

BOOK REVIEW

Russia: still a riddle wrapped in a mystery?

RICK FAWN

The Lands in Between: Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Hybrid Warfare, by Mitchell A. Orenstein. Oxford University Press. 232 pp. £16.99

Ukraine is now a major concern to US politics, but this book is not about Ukraine itself, let alone its much smaller neighbour Moldova, as the author quickly reassures us, but about post-Soviet states saddled between Russia and NATO (and the European Union). These are not so much political actors than a battleground and a harbinger of future political developments which come with a warning. The warning stems from what Orenstein identifies as the 'politics of polarization', in which domestic vested interests are not only able to commandeer internal resources but also to stealthfully and profitably navigate the competitions these countries face, located as they are in 'lands in between', that is, between what are seen as two competing regional power centres. This politics of polarisation is not one a society would seek, but it constitutes a warning for the West, and more immediately for the intensifying Western–Russian contest for domination.

This competition is often, though not consistently, framed as if it were a war. Indeed, at times we have language that makes us think that Europe is aflame. True, since 2014 eastern Ukraine is ablaze, while Crimea is physically out of Kiev's (and Western) control. Other conflicts, with varied but decisive Russian involvement, endure. The wider message of the book is that the West is under attack, and by multiple means, ones harder to detect, let alone combat, than it has endured before.

This geopolitical competition demands careful analysis. Arguably, a fundamental change in EU–Russian relations came when the EU intensified its interactions with the six post-Soviet states that Brussels grouped together in its 'Eastern Partnership', in

addition to Ukraine and Moldova, also Belarus and the South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (the latter three receiving less attention in this volume). Previously, Moscow accepted EU enlargement, in contrast to that of NATO, which Russia continues to abhor. What is different is that the EU now appears paired with NATO in Russian strategy documents, both named as geopolitical threats to Russia.

The book seems to waiver as to just how serious, and in what ways, Russian subversion menaces the West. It is clear that Russia's techniques do not amount to another Cold War. But a 'tug of war' over post-Soviet states is clearly underway. We also read frequently of Putin rebuilding a 'Soviet Union 2.0'. If by that, direct control (Crimea's annexation notwithstanding) is meant, then Putin's astuteness is likely misunderstood. He wishes not to inherit all the problems of dysfunctional former Soviet states, but to have their political and military alignment. Threats are not of direct control, but of newer and more pernicious forms of indirect influence, both in the 'Lands in Between' and beyond.

The book's alarmism extends beyond the use of the language of war. When it is not doing so, it presents the lands in between now as 'on a knife's edge balanced between two competing geopolitical zones'. Threats are presented to the point that the foundations of internal and intergovernmental Western political systems are being undermined. Pernicious, yet clever, Russian interventions in Euro–Atlantic politics have infiltrated from the smallest to the largest countries. In tiny Montenegro, Russian intelligence operatives helped to plan an (unsuccessful) 'election-day coup' when that state refused naval

basing concessions to Moscow. In mighty Germany, mainstream political parties are outflanked by extremists, and that success is made possible by Russian support. The perils are compounded, we read, by expansive Russian assistance to anti-EU forces that 'seek to do away with the key institutions of the liberal international order'. Beyond Europe, Russian stimulus extends to Donald Trump's American presidential ascension, partly achieved from 'resources gained from the Russian government, which has a vendetta against the West'. The cumulative effect is such that 'It is *very possible* that Russia's attempts to undermine Western institutions will succeed'. Brexit '*may* have been financed primarily by Russia' (emphasis added).

Having read through the alarmism, we learn that the West is responding effectively against Russian intrigue, even to the point that 'The EU has stood up to Russian aggression'. In fact, the range of EU/Western responses reads impressively. New mechanisms to respond now exist, and others are being developed, including through the use of digital technologies, and of the dissemination of positive and corrective information. Hard security, including unprecedented NATO deployments along the alliance's northeast frontiers, rightly receives attention.

Perhaps better still, and more tangibly, though not detailed in the book, Western sanctions hit ruling elites where it matters: children being able to study in private Western schools; spouses shopping at Harrods; and some, though probably still too few, impediments on the safe export of Russian capital (oligarchs tend to invest outside their own country, favouring rule of law that protects their investments). So successful were Western sanctions imposed on Moscow in 2014 that Orenstein notes that they helped push the Russian economy into recession.

'The Lands Between' (or slight variations) has served before as a book title, and for a different historical period. That implies important geocultural shifts. Alan Palmer's 1970 *The Lands Between* remains a classic, if unacknowledged in the present book. Those

'Lands Between' were particularly Poland, Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic/Slovakia and Hungary, now of course embedded in the core of EU and NATO. True, the politics of Hungary's Viktor Orbán would be a study that fits with both the domestic and international democratic rollback this book identifies in the lands further east (and indeed it acknowledges though spares detail of the politics of polarisation occurring in some post-communist states in the EU). Nevertheless, it should not be lost on us that the use of that term now—and for the first time in modern European history—decidedly refers to territories and peoples further east. Despite the negativity, geographically and probably historically, definitive change has happened in Europe: pushing the tumult that the term 'Lands in Between' conveys further away from the Euro-Atlantic area.

The message remains ominous: despite optimism about the West's response to Russian aggression, Orenstein concludes that we, our lands, our polities, are becoming the Lands in Between. That, then, is the primary lesson from these post-Soviet states. Is this not an extreme prognosis, even if political developments in both the USA and the UK since the book's publication in 2019 demonstrate that otherwise venerated political systems face the politics of polarisation?

The greatest resource for our own polities, and for the global role models that they were, and hopefully remain, is to adhere to their own espoused values. One might not see the immediate transpositions of lessons from the murkiness of, say, Moldova's politics, to Western democracies. That assertion is part of this book's intended, if perhaps over-stated, iconoclasm. Certainly, established democracies need to perform far better. The electorates still have fewer excuses for passivity and far more opportunities for engagement. We all bear rights and responsibilities. This accessible, provocative book, adds to the clarion call for all of us to exercise them. We need not be the Lands in Between.

University of St Andrews