

Evaluation

Regional Identity and Conflict in Transnistria Since Late Communism

Olga Niutenko

Master Thesis

Institute of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University Prague 2013, 104 p.

Regional identity in Transnistria belongs to the most intriguing matters in post-Soviet history. Beyond the classical model of a national movement, Transnistrian identity is not centered on any single language, religion, or state affiliation. Located between Moldova and Ukraine and recalling strongly the Soviet past, Transnistria is a country with a specific identity, limited sovereignty, and many opaque symbolical conflicts. It is a peculiar laboratory of identity formation in post-industrial times, unfolding on the ruins of the Soviet Empire.

First of all, I would like to show appreciation for the courage of Olga Niutenko in dealing with this difficult subject. The matter is burdened with various expectations (in economy, social hierarchies, power relations, etc.) that affect different politicized interpretations. Thus, it requires a lot from the investigator whose attempts to historicize the main positions (not following or supporting only one side of the conflict), to understand the origins of different standpoints, and to comprehend the dynamics of the conflict. I am very happy Olga Niutenko managed to deliver a thesis that meets the most stringent demands in this respect—a balanced interpretation of the Transnistrian identity and its transformations since late Communism.

Secondly, I have to emphasize the well-considered and elaborated analytical approach of the thesis. Olga Niutenko analyzed various aspects of the Transnistrian identity—struggles for sovereignty, balance of languages and national narratives, economic infrastructure and interests, media, and, last but not least, international relations. She demonstrated her ability to use various analytical categories to illuminate the inner structure and transformations of the issue: Transnistrian identity in post-Soviet times.

Third, Olga Niutenko showed high sensitivity for the symbolic dimension of the struggles for Transnistrian identity. The sections on renaming streets, on struggling for the narrative of modern history, or on preserving Soviet symbols in Transnistria certainly belong to the best and most elaborated parts of this thesis. They convey much evidence to the Soviet and Russian inclinations of the Transnistrian elites and the identity proposed by them.

If there is an aspect that should be focused on in more detail in the future or that could have been elaborated on with more depth, I would mention one major point. The economy should definitely be considered not only as a motive in social and political struggles, as Olga Niutenko sees it, but also as an essential point that allowed elites access to some agency and prevented them from another. In this respect, Olga Niutenko will have to focus on economy as a foundational system of relations and analyze its structure and transformations. After all, Transnistria belonged to economically privileged regions of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, thus the specific “Soviet” identification of Transnistrians may be a specific response to the fact that the privileged economic position got lost during Perestroika times.

Nevertheless, this aspect does not question the fact that the master thesis of Olga Niutenko is very well written, very thoroughly conceived, and highly reflexive. I can fully approve the thesis and propose to mark it with B or A, depending on the course of defense.

Michal Pullmann, Ph.D.

Prague, June 21, 2013