

Daniel S. Hamilton and Stefan Meister (eds.), *The Eastern Question: Russia, the West and Europe's Grey Zone*. Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2016. 264 pp.

This collection of essays explores how the West should deal with the multifaceted political, military, economic, and social crises in eastern Europe, whose future is jeopardized by Russia's aggressive behavior. The contributors to this anthology, leading experts on "the eastern question," consider whether these lands will remain Europe's traditional borderlands in the nearest future, whether they will again become "bloodlands" and fall under Russia's domination, or whether they will be transformed into a space of democracy, embracing European values and norms of civil and political behavior. The authors answer these questions by analyzing Russia's political culture, goals, grievances, and aspirations. These essays help the global community recognize the threats emanating from eastern Europe and assess possible futures for Russia, its neighbors, and the West. Moreover, in a very meticulous fashion, the authors examine possible choices for the West's engagement in this contested region, informed by remarkably realistic and clear-headed views free of convoluted formulations and obscure terminology. Thematically, the collection provides its readers with two general analyses. One explicates who Putin is and what domestic and geopolitical objectives he pursues. The other offers suggestions about how the West should deal with contemporary Russia and its aggressive foreign policies that have recently been extended beyond Russia's imaginary sphere of interests—the post-Soviet space.

The authors invite readers to observe the discrepancy between the West's understandings of Russian political behavior and actions, and Russia's perceptions of the West's attitudes toward Russia. They illustrate that the current crisis of Russian-European and Russian-American relations is conditioned by the fact that Putin's Russia differs considerably from what is understood to be a Western model of liberal democracy. Collectively, the authors have offered analyses that expose the Putin regime as a revisionist and authoritarian regime, define its economic model as crony capitalism, and identify its ideology as a "chauvinistic strain of Russian nationalism" (179).

These analyses illuminate the tremendous gap between Russian and Western understandings of norms and principles of peaceful co-existence. This gap is particularly evident in three aspects of international relations: national security threats; the principle of state sovereignty; and the freedom to choose political alliances.

The contributors note that Russian threats to the West's security are largely the result of Russia's economic growth from 2000 to 2008 stemming from oil revenues which provided Putin with the opportunity and confidence to challenge the West. Today the Kremlin is able to conduct clandestine wars against "color revolutions" in neighboring states and to embark on military operations in several areas. Besides the most recent military operation in Syria, Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine illuminates the scale of Putin's geopolitical ambitions. The authors identify the reasons for this political behavior: Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states managed to break from Russia's sphere of interests in the 1990s, and EU and NATO enlargement posed a grave threat to Russia's security and Putin's regime, exacerbating Russian feelings of humiliation and inferiority. However, an analysis of the underlying reasons for Russia's claim of victimization seem to be overlooked in this collection. As many other scholars have noted, including Lilia Shevtsova and Alexander J. Motyl, humiliation and the need to "defend Russia from the West" are concepts for domestic consumption designed to distract Russian society from the state's increased centralization and economic problems, and to pursue the interests of Putin and his closest associates, which are personal power and enrichment. In light of these considerations, a dramatic transformation of Russian society is needed to reset Russian-Western relations.

In contrast to many other observers who argue that the Putin regime is mortally ill and that its days are numbered, most authors in this anthology suggest that Putin is not going anywhere any time soon and, as a result, Europe and the U.S. should revive and reconceptualize the principles of deterrence, containment, and the rules of engagement which would provide the West with the opportunity to deter Putin's regime and to support the states of the post-Soviet space and their sovereignty. The authors seem to be unanimous that

the West's response to Russian aggression was weak, ineffective, and thus unable to deter Russia from further military actions in the region. Ultimately, such an anemic response made "wider Europe" (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus), Western Europe, and the Baltic states vulnerable.

Importantly, the authors recognize three concepts that remain crucial to the future of Europe's "grey zone" and to the West's security. First, they distinguish between Putinism and a broader Russian society which is currently atomized and not homogenous. In other words, there are many Russias that might be engaged with the West, and the degree of its engagement depends on how close certain individuals and groups stand to power and Putin. Indeed, a strategy of isolation has never worked, and the authors suggest inviting a broader Russian society, including the Russian intelligentsia and opposition, into intellectual and cultural exchange, which would create a counterbalance to the Putin regime and its propaganda. There is, however, an apparent concern that despite the fact that these provisions are noble, humane, and insightful, their implementation is complicated because of Russia's repressive methods of governing, a "piece" that will be problematic to insert into the puzzle of potential engagement solutions.

Second, in their analysis, the authors argue that corruption, compromised rule of law, and the dysfunctionality of the governments in Eastern Europe contribute to the instability in this region. The authors posit that to help post-Soviet states promote democratic reforms and mitigate Soviet legacies, the West's assistance should target these weak areas which ultimately prevent these states from leaving the space of Russia's domination. Their most vulnerable institutions of power are the security services, ministries of defense and interior, and financial institutions governed by Soviet-trained bureaucrats who impede democratic reforms.

Third, because of Russia's social instability and the disrupted bilateral relationship between the EU and Russia, and between the US and Russia, a reset in Russian-Western relations is absolutely necessary. However, this reset will be largely determined by Russia and its political leaders—Putin or whoever comes after him. A "fair trade" is certainly possible: the West might acknowledge Russia's

spheres of influence in exchange for cooperation against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and terrorism, in the energy sector, and in resolving regional crises. This space of cooperation seems extremely constrained, and the exchange appears wholly unequal. However, the prospects of World War Three are an unacceptable scenario for the West, for the states of eastern Europe and, hopefully, for Russia.

This collection has allotted limited space to other states' interests in this region. Among them are China and Turkey, states that play a critical role in the geopolitical balance in eastern Europe. In addition, the dilemma of returning the Donbas and Crimea to Ukraine's jurisdiction, and the challenges of conflict resolution in other "frozen conflict" zones, have received scant attention in this volume. Nevertheless, Hamilton's and Meister's anthology makes a tremendous contribution to our understandings of the "eastern question" and provides a thoughtful consideration of important possibilities to those who actively engage in the national and global security decision-making processes.

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Martin Brusis, Joachim Ahrens and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds.), *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 251 pp.

In the age of competitive authoritarianism, non-democratic regimes receive a substantial amount of well-deserved scholarly attention. Nevertheless, it is quite rare to find an academic publication of the same analytical depth and theoretical insight as Brusis, Ahrens, and Wessel's edited volume. The book presents a great selection of theoretical and empirical contributions focusing on a variety of issues in the former Soviet republics.

In this book, the contributors explore the politics of legitimation in Russia, Belarus, Georgia, and the Central Asian republics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all fifteen republics