# Interview – Igor Okunev

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Igor Okunev has a Master's Degree in history from the University of Manchester and a Doctoral Degree in Political Science from the MGIMO University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations). He is a Professorial Research Fellow at MGIMO University and Director of its Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations. He is a Co-Chair of the Research Committee on Geopolitics at the International Political Science Association. His work focuses on political geography, critical geopolitics, federalism, and capital cities. In 2021, he published an English textbook on *Political Geography* and Coursera launched his online course on the same subject. He is the author of three monographs: *Basics of Spatial Analysis, Capital Cities in a Critical Geopolitics Mirror, and Geopolitics of Microstates*, all in Russian.

**Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

Political geography has long been seen by political scientists and international relations scholars as a predominantly descriptive discipline. As far as many people are concerned – and we're speaking in broad terms here – it describes where various elements are located on the political map of the world and how things have come to be this way. However, there is a huge analytical potential in the field of political geography. It is a science that is amenable to empirical research methods (both quantitative and qualitative) and, as such, it allows us to explain social phenomena, including international relations, through spatial variables. This is primarily due to the emergence of the so-called schools of new political geography (Peter Taylor, John O'Loughlin, and John Agnew) and critical geopolitics (Gerard Toal). Political geography is being transformed into an exact science, which should in turn give it greater significance in political science and international affairs training programs.

**How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

Even when I was in school, I knew that I wanted to do research in the field of political geography. But, as fate would have it, I ended up studying for a BA in linguistics. Imagine my surprise when I discovered during my doctoral studies in geopolitics that it is linguistic methods that allow us to understand the driving forces of world politics. It turned out that political geography has much in common with hermeneutics, only it is maps and geographical narratives that require interpretation rather than texts. The second key discovery for me was that I could apply spatial econometric methods to political geography. I managed to resolve the perennial dispute between geographic determinism in geopolitics (which claims that the structure of physical space is a key factor in political processes) and geographic nihilism (which states that the importance of space in political processes can be neglected) using mathematical statistics. It turns out that we can measure the degree of influence of space – that space is a probabilistic quantity.

**In your recently published book on political geography, you discuss the spatial dimensions of politics. How are these dimensions tackled in the book?**

The book is intended to be a foundational textbook for international affairs students. In it, I present political geography not as a narrow discipline that is a side-effect of the natural factor of world politics, but rather as a discipline in its own right that provides us with a spatial coordinate grid for the system of international relations.

Relations between states develop in time and space, and knowledge of political history and political geography is crucial to the study of international relations and political science. In the textbook, I give a comparative description of all the elements of the political map of the world and classify them according to the level of political space they occupy, which creates a complex structural conception of this map.

**As the Director of the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations, what are the unique advantages of employing empirical methods of spatial analysis in understanding international relations?**

We use spatial econometric methods to create geoinformation mathematical models of the spatial factor for the system of international relations. Spatial analysis methods are already widely used in such fields as meteorology and economic geography, for instance. Whenever you book a taxi or search for the nearest café, your smartphone or computer uses spatial analysis algorithms. We're trying to apply these methods at the inter-state level and see, for example, how neighbourliness between states affects electoral behaviour, or the extent to which localization in one region helps states to integrate more closely in a given area. We use spatial autocorrelation to test hypotheses such as whether increased conflict in one country affects security in the region as a whole, whether democratization in a given state contributes to political transformations in neighbouring countries, etc. It turned out that the spatial factor was weak in certain areas (for example, when it comes to the spread of political regimes, values or corruption) and incredibly strong in others (such as electoral behaviour, demographic policy or conflict).

**How is geospatial technology evolving to address today's global risks and security challenges?**

Neighbouring states often experience similar security problems, such as environmental disasters, crop failures, or something that is very relevant today, pandemics, that invariably affect several countries at the same time. Countries develop similar instruments as a response to similar problems, which ultimately leads to the creation of regional security complexes. Geoinformation modelling can help us determine, for example, where national response measures may be more appropriate for dealing with external risks, and which problems are best left for international institutions.

**The practical use of geospatial technology would depend on the state of geographic information systems (GIS) in different countries. How can this be a more equitable and accessible research methodology?**

From the point of view of access to GIS systems, this is not a problem in today's world, as high-quality freeware is available (for example, QGIS). What is problematic is the fact that there is a shortage of freely available cartographic data in countries with a developing cartographic culture – precisely where the assistance of developed countries is needed. In particular we need to create an open library of spatial data with files containing information on the geographical coordinates of every country in the world and their administrative and territorial units at all levels and in all electoral districts. This will allow us to set up a kind of international resource sharing centre where students, instructors, and scientists from around the world can get a cartographic foundation for their projects. Unfortunately, all the databases that exist today are either paid services, outdated, or contain only a fraction of the data.

**Your work heavily revolves around critical geopolitics. How is this different from traditional geopolitics?**

Critical geopolitics appeared in the 1990s as a response, on the one hand, to the transformations taking place in the system of international relations following the collapse of the bipolar world, and, on the other hand, to the constructivist turn in the social sciences in general and in human geography in particular. Schematically, traditional geopolitics proceeds from the fact that physical space is capable of influencing global political processes.

Critical geopolitics, on the other hand, is based on the notion that space lives inside our consciousness in the form of certain representations, and it is these spatial myths and images that have a significant impact both on those who

make foreign policy decisions, and on those who analyse them. These representations are manifested in the form of discourses and narratives and, as such, they need to be analysed linguistically and semiotically. For example, look at how some states (e.g. Georgia or Cyprus) build their foreign policies by positioning themselves as European countries, even though they are physically located outside of Europe. In this case, concepts of space are more important than space itself.

**In this article, you have outlined different ways of settling territorial disputes through alternative approaches to sovereignty. Would you consider these applicable in addressing present-day maritime territorial disputes, such as in the Eastern Mediterranean and the South China Sea?**

In the article, I argue that at the analytical level, there are enough tools to resolve almost any territorial dispute. I cite many examples in history of how the non-attributive approach (opposite to one country – one sovereignty) has been used to resolve countless disputes around the world. Joint and alternate administration of a territory by several countries, leasing it out, placing it under international control, or creating cross-border or sovereign regions are all possibilities, alongside many others. The resolution of any dispute, including the ones you mentioned, thus depends on the political will (or lack thereof) of the participants in the process. The task of the expert community is to throw various complex, asymmetric, and unconventional approaches into the mix in order to help politicians make a decision that suits all sides – but only when the time is right.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

I think the most important thing that separates a person who is merely interested in international relations from an expert in the field is the ability of the latter to think in different scientific paradigms and schools. A humanities graduate has developed the skills to assess world politics from a point of view that does not match their own established beliefs, to look at global political processes using an alternative system of logic and reasoning, meaning that they can, if not accept, then at least understand different perspectives. People from different corners of the earth will always think in different ways and have incompatible interests and conflicting values. Specialists in international relations provide us with opportunities to get along on this planet.