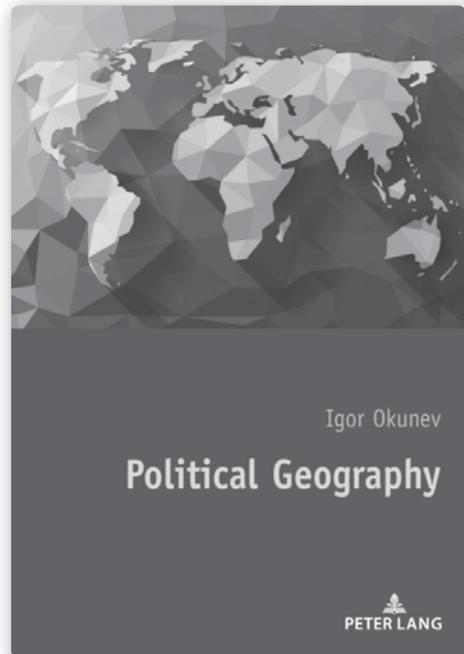


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Igor Okunev
POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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Political geography is a textbook by Igor Okunev, a professorial research fellow at MSIMO University and Director of its Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations and Co-Chair of Research Committee on Geopolitics at the International Political Science Association. In the introduction, Okunev defines political geography as a “discipline concerned with the spatial dimensions of politics” which offers us an additional, specific theoretical insights for domestic and foreign policy formulation and analysis (page 19). Through introducing the reader to the numerous topics, from geopolitical systems to internationally administered territories, and their more concrete and specific elements the author, in a very coherent manner, showcases the comprehensiveness of the discipline. The first chapters of the book focus on rather theoretical discussions of the discipline, however gradually the book covers more and more concrete, real-life based phenomena. Simplifying it, one could say that the author starts with the “political” side of the disci-



plines and slowly progresses to the more “geographical” part of it.

The textbook is divided into 12 chapters and 188 subchapters, each addressing one of the discipline’s basic elements. Every chapter also offers a list of the key terms and concepts, several questions for dis-

cussion, one or more activities and a number of suggested readings, all for the purpose of the chapter revision. What makes Okunev's textbook an essential reading for students and researchers in the fields of political science, international relations and area studies, is his example-based way of presenting and addressing specific phenomena. He does not only provide an example for each element he introduces, as this often leads to misinterpretation and simplification, but offers wide array of different examples, often even all the currently existing examples relevant to the particular phenomena. With that he successfully provides us with a very useful collection of basic definitions, explanations and examples of individual elements the political geography deals with.

In order to get a sense of what is actually the content of the book and how does the previously mentioned example-based writing look like, we will focus on 8 (out of 12) chapters, more precisely subchapters which offer an example related to Slovenia.

In the second chapter - Global Geopolitical Systems, the author, among other things, dives deeper into several types of the respective phenomenon - we know antagonistic, concentric, polar, civilization-centered and regional geopolitical systems. The latter are on supranational level usually referred as macroregions and mesoregions. Okunev defines mesoregions as "stable historical and geographical groups of countries

within a continent" (page 63). He gets us acquainted with the mesoregions of Europe, Asia, Africa, America and Australia and Oceania. His classification of the individual countries to specific mesoregion originates in the United Nations Statistic Division geoscheme, however, he also points out there are other possible classifications and taxonomies one could use. Besides that, he also introduces us to the so-called dual countries phenomenon, which have troubles with deciding where they actually belong. There are four mesoregions in Europe - Northern, Western, Southern and Eastern. Southern Europe mesoregion includes Iberian, Apennine countries and most of the countries of the Southeastern Europe, part of which is also Slovenia.

Political geography also deals with vexillology, the study of the national flags, about which we can read in the fourth chapter. Okunev familiarizes us with the very specific terminology related to the (number of) colors, parts, patterns and other flag attributes and, of course, their display. Slovenian national flag can be described as tricolor with equally sized horizontal stripes and a very detailed coat of arms. Author also provides us with a table showing common flag elements, in which Slovenian flag is interestingly in the same group as Burundian, Croatian, Equatorial Guinean and Israeli flag - all of them contain a six-pointed star.

In the fifth chapter Okunev addresses Properties of State's Territory. A

very specific subchapter is dedicated to the landlocked states, which describes states with complete absence of the seacoast. There are even two so-called double-landlocked states, Liechtenstein and Uzbekistan, which not only do not have their own access to the sea, but also all of their immediate neighbors are a landlocked state. However, some countries, Slovenia is here again used as an example, can be described or categorized as only nominally landlocked, as they have a very small strip of land along the sea, which is, however, of immense geopolitical importance to it.

Another political geography element the textbook addresses is the disintegration. In the sixth chapter – Composition of State Territory, the author points out that “the world political map is subject to constant changes” (page 230). When the internal territorial change signifies territorial separation into parts, we are speaking of disintegration. At this point, we need to establish a difference between disintegration, which is a consequence of primarily internal pressures and partition, which is enforced from the outside. Okunev explains the disintegration phenomenon with two main examples, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, as the author rightfully points out, the disintegration often also leads to escalation of an armed conflict.

The seventh chapter covers the international territories where com-

mon heritage of all humankind is under the jurisdiction of international law and internationalized territories, which are tied to a specific state sovereignty, but have their legal status defined by an international authority. There is also an exception in this distinction, often called nobody’s land or *terrae nullis*, which is territory where no state enjoys sovereignty while also not having a status of an international territory. Two of the internalized territories’ elements the author carefully examines are the international rivers and lakes. Okunev introduces the reader to the international regulation and governance system of the transboundary watercourses. The *Central Commission for Navigation of the Rhine*, founded in 1815 and considered the first international body in the modern sense of the word, is one of the examples the author gives us to get a sense of the subjects which are part of the special legal regime regulating the sphere of the international rivers. Slovenia is a part of the *International Sava River Basin Commission*, which was established in 2001.

A very specific phenomena Okunev also examines are the free territories, which he defines as “separate political entity in the form of a sovereign state or its parts under international administration” (page 264). While not being fully sovereign, especially when it comes to the security and foreign policy, their self-government is intact and not controlled by an international organization. The reasoning behind their creation is usu-

ally to freeze the territorial claims and tensions. Slovenian territory was historically connected to two examples of the free territories – the *Free State of Fiume* (Rijeka) which existed between 1920 and 1924 and the *Free Territory of Trieste* existing from 1947 to 1954.

In the tenth chapter, Okunev focuses on borders, one of the elemental structures of the state and cleavages, which are usually the reason for the border creation. A very specific phenomenon in the context of the state border and cleavages are the twin cities – “formed by amalgamation of two cities or urban centers and separated by the international border” and divided cities – “former single entities, with the state border running through it” (page 387). Beside the well-known examples, such as West and East Berlin and Jerusalem, Okunev also mentions Gorizia-Nova Gorica one of the three present examples of a divided city.

The eleventh chapter studies the regions and municipalities as the most common forms of the internal political and territorial structure of the state and the local government. The literature usually refers to the *political and territorial organization*, which comprises of administrative divisions (regional and subregional level) and municipalities (local level). To understand the differences between the state administrative di-

visions Okunev provides the reader with the calculation, which found that an average state has 18 first-order administrative divisions with average territory of 40 000 km and average population of 1.8 million. Slovenia is in this regard mentioned as a one of the examples of a country with the highest rate of fractionalization. However, Okunev points out that fractionalization is a very debatable issue as reducing it often gives, especially in the case of a small state, impetus to centralization. As the author correctly concludes: “Fractionalization is a compromise between the need to make some aspects congruent and consider territorial heterogeneity, which is unique in every state” (page 397).

Because of its comprehensiveness and clarity, Okunev’s textbook is a necessary reading for every student, researcher and lecturer active in the field of political geography, however, it is an essential study and research accessory for members of academia in other related disciplines as well. While the experts of the discipline will definitely find interest in the very specific elements and their real-life examples the author offers, it should be, nevertheless, an intriguing and useful tool for beginners and non-experts too as he also presents numerous concise and precise explanations necessary for understanding the large number of the phenomena covered.