

Zitierhinweis

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Eugen Străuțiu Steven D. Roper William E. Crowther Dareg Zabarrah-Chulak Victor Juc Robert E. Hamilton 2023. *The Armed Conflict of the Dniester. Three Decades Later*. New York et al.: Peter Lang (South-East European History 3). 254 p., ISBN 9781636672502 (hardcover), ISBN 9781636672519 (PDF), ISBN 9781636672526 (ePUB), € 79.39 (hardcover) / € 79.39 (eBook).

The media focus on the Moldavian Republic of Pridnestrovie (PMR) – also referred to as Transnistria or Transdniestria – has regained momentum since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The multiethnic breakaway region internationally recognised as part of the Republic of Moldova returned to international headlines due to a potential spillover of the armed conflict in neighbouring Ukraine, given the presence of Russian military troops and peacekeeping forces on its territory. The troops were stationed there as a result of the ceasefire and conflict resolution framework that followed a brief but bloody war fought in March–July 1992 between Moldova, newly independent from the Soviet Union, and the forces backing the secession of Transnistria. It is this conflict and its legacy three decades on that is the focus of this book. The fruit of a project launched in August 2021 by the Laboratory for the Analysis of the Transnistrian Conflict at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania, in collaboration with the Balkan History Association in Bucharest, this edited volume represents a valuable source of information on the armed conflict of the Dniester, being one of the few studies in the English language to focus solely on its analysis. The research project originated in the observation that studies on the Transnistrian conflict have tended to offer partisan perspectives, notably from local scholars, and have been affected by various degrees of politicisation, starting with terminology. Hence, the editors maintain that, compared with other protracted conflicts, the Dniester conflict has rarely been the subject of in-depth studies, especially when it comes to English- and to some extent also Russian-language publications. Therefore, the volume seeks to provide an original, coherent, diverse, and useful contribution to the study of the Dniester conflict (18-9). The editors aim to reach a broader readership by publishing in English, thus going beyond the mostly Romanian-language literature to date, within a non-confrontational framework that allows the authors to express their standpoint without falling into partisanship. The team of editors and authors is geographically

diverse, including one scholar from Transnistria and several based in Western and Southeastern Europe, Turkey included, as well as editors from the United States.

The book contains nine chapters. The first five contributions are history-focused and the remaining four foreign policy-oriented with a strong emphasis on the role of Russia in the conflict. While this subdivision into two groups is not explicit, the themes of each chapter make the categorisation clear. Indeed, while the angle taken by the book seems to engage with a multidisciplinary approach, there is a strong preponderance of contributions from political sciences, specifically conflict studies and international relations, with a few interventions from history and memory studies.

Chapters 1 and 3, by Mihai Melinte and Anatoliy Dirun, respectively, offer two complementary yet rather classical reconstructions of the events that led to the armed confrontation between Moldova and Transnistria, including their diplomatic exchanges and Russia's involvement in the conflict. Chapter 2, authored by Keith Harrington, and Chapter 4, written by Dareg Zabarah-Chulak, are more original and innovative, focusing on agencies often neglected in research on the Dniester conflict. Harrington looks at the anti-secessionist politics in Transnistria between 1989 and 1992 through a deep analysis of local newspapers, unveiling a limited yet active opposition to secession among local actors across all districts of Transnistria.

Zabarah-Chulak's refreshing contribution is a network analysis of foreign actors and volunteers fighting in the war. He deconstructs the narrative of monolithic foreign governmental support to both sides of the conflict, showing the impact of the unstable political landscape in Romania, Ukraine, and Russia. For example, the Cossack volunteers and the Russian 14th Army, who supported the Transnistrians, should almost be seen as separate agents from Moscow. Nicoleta Annemarie Munteanu (Chapter 5) gives an overview of war memories published in Moldova, offering a practical guide to local sources on the Dniester conflict, beneficial both in terms of literature review and her reflexivity in approaching it.

The following chapters shift the attention towards an analysis more focused on Russia's foreign policy through the prism of the conflict. In Chapter 6, Ana Jović-Lazić takes a realist standpoint vis-à-vis the Russian approach to the Dniester conflict and its impact on Moldovan foreign policy, while Tarik Solmaz (Chapter 8) problematises the

notion of “hybrid warfare” and its application by Russia in Crimea and Transnistria. Kamala Valiyeva (Chapter 9) then analyses the importance and criticalities of the Dniester dispute, happening as it is in a contested space between Europe and Russia. Chapter 7 by Maximilian Ohle addresses the agenda and subjectivity of Moldova and Transnistria, and thus stands as a partial exception in the foreign policy-oriented part of the book. He focuses on Moldova’s and Transnistria’s bargaining practices and “codes of intent” within their triangular relationship with Russia.

As is often the case with collective volumes, some contributions appear more helpful than others in achieving the goal set out in the introduction. When it comes to avoiding partisanship, the book is, however, generally successful. It does allow subjective standpoints to emerge without falling into a politicised confrontation. However, the chapters do not seem to “talk to each other” consistently, although some, such as Zabarah-Chulak’s, offer a level of analytical depth that serves as a constant reminder of the complexity of local decision-making and rationale, thereby providing a useful sounding board vis-à-vis the arguments voiced in other chapters.

Arguably, the most dissonance arises between what I identified as the two parts of the book, with the later contributions, with the exception of Ohle’s chapter. These are written with a strong focus on external actors, most notably Russia, and often just short of providing policy recommendations, as openly indicated by Tolmaz (198, 208), rather than academic scrutiny. Moreover, these policy-oriented contributions are less balanced when it comes to political positioning than the chapters in the first half of the book. Indeed, although not partisan, they present a distinctly critical stance towards Russia. Such a perspective ultimately gives relevance to Russian foreign policy and geopolitics rather than value to studying the Dniester conflict. While these contributions are helpful in placing the dispute in a broader context, the relevance of the main topic seems to be overshadowed to such an extent that it goes against the volume’s aim of delivering in-depth analyses and a thick description of the armed conflict.

Finally, some additional microlevel perspectives would have benefitted the book’s comprehensiveness when it comes to local political developments in both Moldova and Transnistria. The role of economic and criminal interests in the protraction, but also pacification of the conflict would have merited a chapter. Instead, the

book focuses very much on the events leading to the armed conflict of 1992, on the one hand, and the repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine three decades later, on the other. This leaves (too) little room for a description of what happened in the 30 years in between, a period which saw several attempts to settle the conflict, with the failure of the Kozak Memorandum in 2003 being just one of the most important.

Nevertheless, the edited volume still represents a valuable piece of literature for studying the Dniester conflict, and it does live up to most of the expectations the editors raise in the introduction. In a scholarly landscape where contributions in English are generally limited to comparative studies or journal articles, with a few exceptions, including vol. 71, no. 4 (2023) of this journal, the edited volume reviewed here is a welcome addition to the study of the Dniester conflict.

In summary, there are several specific aspects which give the volume added value. Chapters 2, 4, and 5 unpack subjective and microlevel agency which mainstream readings of the conflict often ignore, also offering food for thought on how to approach other sources about the conflict. Chapters 1 and 3 offer two different perspectives that need to be borne in mind when studying the dispute with respect to the international dimension, specifically Russia's involvement. Both of these perspectives, the former focused on conflict resolution and the latter on foreign policy interests, underline the conundrum of the protraction of a conflict that has barely witnessed any armed violence since the signature of the ceasefire agreement. In conclusion, while there are some caveats, the book offers a relevant English-language source for deepening the reader's knowledge about the Dniester conflict. Nonetheless, readers should be aware that the book is not self-standing: its reading does not substitute the existing English-language literature on the conflict, but is certainly a worthy complement to it.