



## Meanwhile, In Russia ... Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video

Eliot Borenstein, London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022,  
xii + 146pp., £12.99 p/b.

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One of the largest parts of the book, Chapter 6, is devoted to an overview of the military power of the CSTO member states. The main parameters for evaluation are their national armed forces and their respective military expenditures based on factual data from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database and the World Bank database. Based on the data, the author concludes that among the five members of the organisation except for Russia (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), there is an asymmetry in power. Only Belarus and Kazakhstan have a significant role in defending the alliance thanks to a large military contingent and a sizeable military budget. The rest of the countries are significantly limited in military expenditure and the number of troops.

In Chapter 7, the author explores the effectiveness of the CSTO as a regional security organisation, addressing the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, NATO expansion and the US military presence in post-Soviet Eurasia. Davidzon points out that the post-Soviet integration countries ‘prioritize national interests, incorporated in their multi-vector policies, over commitments to the allies’ (p. 170). The author makes a case for ‘shallow integration’ within the framework of the CSTO, meaning that its members are not ready to limit their sovereignty and delegate some of their national powers to supranational bodies.

In the final chapter, the author concludes that CSTO members are willing to cooperate in areas that least affect their independence: preferential terms for armaments supply from Russia, specialist education from Russia and joint training. In terms of collective security, countries are more inclined towards bilateral cooperation with Russia than among themselves. Thus, there are still difficulties with integration in the post-Soviet space: it is possible only in narrow functional areas and precludes deeper interstate cooperation.

The author has conducted an in-depth analysis of the CSTO as a case study of post-Soviet integration. He relies on a clear methodological approach, using a wide range of factual data obtained from relevant sources (the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, the World Bank database, national and international legal documents, news and mass media materials) and theoretical research. The book will be of interest to a wide range of readers, from researchers and students to everyone interested in regional integration issues, security cooperation and functional organisations.

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Eliot Borenstein, *Meanwhile, In Russia ... Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video*. London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, xii + 146pp., £12.99 p/b.

THIS BOOK IS INCLUDED IN A NEW SERIES, ‘RUSSIAN SHORTS’, the overall goal of which is to provide brief, stimulating discussion starts on a variety of historical and cultural topics that have not been covered elsewhere. In this way, *Meanwhile, In Russia*, which is a written version of Eliot Borenstein’s short online lecture series on Russian memes, is a worthy addition to that collection, since there are currently no other academic studies on Russian memes.

The book itself is divided into an introduction, nine chapters, each of which covers a different theme, and a conclusion. In his introduction, Borenstein explains the origins of this book as a spring 2020 COVID-19 lockdown project. Chapter 1, in which he discusses the origins of the term ‘meme’ and presents other theoretical material, almost certainly comprises the opening parts of the online series. While useful for such an endeavour, where a theoretical background is necessary for the discussion

that follows, for such a short text as this, which is supposed to present Russian memes themselves, this chapter could have been significantly shorter, or the relevant information might have been included in the introduction, leaving more space for the physical reproduction of Russian memes. Chapter 2, which would have been a more fitting opening for this volume, shows how Soviet visual culture can be seen as the precursor for today's memes. Ranging from early revolutionary posters to later Brezhnev-era television shows, these cultural artifacts are examples of words and images that, while frozen in time, have a long life in popular culture of sending messages to the masses, where the messages are known and understood by all, regardless of their social status, and are carried forward through the generations. Some of these have yet another life now as Russian memes.

Chapter 3 begins the actual presentation of Russian memes. In this chapter, Borenstein engages with Soviet political culture as a subject of contemporary memes. They continue from the Soviet tradition of *anekdoty*, wherein former leaders play a set role in popular jokes, a role that generally continues into contemporary times. Reaching back further in cultural history at the end of this chapter, Borenstein notes that Pushkin also plays a role in meme culture, where many of them link closely to his African heritage, generally in a pejorative manner. Chapter 4 presents a number of characters who have become folk heroes of Russian memes. These include the Jolly Milkman, Kandibober, who appears in viral videos, Peter Piglet, a character originating from three children's book by Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Vatnik, which took on a wider meaning *via* Twitter after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and Zhdun, amongst others. Each of these is provided a brief origin story and a discussion of their cultural relevance.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how memes target the rich and famous, including Vladimir Putin, but Borenstein notes that it is now a criminal offence to go after the famously thin-skinned president. Foreigners are not exempt from such memes, as Barack Obama, Greta Thunberg and Elon Musk are also frequent targets, much as they are in the West. Chapter 6 introduces the reader to Russian media clips that have turned viral. Most famous amongst these are the Chelyabinsk meteor crash in 2013 and various road rage incidents. Chapter 7 continues a discussion of viral videos, presenting music and dance as a topic. The examples here almost exclusively discuss twerking at what some might consider inappropriate locales.

Chapter 8 turns to the use of Russian high culture, in particular famous works of Russian art, and how they have been turned into memes. Amongst the most popular are the works *Barge Haulers on the Volga* and *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire* by Ilya Repin. As with Vatnik, the latter also has a more contemporary meaning than published here, as Ukrainians have been re-enacting the painting since February 2022 as their own response to Putin and Russia. Medieval paintings and icons have also been resurrected and added to the present-day Russian memetic cultural canon.

Chapter 9, a late and somewhat unexpected addition to this text, discusses how COVID-19 was memed during the years of the global pandemic, showing just one way that Russian citizens tried to deal with lockdowns and accompanying shortages. In his conclusion, Borenstein readily admits that what he writes today might not be relevant tomorrow, for while some memes will have lasting value, others will fade quickly away. This could be particularly true for the COVID-19 series, as the world begins to move away from it and towards other challenges.

While this book does accomplish the goal of setting out some parameters and presenting the background information necessary for a discussion of Russian memes, the academic study herein challenges the other goal of the series—to be readily accessible for all types of readers—for a fairly sophisticated knowledge of Russian culture, both historical and contemporary, is required to fully appreciate everything that is presented, especially in a medium that is largely visual. For example, a general reader attracted to this book would likely already be familiar with what Ivan the Terrible looks like, as well as many of the Soviet-era leaders, but not so much with the characters presented in Chapter 3. Therefore, it would have been helpful to have more actual memes included in the text itself. While Borenstein does include a significant number of memes on his course website for each

chapter of the book, they are missing from this text. Not everyone will want to take the time to look at the site while reading the book or be able to. The paucity of visual material is a drawback of this book and detracts from its accessibility.

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Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu & Arda Özkan (eds), *Conflict Areas in the Caucasus and Central Asia*. Lanham, MD & London: Lexington Books, 2022, 468pp., £38.00/\$50.00 ebook.

*CONFLICT AREAS IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA* IS AN edited volume containing 19 articles written by scholars from different universities in Turkey. The purpose of the book, which has a brief introduction but no conclusion, is to give an overview of the ‘frozen conflict zones produced by ethnic/religious conflicts faced by the countries of the region’ (p. 2). In geographic terms the Central Asia and Caucasus region comprises five countries—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—lying east of the Caspian Sea, and their three neighbours to the west of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

Chapter 1 sets the tone for the Turkish nationalist perspective on the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. The bias of the author against Armenia is especially clear in the following passage: ‘To conclude, when the unbridled aggressive policies of Armenia, implemented with excessive self-confidence and smugness, were combined with strategic and tactical mistakes, an opportunity for Azerbaijan to retaliate and win a victory arose’ (p. 23). When referring to ‘the so-called “Armenian Genocide” allegations’ (p. 13) the same author adopts the official Turkish policy of denying the Ottoman genocide against 1.5 million Armenians in 1915, which triggered the mass movement of Armenians into the Russian-controlled Caucasus.

Chapters 2 and 3 give an overview of the roots and evolution of the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both conflicts are similar in that the central government in Georgia was unable to establish a mutually beneficial power-sharing arrangement with the respective ethnic minorities. Both chapters demonstrate the pivotal role played by Russia, which benefited from the geopolitical instability and reinforced its presence by strengthening military and economic ties with both regions.

Chapter 4 discusses the case of the Meskhetian Turk minority of Georgia deported by Stalin to Central Asia in 1944. Stalin’s reasons remain unknown (p. 92). Unlike other deported groups, the Meskhetian Turks were not allowed to return to their homeland after Stalin’s death. In Chapter 5, on the southern Azerbaijanis fighting for equal cultural and citizenship rights in Iran, the author evaluates their demands for democratic and cultural rights. He makes the point that it is wrong to pretend or assume that this large minority seeks secession from Iran. In Chapter 6, with regard to the Adjarian (also spelled Ajarian) conflict, in which ethnic Georgian Muslims were opposed to the central government of Mikheil Saakashvili, the author describes how the local leader, Abashidze, was ousted with Russian help in 2004. However, Russia did not take the same actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, where the stakes were much higher.

Chapter 7 discusses the situation in the North Caucasus, a region comprising Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia and Stavropol *Krai*. Chapter 8 touches upon the Ferghana Valley, an ethnically and culturally complex region divided among three different republics, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The author contends that there is a high