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## Russian Interventions in the Post-Soviet and Syrian Conflicts

Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts, by James J. Coyle, Cham, CH, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, XI 333 pp., \$125 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-319-52203-6

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## Russian Interventions in the Post-Soviet and Syrian Conflicts

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**The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space**, by Tim Epkenhans, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2016, XI 401 pp., \$110.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-4985-3278-5

**Russia after Putin**, by Richard J. Krickus, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2015, 128 pp., \$15.95 (paperback), ISBN-10: 1584876166; ISBN-13: 978-1584876168

**Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy**, edited by Andrei P. Tsygankov, London, Routledge, 2018, XIV 429 pp., \$168.61 (hardcover), ISBN-10: 1138690449; ISBN-13: 978-1138690448

### Introduction

Russia, formally the Russian Federation, has emerged as the main successor—a rump state—of the former Soviet Union. In the bipolar world order of the Cold War era, the Soviet Union had attracted critical, and at times even largely negative, attention from the Western policymakers and analysts, and those of other parts of the World. Arguably, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia still suffers from such an image. Moreover, as an heir to the Tsarist Russian Empire, it is also perceived as an imperialist power and a colonizer by some other Post-Soviet countries. In particular, the Russian intervention in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014) and Syria (since 2011 and more intensely from 2015) has attracted critical attention due to its support for separatism and authoritarian regimes in its near abroad.

### Russian interventions in its near abroad

Although a broad and in-depth analysis of the Russian foreign policy is not the scope of this review essay, it nevertheless pays attention to the Russian intervention in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria informed by a critical review of a set of recent books mentioned above and other sources. This review essay tries to critically discuss, and possibly deconstruct or reaffirm, certain prevailing claims about the Russian motives in its near abroad policy.

*Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* is a large edited volume by Andrei P. Tsygankov about different aspects and foci of Russian foreign policy and affairs. As different chapters are written by different authors with diverse perspectives, the book chapters have different qualities and assets. As with most descriptive pieces, there is a great deal of subjectivity involved in political issues. This book is very suitable as a textbook for students and scholars of Russian foreign policy; its scopes and orientation, and the facets and insights offered in this edited volume are useful, multi-faceted and broad. For a discussion of Russian security

and near abroad policies the most relevant chapters are entitled “Central and Eastern Europe” (282–95), “The Middle East” (295–310), “The Caucasus” (311–24), “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (400–9), “The Eurasian Economic Union” (410–20), and “The Collective Security Treaty Organization” (421–9).

James Coyle’s recent book, *Russia’s Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, is a valuable study as it places the “frozen,” untermiated, separatist conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space in a wider political and legal context. The author discusses the history of these conflicts informed by the different and diverging Russian and Western perspectives. Coyle’s main theoretical framework of conflict analysis contains international law, realism and (ethno-) nationalism (1–22). Coyle’s view on issues in Ukraine is obvious as he discusses the politics in Ukraine elaborately and ultimately, he claims that Russia supports separatists whereas the West supports the new government and the territorial integrity of Ukraine (60–71). Despite his work’s obvious merits, I cannot agree with him that the new world order—a mainly Western product according to him—always supports the territorial integrity of countries and therefore prohibits separatism (273). However, designating Russia as the global supporter of separatism and the West as the supporter of countries’ territorial integrity would be unfair. Western press and media materials from the end of the 1980s and early 1990s reveal a Western euphoric attitude at those times—at times silently but at other times loudly—supporting separatism and disintegration of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia and ultimately Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia as late as 2008.

Dmitry Ofitserov-Belskiy and Andrey Sushenov discuss the Russian foreign policy towards “Central and Eastern Europe” (282–95). Arguably, it would have been better to separate the discussions of Russian foreign policy towards the European Post-Soviet, and the former Warsaw Pact countries mainly owing to the ethnopolitical dynamics of the Soviet Nationalities Policy and other legacies of the Soviet ethno-territorial system. However, the authors have a legitimate reason to discuss them in one chapter as they maintain that there is clearly a link between the Russian policy towards Ukraine and the expansion of NATO and the enlargement of the EU eastwards which have triggered a Russian assertive position towards Ukraine, a former Soviet country which Russia would like to include in the Russian-backed Eurasian economic and security initiatives and designs rather than the Western ones. As they maintain, “[t]hreatened by loss of vital interest, Moscow had to take drastic measures that cost it in reputational and economic terms” (292–3). It is remarkable that the authors call the power transition in 2014 in Ukraine, unlike most Western accounts, *a coup d’état* and not a revolution, and therefore view Russia’s concerns about its vital interests understandable after a government with pro-Western and anti-Russian orientation seized political power in Ukraine.

Maxim A. Suchkov, similar to James Coyle, maintains that the August 2008 War was triggered by a (hypothetical) Georgian membership of NATO and hence by a Russian strategic calculation. Despite his expansionist view of Russia, Coyle’s discussion of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 reads as a Russian punitive reaction to a Georgian provocation. Similar punitive narratives are given for Russian attitude in Ukraine [60–71]. However, the Russian reaction does not accord with a (neo-)realist rational actor approach, for an understanding of political behavior by an imperialist and expansionist rational actor usually tends to be voluntaristic rather than deterministic, and presumes a timely planned series of actions rather than often hasty and ad-hoc reactions, the results of which are not necessarily opportune for the re-actor. As the rationale behind the Russian interventions in Ukraine and Georgia—as well as those in Tajikistan and Syria—reveal security concerns, they cannot be understood solely (and primarily) as expansionist, for they came as a reaction, were determined by the geostrategic security concerns, and came only after the initiation of the conflict by other actors.

Indeed, a rational actor may react. However, a strong expansionist imperialist rational actor usually has enough power and freedom of action to act first according to its own interest before it is compelled to react in ways that contradict its primary interests. Although Russia could gain control over a longer shore of the Black Sea, which is geopolitically interesting for a landlocked Russia, the disadvantages of supporting separatism have been larger for Russia as it lost its important position in meddling with the domestic and security policies of those countries as it recognized the cessation of Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia and allegedly supports separatists in Lugansk and Donetsk. In general, Coyle's view is self-admittedly and openly pro-Western and anti-Russian (Coyle, 20, 272–3). That is counterproductive, because otherwise many of his neutral statements, informed by sound analysis, could have made a better impact on unpartisan readers.

A succinct, and a rather more balanced, account entitled “Frozen Fragments, Simmering Spaces: The Post-Soviet De Facto States”—in an edited volume by Edward C. Holland and Matthew Derrick entitled *Questioning Post-Soviet*—is provided by Gerard Toal and John O’Loughlin (103–25). This account is more balanced as the authors discuss these conflicts from the separatist entities’, Russia’s and host states’ perspectives and geopolitical interests. The account is published oddly (or not) by an Institute named after George Kennan, a main anti-Soviet advocate and theorist of containment geopolitics. The cases of conflict are dissimilar and hence cannot be treated similarly, and the authors justly conclude that the future of these separatist entities as *de facto* independent polities is uncertain, yet they maintain further that “[t]he vast majority of the residents of *de facto* republics prefer this uncertain but relatively secure arrangement to any other alternative’ (123).” Russia has recognized the Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence in 2008 and incorporated—or re-incorporated according to the Russian narrative—Crimea in 2014, more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even though the tactics of host states’ and Russia are not uniform in all cases, the general patterns are similar: Russia wants to be (preferably solely) in charge of intermediation and provision of security—being nonpartisan according to its own narrative—whereas the host-states persist in regarding the separated areas as their territory.

*Russia after Putin* is the title of a monograph by Richard, J. Krickus published by the US Army War College Press and Strategic Studies. It is not a study based on systematic factorial (quantitative) research but is a rich analytical description of multiple scenarios which are likely to emerge in Russia. However, forecasting scenarios are speculative in general, the value of this book is that it is informed by current and actual events. Therefore, this book is valuable in the analysis of the recent Russian foreign policy. This book cannot be fairly called anti-Russian as a main argument of the author is that the U.S.A. should seek cooperation, rather than conflict, with Russia. According to this book the main Russian foreign policy objectives in its near abroad are to “

[d]eny former Soviet Republics in the near abroad the opportunity to follow the Baltic Republics into NATO and the EU; Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine in particular. Instead, incorporate them, as well as the Central Asia[n] states, into economic and security systems dominated by Moscow—e.g., Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and a new Eurasian Economic Union [and, in addition to] [j]oin China in a grand strategy to present the Americans with a firewall in every part of Eurasia, and do the same in denying Washington successful attempts to achieve regime change throughout Eurasia and the Greater Middle East. Of course, Moscow will avoid any effort on Beijing’s part to treat Russia like a junior partner”

(21). Studying the situation in the Russian near abroad one can conclude that those Russian (and Chinese) goals are correctly mentioned. Nevertheless, Russia regards them as legitimate reactions as it views NATO’s and EU’s enlargement as threatening.

According to Phillipp Casula and Mark N. Katz, “Moscow’s military intervention in Syria ... [and] its relative success in shoring up the Assad regime stood in stark contrast to the results that the United States and its allies achieved through military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (295).” However, these cases are not entirely comparable as Russian intervention’s main goal has been preventing a regime change in Syria, whereas the American interventions’ goals in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq were to topple incumbent regimes. The U.S.A. has also a good record of protection of its allies, particularly in Latin America.

A correct explanation of Russian assertiveness in its client-state, Syria, is offered by Krickus. In addition to the oft-heard claims of the Russian desire to keep its strategic naval base at Tartus, Krickus also mentions Russian concerns about terrorism. Accordingly, the Russian policymakers and security specialists are anxious about the effects and consequences of the Sunni Islamist extremism. They are anxious about the possibility of spill-over of the Syrian conflict in Russia (and Central Asia) as “fanatical jihadists are certain to look beyond Syria as such and hope to precipitate a sectarian war throughout the region. For its part, Moscow can expect some of the Chechens, Ingush, Dagestanis, and Ossetians [*sic*]<sup>1</sup> fighting Assad’s force in Syria to join their counterparts in the North Caucasus and to carry jihad into Russia proper (42).” As there is ample evidences of the engagement of fighters in Syria originally from the Russian Federation and other Post-Soviet countries, and as there have been foreign fighters involved in the Chechen, Tajikistan and Afghanistan conflicts, such claims and mistrusts do not seem irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

Although not mentioned by Mariya, Y. Omelicheva and other sources discussed here, perhaps the rather successful Russian experience of holding a regime in power in Tajikistan constitutes a precedent for Russian intervention in Syria. Tajikistan has a long borderline with Afghanistan from where Islamist violent jihadis have allegedly penetrated into and participated in the Tajikistani Civil War. A good account for understanding the nature of Tajikistani Civil War is offered by Tim Epkenhans’s study, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space*. Remarkably, still, the largest Russian military base outside the territory of the Russian Federation, the 201st Military Base, is located in Tajikistan (327).

## Conclusion

The Russian foreign policy towards its near abroad could be understood by both (neo-) realist and constructivist theoretical understandings. However, in doing so it is also important to look at Russia’s own geopolitical imagery, i.e. how Russia views the world, notably its near abroad, and Russia’s place, role or even mission in it.<sup>3</sup> As Omelicheva puts it, “[t]hese geopolitical visions provide Russia with a repertoire or descriptive and prescriptive ideas making certain foreign policies and their outcomes more or less possible” (325–6). Although it needs further research, having reviewed the current conflicts it seems that the Russian behavior outside the Post-Soviet Space is guided primarily by neo-realist rational actor understandings. However, this seems not to be true with regard to the conflicts in the post-Soviet space as the Russian behavior in these conflicts is also, and perhaps more so, guided by its imperial historical experience which colors the Russian geopolitical interests with a layer of moral obligation and blends it with either altruism or expansionism, or with both at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

## References

- M. Y. Omelicheva “Central Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, edited by A. P. Tsygankov (London: Routledge, 2018), 325-327.

## Notes

1. Unlike their other North Caucasian neighbors and similar to Georgians and Russians, Ossetians are predominantly Orthodox Christians. Sunni violent militias do not have popular appeal, and in fact are quite unpopular, especially after the Beslan School hostage crisis in 2004.
2. See, e.g. B. Rezvani, “Reflections on the Chechen Conflict: Geopolitics, Timing and Transformations,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 6 (2104): 870–90; C. Moore, “Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and Beyond,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 395–415.
3. Omelicheva, “Central Asia,” 325–327.
4. For a classical example of such a situation, see the classical monograph by E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1941).

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