

**Gerard Toal. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*.** Oxford UP, 2017. xx, 388 pp. Illustrations/Figures. Maps. Tables. Notes. Index. \$26.95, cloth.

**G**erard Toal's detailed and well-researched study focuses on the two cases in which Russia has invaded its post-Soviet neighbours—the 2008 war in Georgia and the intervention in Ukraine since 2014. However, Toal does not simply recount the events of those cases. His work is guided by a clear theoretical perspective that is rooted in his training as a political geographer. Toal looks at the crises in Georgia and Ukraine not just as conventional wars but as wars over geographical concepts. All of the actors involved—Russia, Georgia and Ukraine, secessionist leaders in those two states, and the West—have had their own understandings of geography, based on their own perceptions of history and politics. Toal's work is centred in the field of critical geopolitics, and it highlights the different geopolitical cultures of the actors, whose “spatial identities” shape their “understandings of their position and mission in the world” (10).

Toal moves quickly to put meat on these theoretical bones. *Near Abroad* begins with a theoretical introduction (1-16) and then moves into a chapter that critiques the dominant liberal and realist paradigms used in the West to explain the post-Soviet region (17-54). Chapter 2 provides the roots of the Russian view of the region (55-92). Then, in three detailed chapters, the 2008 war in Georgia is considered (chapter 3, 93-125; chapter 4, 126-65; and chapter 5, 166-97). Chapter 5 is particularly interesting, as Toal presents the conflict from the perspective of four actors—Georgia, Russia, the United States, and South Ossetia. Next, two chapters focus on the ongoing disputes in Ukraine—the Crimea is highlighted in chapter 6 (198-236) and the conflict in the Donbas, in chapter 7 (237-73). Finally, in a concluding chapter, “Geopolitics Thick and Thin,” Toal argues that a more thoughtful, “thick” approach to geostrategic thinking could benefit the US (274-302).

Toal's work has some very important strengths. Notably, he has carried out fieldwork in most of the disputed areas of the former Soviet space, including in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, he is well positioned to discuss the perspectives of all of the actors in these conflicts, not just those in Moscow and Washington. Many analysts looking at the post-Soviet area focus mainly on the views of the great powers. Toal, in contrast, is able to take a much more granular approach. So, for example, in discussing the revolt in the Donbas, he is able to knowledgeably consider the views not just of Putin or Obama but of diverse figures such as pro-Russian militia leaders, left- and right-wing ideologues in Moscow, and Ukrainian oligarchs.

Given the fact that this book appeared in 2017, it is noteworthy that Toal was able to compile such an in-depth study on the Crimea and Donbas conflicts, as they had begun only three years earlier. For instance, he and his colleagues conducted opinion polls in late 2014 in the Crimea, the Donbas, and other parts of southern Ukraine, which provide very useful data on popular attitudes in this contested region. This enables Toal to show (in chapter 7) why the ambitious Russian project of creating “Novorossiia” in this entire area was doomed to failure.

A particular strength of this work—which could also be seen by some as a weakness—is Toal’s effort “to make an empathetic stretch” in order to understand the geopolitical views of Russia’s present leadership (11). He concludes that the West has failed to fully understand Russia, which is hardly arguable. Yet he seems at times to adopt some part of Moscow’s world view. For example, he stresses NATO’s Bucharest Declaration of April 2008 as a key turning point—indeed, one “central to this book” (7). NATO expressed the intention of eventually allowing Georgia and Ukraine to join the alliance. Toal, in stressing the importance of this declaration, seems to implicitly endorse Russia’s view on the conflicts in those two countries—that they were caused by Western overextension into lands that somehow “belonged” in Russia’s geopolitical space. Where, one wonders, does this leave the agency (and the sovereignty) of Georgia and Ukraine themselves?

Some might also question Toal’s tendency to equate the strategic views of the West with those of Russia. Can the two really be seen as equally legitimate when the West forms its views through more open and democratic means (however flawed)? How, it might be asked, can we even know if the views expressed by Putin’s government on the 2008 and 2014 conflicts actually reflect the views of “Russia”? Indeed, can we truly know the national strategic culture of a country with manipulated polls, manipulated media, and manipulated elections?

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