat is assessed in other sources.[10] According to Mikhail Zygar’s account, Putin heartily disapproved: “You’re going where?” Putin shouted at him [meaning Yanukovich’s flight to Kharkiv]. ‘Sit still! Your country is out of control. Kiev is at the mercy of gangs and looters. Are you insane?’”[11] This offers a different interpretation of events.

Russia’s complaints about the threat to its trade from Ukraine’s EU Association Agreement also had a considerable element of propaganda and bluff. Yes, there was a lot to lose on both sides. But if Russia cared so much about trade, why did it go about destroying its trade with Ukraine from August 2013? In 2011 total trade between Ukraine and Russia—exports and imports—was worth \$55.7 billion; in 2016 it was only \$12.3 billion.[12] Clearly, Russia cared more about destroying Ukraine. Economics is not sufficient to explain Russian actions. Putin seems genuinely to believe the myth that Ukraine does not exist, which has nothing to do with NATO expansion. And the tragedy of the last four years is that he has been trying to prove it.

Finally, Charap and Colton’s book has the ruins of Donetsk airport on its front cover. Expensively redeveloped as a symbol of the new Donbas for the 2012 European Football Championship finals, the airport is now completely destroyed, after a bitter fight in the fall and winter of 2014-15

that, as Charap and Colton correctly state, had political but not strategic purpose. But does the metaphor hold? Did everybody lose? The Ukrainian economy has recovered, though only slowly. There has been some reform, though not enough. Ukraine has begun to reform its energy sector. The country is more united than it was, though not enough. War is a great catalyst for change. But sometimes bearing the loss is also the right thing to do. What else is a country supposed to do if it is attacked?

Notes

[1]. Dmitry Trenin, "The crisis in Crimea could lead the world into a second cold war," *The Observer*, March 2, 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/02/crimea-crisis-russia-ukraine-cold-war, is a classic early example of this genre. See also Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

[2]. Douglas Brinkley, ed., *Dean Acheson and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 34.

[3]. Andrew Wilson, *The Ukraine Crisis: What the West Needs to Know* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[4]. John. J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2014, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault.

[5]. Referring to Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, 255.

[6]. Tadeusz Iwański, "The stable crisis. Ukraine's economy three years after the Euro-maidan," *OSW Commentary*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-04-05/stable-crisis-ukraines-economy-three-years-after-euromaidan>.

[7]. Mary Elise Sarrote, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[8]. "Vladimir Putin's Unshakeable Popularity," *The Economist*, February 4, 2016, www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/02/daily-chart-4.

[9]. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

[10]. Sonia Koshkina, *Maidan: Nerasskazanaya istoriya* [Maidan: the untold story] (Kiev: Bright Star, 2015). Although Koshkina's book is controversial, because she does not always question the accounts of the Yanukovych elite.

[11]. Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 268.

[12]. Oleksandr Kramar, "Diversifying from Russia: Don't stop now..." *Ukrainian Week*, June 2017, 20-23; 20.

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