

Olga Niutenko: Regional Identity and Conflict in Transnistria since Late Communism

The thesis explores the origins and formation of the collective Transnistrian regional identity. It opens with a clear and comprehensive introduction, in which Ms. Niutenko demonstrates familiarity with all relevant authorities and major academic debates in the field of the history of national and regional identities. Her central hypothesis stems from careful reading of this body of literature: she sees the formation of the regional identity as a multifaceted process combining historical, social, cultural and economic dimensions. Despite identifying the late-soviet legislation on equality of languages as a catalyst for the formation of Transnistrian identity, Ms. Niutenko avoids the trap of overrating the explanatory capacity of the language-based ethnic nationalism. She emphasizes the crucial role of the collapse of the USSR and subsequent political mobilization of Transnistrian population against the “Romanizing” efforts of the Moldovan government.

The text is logically structured into three chapters. The first chapter provides the reader with an overview of the Transnistrian past and present, including the brief analysis of the recent political and socio-economic developments. Second chapter focuses on selected privileged arenas for the study of identity-construction: language conflicts, education policy and religion. The analysis of history textbooks and curricula provides a valuable insight into the identity politics in Moldova and proves the academic prowess of the author. The final chapter focuses on the utilization of soviet heritage in legitimating of the Transnistrian identity project. Throughout the thesis, Ms. Niutenko demonstrates a well-developed familiarity with relevant theory and proves her ability to apply methodological concepts derived from these theories. Her writing is clear and well structured.

All of this said, I have three questions that I would like Ms. Niutenko to address:

1) There seems to be a problem with the rather unusual use of the notion of Historiography. On the page 22 Ms. Niutenko argues that “a new period of Transnistrian and Moldovan historiography began with parliamentary elections.” In order to substantiate such statement, she emphasizes the fact that a visa regime for Romanian citizens has been introduced as an immediate result of these elections. Likewise, under the heading of “Historiography” (p.13-16) we find a subchapter discussing the early history of Transnistrian territory instead of an analysis of existing historical literature on the topic.

2) On a more analytical level, the thesis seems to suffer from a cultural bias – it builds on the premise that “the Transnistrian people created their own independent and sovereign state” on the basis of the existing regional identity (p.9 in introduction). However, diplomatic historians would argue that the PMR/TMR was simply an outcome of tides and currents of international affairs. From this particular perspective the Transnistrian identity would be an instrumental temporary extension of the Russian identity, articulated more inclusively (soviet heritage) to accommodate people of

different ethnicity. Even the chronology of the process as applied by Ms. Niutenko seems to suggest that the statehood came first and identity later. In this sense, it might be fruitful to compare the situation in Transnistria with other post-soviet unrecognized states such as Abkhazia or South Osetia.

3) The thesis suggests that Moldova, unlike Transnistria, failed to established non-ethnic identity. I would be interested in knowing why Moldovans were so eager to become Romanians? You mention that Romania was a synonym for the West in post-soviet Moldova. Did this fact play a role in a rather swift “Romanization” of the Moldovan identity project and its ultimate demise in Transnistria, which embraced the eastern, soviet heritage?

Lastly, it is my professional duty to point out two minor errors. First, the thesis would profit from another round of editing – it is full of not erased MS Word correction marks. Second, the official English version of the name of the independent Transnistrian state is Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic – PMR.

Despite such minor imperfections, the thesis fully satisfies relevant requirements and I recommend it for defence with a preliminary mark excellent - A.

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Prague

20/6/2013