

Review - Russia Abroad

Written by Galina Bogatova

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GALINA BOGATOVA, APR 13 2020

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

Edited by Anna Ohanyan
Georgetown University Press, 2018

The book's title "Russia Abroad" may mislead the reader into thinking that it focuses on explaining Russian foreign policy towards its neighbors within Eurasia, while it actually focuses on the agency of these marginalized neighbors. The book introduces the regional constellation of states that experience the legacy of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union from a new regionalist perspective. The authors attempt to represent the repercussions of Russian hegemony from the standing of peripheral states. They explain how and why ex-subordinate regional players push and pull Russian political, institutional, economic and social intervention in their internal affairs. Ohanyan's volume is well-organized. The theoretical part is consistently followed by case studies in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East from the collapse of the Soviet Union up to now. One of the biggest contributions of this edited volume is that it offers a new categorization of the post-colonial traumatic effects that detrimentally influenced the regional integration of ex-colonies in the post-Soviet space.

Fractured Regions

The authors talk about post-communist Eurasia's "fractured regions" as "debilitated neighborhoods between states and societies" and "post-colonial systems that mediate between the former empire's need to maintain influence over the region and the desire of the successor states to advance their newly found independent statecraft" (p.21). Following this logic, regional fracture is a crack in what "should be" an integrated regional body. As opposed to hegemon-centric theories of regionalism, which look mainly at the behavior of regional hegemons and focus on their regional and global policies, the authors of this volume claim that the margins also matter and may have more leverage to push and pull geopolitical giants than we commonly assume. Peripheral regional actors also manipulate and pit external hegemons against one another, creating a competitive environment for their ex-metropolises, while also competing internally among themselves.

According to Anna Ohanyan, fractured regions are the product of a troublesome and ongoing disconnection between the "ex-colonial children" and their "imperial parents." For example, post-colonial states are still too fragile and unsustainable institutionally, economically, and politically to have the tools and confidence to unite with their peers and stand up against the "parent-hegemon" as a united community of independent and mature states. Most of these states remain economically and politically dependent on their ex-imperial masters or are bonded with them socially or culturally. Hegemons use these remnants of their colonial past to continue to covertly control and exploit ex-subordinates while trying to prevent a "fraternization" of the periphery.

The performance of regional fracture or integration is sliced into a three-dimensional reality. The first dimension is the political one. According to the authors, it demonstrates the chessboard of regional players and the pattern of power distribution among them. In fractured regions, power leverage is (partially or entirely) in the hands of the external hegemon, which benefits from social connections with local elites that remain as part of a post-colonial heritage. Because post-colonial states cannot rely on their "immature" institutional structures, power is usually concentrated in the hands of certain individuals and dependent on their informal links with the external hegemon. However, these

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informal power linkages are extremely unstable, temporary and transitory; yet they still benefit the hegemon the most in the short-term. This political phenomenon is labeled by Ohanyan as the “periodic power syndrome.” This “syndrome” exposes a disease of the region, which causes low predictability of the outcome for everyone who is involved in political interactions with members of the region. This is true even for the main external hegemon. Contrary to fractured regions, healthy regional integration implies that social ties and institutional connections among states counterbalance elite corruption and make political outcomes more calculatable.

The second dimension is institutional. Although the authors identify this dimension as a stand-alone aspect, it is better understood as an extension of the political one. All the case studies support Anna Ohanyan’s theoretical claim that even if regions establish a thick institutional layer of internal relations, this does not speak of their high level of integration. In the case of fractured regions, the main function of institutions is to crystalize political asymmetry and hinder collective efforts to change the power dynamics. Fractured regions create power-based institutions, while mature regions establish rule-based institutions. The fractured version of institutionalization clumps the states together in a post-imperial system of power imbalance between the marginal actors and the hegemon.

The third dimension of the multifold regional entity is a social one. This aspect is closely connected to the institutional dimension because the level of regional social unity is one of the requirements for a solid institutional foundation. But in the case of fractured regions, social ties rarely spill over to institutional connections. This is so because political processes within the fractured regions and their constituent states flow top-down but not bottom-up. Here, social capital is more unilaterally susceptible to institutional intervention and manipulation by the elites in power.

While the theory of regional fracture is indeed innovative, it brings about a set of unconventional concepts that call for more clarification than is actually provided. For example, the concepts of “fracture by default” and “fracture by design” (p.15) seem to lack properly demarcated theoretical boundaries *inter se*. These two concepts are of undoubted value for regionalists; however, they would benefit from more conceptual development. According to the authors, fracture by design refers to intentional efforts by external hegemonies to disrupt the processes of regional integration while seeking to continue exploiting their ex-colonies. On the other hand, fracture by default is scarcity and/or disorder of institutional, political, and infrastructural connections among regional actors. Here, the two notions would be more enlightening if the authors explained how it was possible that the fracture by default was not a consequence of the fracture by design. If fractured regions are mostly post-colonial, it is logical to assume that their ex-metropolises initially designed their colonial systems in a way that would disconnect the subordinate states from each other in order to sustain the imperial administrative capacity. Eventually, every fracture by default is a fracture by design. If this is not the case, then, what are the examples to the contrary?

Eurasian Case Studies

The cases in support of the suggested theory of regional fracture are explanatory, but direct reference to the theoretical part of the book throughout the cases would make it clearer to the reader how internal fragmentation within states spills over to intraregional instability. Chapter 3 covered by Vsevolod Samokhvalov provides a fresh insight on the Ukrainian crises and discloses the mechanisms of regional fracture at work, describing Ukraine’s inconsistent attempts to resist great powers’ interventionism. The cases on the Western Balkans and South Caucasus authored by Dimitar Bechev (chapter 7) and Laurence Broers (chapter 4), respectively, also demonstrate how the collision and alignment of the interests of local elites and regional powers preclude intraregional integration. In chapter 8, Mark Katz shows how low-intensity armed conflicts in the fractured and vulnerable contemporary Middle East allowed for Russian intervention in Syria, and how it affected global rivalries. Other cases also offer solid evidence that a fractured regional fabric can both enable and constrain great powers’ room for maneuvers in the regional periphery.

The case studies contain a lot of information on how internal social and political turmoil affect a state’s links to its regional peers. The patterns of instability re-occurring from the inside out call for their inclusion into the theoretical body of the book, or at least for more concrete theorization. How does the homogeneity or heterogeneity of states’ regimes influence their capacity to integrate regionally? How does the stability of internal autocracy or democracy affect one’s tendency to cling to external hegemonies or to associate with the peer-states? Does the state feel the need

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to connect to the regional neighbors when experiencing political disorder or is it more satisfied with being a stand-alone actor?

These questions reflect the lack of general explanations on how institutional, political and social fractures spill over each other, if they correlate negatively or positively. If answered, these questions would add predicting and explanatory power to the conceptual framework offered by the authors and help make more sense of the chosen case-studies. Theory, generally speaking, is a (flawed) model of reality that helps us foresee events and establish some anchors of familiarity to make sense of seemingly disorderly and unpredictable phenomena. Without proper generalization of patterns in the given study cases, the theory of fractured regions leaves one in the same unpredictable and disorderly world.

All the contributing authors are experts in their field, in a position to challenge all the previously mentioned theories and practical manuals on regional politics. Most of the authors have some first-hand academic or professional experience in the countries surrounding Russia. Considering the Eurasian background and expertise of the authors, it is not surprising that they cast asymmetric judgements comparing the intensions and mechanisms of Russian foreign policy towards her regional neighbors with that of Russia's Western competitors. The book gives an impression that the Western powers are consistently attempting to contribute to the region's consolidation, while Russia tries to undermine the common interest of regional actors and only seeks to disrupt regional alliances and connections. But is it always the case? This approach seems somewhat uncritical towards Western great powers' engagement with Eurasian states. Though it must be noted that Mark Katz in his chapter "Syria and the Middle East: Fracture Meets Fracture" openly claims that the US aligned its policy with the autocratic regime, and did not shun from undermining the democratic processes of regional integration to regain control over Egypt and Bahrain during the Arab Spring. Other authors seem to be silent regarding instances in which Western hegemons are also guilty of exploiting regional fractures just like Russia does.

Concluding Thoughts

The theory of fractured regions is a meaningful contribution to the array of regionalist paradigms. Most theorists focus largely on *hegemonic* regionalism, explaining the system from a top-down perspective: that is, from the point of view of the local or external hegemon towards the regional periphery. *Russia Abroad* reveals the overlooked patterns of the marginal "subordinate" states' agency in relation to the great powers. It explains the complexity of "divide and conquer" hegemonic policies in the context of internal regional polarization and instability.

While literature on the mechanisms and factors of regional integration is abundant, there is a blind spot regarding the absence of ties, fragile or "cracked" regional fabrics, and vulnerabilities of the regions. The book fills this gap, as the authors explain the "how" and "why" of regional fragmentation. While much work on regional disorder tends to simplify regional oscillations and categorize regions into a dichotomy of solidity versus fragility, Ohanyan's edited volume reveals the evolutionary, institutional, and socio-political complexity of regional integration and disjunction. By including both conflicts at Russia's borders as well as beyond, the concept of regional fracture also challenges theories of geographic contiguity, which concentrate on how interstate borders shape foreign policy and territorial conflict.

In conclusion, I find *Russia Abroad* a meaningful contribution to regionalism studies. It introduces the intricacies of the peripheral countries' political performance, which had been previously largely ignored. The authors show how internal disintegration is detrimental to the well-being of the region as a whole, and can be paralleled to the theory of Transitional Justice: while a society that suffered from long-term oppression is not prepared to function as one, it finds itself at a constant risk of intervention or internal conflicts. The book would be of interest to students of post-Soviet studies and benefit policy makers and global market actors seeking a better understanding of the regional disposition of internal and external security factors in the region. The book provides a variety of tools for recognizing possible "gray zones," limits and opportunities of military and political involvement in the region. I recommend this volume to everyone interested in the political complexity of the post-Soviet space, for it provides the reader with a brief and relevant historical background. It interprets the latest (and some of the ongoing) political events and maps them in a regional context. For all of this, it is a highly commendable work suitable to a wider audience beyond mere

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fellow academics.

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Galina Bogatova is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Florida International University, majoring in Gender and Security Studies. She completed her bachelor's degree in Economics at the International Banking Institute in Saint Petersburg and her master's in International Relations at Saint Petersburg State University. Most of her work concerns ideational, sentimental, and strategical dynamics in Eastern Europe and Central Asia with a focus on Russian foreign policy.