Why did Russia intervene militarily in the Syrian war in September 2015? Was its action based on the same calculations that led to its decision to incite conflict in Ukraine in spring 2014? The answer provided in the book *Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond* does not originate from an analysis of the Kremlin’s foreign policy machinery. The intriguing new approach put forward in the collection of essays edited by Anna Ohanyan is to look at the local structural and cultural factors in Russia’s periphery to find out why Russia is being tempted to interfere in its neighborhood.

The volume offers empirical case studies about Russian involvement in regions adjacent and more distant, as well as a theoretical approach that analyzes the conditions emanating within these regions that invite external hegemons to vie for more influence both within the regions and consequently in world politics. The main answer to the question why Russia continues to become involved beyond its borders has to do with the nature of these regions: they are fractured in a way that makes them prone to external actors seeking to leverage them for their own hegemonic purposes. What are the fractured regions addressed in the theory, and why do they matter in world politics? To cite Richard Giragosian’s allegory, fracture in an engineering context points to “structural failures, material defects, inequalities in design and problematic maintenance” (p. 103). In the same vein, fractured regions, and states within them, have pores, cleavages, and cracks. They are incapacitated regions with limited regional identities and they consist of countries with weak state- and institution-building capabilities.

The theory of regional fracture (TRF) put forward in the volume sets out to elaborate the processes and mechanisms that characterize the fractured peripheries created by the retrenchment of great powers from their spheres of influence. Contributing to the theoretical debates on postcolonial studies and comparative regionalism within the field of international relations, the theory touches on such questions as “why the retreat of great powers from their spheres of influence has been insufficiently compensated by the rise of regions as actors in world politics” (p. 39). The theory advances from the traditional notion of divide and rule, because, as Ohanyan points out, the phenomenon is related to the political, institutional, and societal complexities pertaining to postcolonial states. It is along these three dimensions that regional fracture is analyzed in the case studies.

The book consists of three parts. The first includes the two theory chapters by Ohanyan and Robert Nalbandov discussed below. The second has four empirical chapters focusing on the former Soviet Union, while the third has two empirical chapters on non-post-Soviet regions, as well as the conclusions. Within the empirical chapters, there is a division into chapters that focus on an entire subregion in the post-socialist space (the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the West Balkans) and chapters that have a more or less tight focus on a single country case in the larger Russian neighborhood (Armenia, Ukraine, and Syria).

The theory is expounded in the introduction and chapter 1, both written by Ohanyan. The theory ad-
addresses a gap within the study of regional integration, which has tended to focus on the benefits of cumulative ties within regions and which consequently has assumed a linear development of those ties. While fractured regions can be lever for rising and neo-imperial powers, they can also be liabilities. Geopolitical rivalries exacerbate the cleavages further and therefore inhibit any bottom-up progress toward regional multilateral positive-sum development. According to Ohanyan, the costs of regions remaining fractured need more attention and more theorizing, which prompted her to collect a set of case studies to analyze the multiplicity and institutional complex of regional actors within the Eurasian space and beyond.

The second chapter, by Nalbandov, expands on the theoretical analysis of TRF and Russia’s involvement in its neighborhoods. The focus is on the nexus between geographical contiguity and regional fracture, and the chapter elaborates on Russian foreign policy toward those regions and countries that the empirical chapters in the volume address: the post-Soviet space and beyond, which Nalbandov labels as an area stretching from “Donbass to Damascus” (p. 41). The chapter asserts that Russia’s involvement beyond its borders is based on calculations of rationality and identity. Nalbandov focuses on Russian involvement abroad mainly in the military field. A welcome discussion, which would have also added to the congruity of the two theory chapters, would have been to analyze Russian non-military involvement in its near-abroad regions. For instance, the concept “Russkiy mir” (Russian world), a value system endorsed through soft power, could have allowed for further theorization of Russian interests in its neighborhood.[1]

Nalbandov asserts that questions of identity and interest stem from both the current geographical borders and the memory of the imperial and Soviet past. Nonetheless, the chapter does not address the Baltic or Central East European regions at all, even though some of those nations belonged to the Russian Empire and others constituted the border with the USSR and its alliance during the Cold War, and some could tentatively also have left an imprint on the identity and memory of contemporary Russia, thereby soliciting some Russian interest in the region as well. Moreover, Nalbandov does not explain why the theory is applicable to the Western Balkans—which is addressed in chapter 7 by Demitar Bechev—and not the Baltics and the former Soviet bloc.

The essays on Central Asia by David G. Lewis, on the South Caucasus by Laurence Broers, and on Armenia by Giragosian are profitably interlinked. As a result, they are the most rewarding of the empirical chapters in helping readers to understand the issues Russia addresses in its postcolonial foreign policy. Each is embedded in the TRF as well as in other relevant approaches to regional and postcolonial studies and the study of the post-socialist space, among them weak states, neopatrimonialism, and patron-client systems.

There are two essays on the South Caucasus, “the most notoriously fractured” region within the post-Soviet space (p. 81). Starting with a discussion of whether the South Caucasus even fits the characteristics of a region, Broers addresses two major reasons for fracture: the Soviet legacy and the rivalry of extra-regional hegemons. Institutions in the South Caucasus remain informal, with only the thinnest forms of multilateralism prevailing. Each of the three countries has its own “special bilateral relationship” with external hegemons: Armenia with Russia, Azerbaijan with Turkey, and Georgia with the US (p. 93). Giragosian calls this a “three-direction trajectory” in his chapter and notes that it has instituted a new security dynamic in the region (p. 109). Concentrating on Armenia, he makes recommendations that seem relevant to all the states in post-Soviet Eurasia: managing ethnic nationalism and supporting the creation of a middle class to ensure both political stability and an open economy.

Central Asia, as Lewis points out at the start of his chapter, is a prime example of a fractured region: it is riddled with internal cleavages and external competition, and it lacks strong regional institutions or identity. Focusing on the societal dimension of the TRF—values and worldviews—the chapter reaches conclusions suggesting that there is a regional, elite-level identity in the making: one of “illiberal regionalism” (p. 119). It is a top-down phenomenon, which does not concur with theories of “new regionalism” that would point toward regional civil society links or intraregional trade. Nor does it make the region accessible to Western external hegemons, such as the US, whereas there is potential for actors who share the illiberal worldview and norms, such as China.

Another subregion addressed in the empirical cases, Western Balkans, belongs to the cultural and economic “Yugosphere,” while due to its Western integration endeavors, it has also become the European Union’s (EU) “backyard” (pp. 141, 139). As Bechev points out in his chapter, Western Balkans is a Russian sphere of interest, although perhaps only a sphere of limited influence. Since the members of the region have opted for Western
integration, it has become difficult for Russia to leverage this region for its own geopolitical ambitions. Nonetheless, the power and value fractions, and the regional players themselves resorting to zero-sum games, do give Russia some foreign policy tools in the region. The other chapter in the book not pertaining to the post-Soviet space is Mark N. Katz’s contribution on Syria. Its aim is to analyze “how Putin has attempted to take advantage of existing fractures to reassert Russia as a great power in Syria” (p. 153). It describes Moscow’s policies on Syria and the Middle East from the Cold War era until the Arab Spring and beyond, underscoring its attempt to preserve an authoritarian status quo and ultimately, the continuation of the regional fracture. The jury is still out on whether Bashar al-Assad’s regime is a liability or asset for Putin, but exerting influence in the region will continue to be difficult for Putin.

Vsevolod Samokhavlov’s chapter on Ukraine counters several narratives pertaining to how Ukraine’s policies have vacillated between the Russian and European influences since the early 1990s. It discusses regional fracture primarily in the context of the country itself, with the regional setting being the rivalry between Russia and the EU. Thus embedding Ukraine in a regional comparative setting remains a secondary aim of the chapter. The other chapters, particularly the one by Broers, make references to Ukraine, offering valuable links between the empirical chapters. The framework proposed in the TRF analyzes regional mechanisms and process through three dimensions—power, institutions, and values—all of which offer prominent ways to place Ukraine in a comparative regional setting. The power dimension of regional fracture that has been created by Russian hegemonism has made Ukraine part of a Eurasian “archipelago of exceptional spaces,” a concept that refers to the de facto entities of Donbass, Crimea, and Luhansk within the Ukrainian territory (p. 96). Secondly, Ukraine has been participating in regional institutional building that does not include Russia: the Georgian-Ukrainian axis that established the GU(U)AM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Moldova) Group and more recently, the Community of Democratic Choice. Thirdly, the value-based community of those countries that have proceeded into institutionalizing their relationships with the EU within the Eastern Partnership forms yet another perspective on Ukraine in a regional comparison.

This is an edited volume that aims at theory building while also including empirical chapters to advance that theory. As Ohanyan writes in the introduction, there are too few cases in the book to make causal claims based on them. Therefore, it is useful to outline some of the pathways that the theory opens for future research and theorizing on fractured regions. The endeavor here is also to touch on those parts of the theory that could reverberate beyond the field of international relations. Coming from the field of area studies and being a scholar of the (post-)socialist space, I found several of the theoretical objectives to be commendable: the TRF offers a varied and articulated framework for analyzing the center-periphery relationship and for analyzing the (post-)Soviet experience within postcolonial studies.

The aim of the theory of regional fracture is to address Russia’s neighborhood policy as a postcolonial foreign policy, in which the regional fracture is understood as imperial deconstruction. Accordingly, the theory postulates a postcolonial reading of Eurasian (and beyond) relationships, bringing analytical focus to states and regions that have remained on the periphery of scholarly attention within the study of great power politics. Including the post-Soviet space within postcolonial studies is a recent development. As late as 2001, David Chioni Moore, reviewing the reference literature within postcolonial studies, noted that the “second world,” that is the Soviet-led socialist world, has been missing from the grand narrative.[2] Therefore, elaborating how post-socialist and postcolonial approaches can be combined in the study of the post-Soviet space, a point put forward by Sharad Charia and Katherine Verdery within the field of anthropology, indeed offers productive new ways of thinking.[3]

Two major questions come to mind here. Both stem from one of the objectives elaborated in the theory chapter by Ohanyan, namely, that the theory addresses the extent to which regional fracture is “specific to post-Communist Eurasia with Russia as its geopolitical core” (p. 8). The first of my questions addresses the role of Russia within the theory of regional fracture. The other question inquires whether the TRF, inasmuch as it is a theory of Russia’s postcolonial foreign policy, is applicable to Russian involvement in regions colonialized by other imperia.

Does the theory have explanatory power beyond analyzing Russia’s involvement in the post-socialist space? The theory, as explained in chapter 1, deals with rising and neo-imperial powers, but which exactly those are could be a pathway to further theorizing. Continuing from this, there is one aspect that the theory does not yet touch on, which nonetheless seems relevant when dis-
cussing regional competition: namely, whether it bears any significance for the theory which hegemon Russia is challenging as it intervenes in a particular region. As the case on the Western Balkans by Bechev discussed above shows, the EU’s influence in that region reduces Russia’s ability to maneuver. How then is the EU’s influence different from that of the US, Iran, or China, for example? Moreover, is there a qualitative difference between Russia’s involvement in its own post-Soviet/post-imperial space and in other regions? Which other regions might be useful cases to address within the theory? In this context, it becomes relevant to elaborate more on how the Western Balkans or the Middle East fit into the theory, as they do not constitute elements of Russia’s postcolonial space.

The TRF offered in the book is a welcome advance in studying Eurasian politics. It addresses the issue of “why margins matter” and opens crucial avenues for discussing why Russia’s neighborhood remains debilitated by a multitude of internal and external processes (p. 1). This allows for an advanced approach to the study of Russian postcolonial foreign policy. Moreover, in addressing the cost of regional fracture to global security, it opens pathways for ways to understand processes of “unregioning,” thereby also offering policy advice to those governments that seek to prevent regional fracture.

Notes


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