

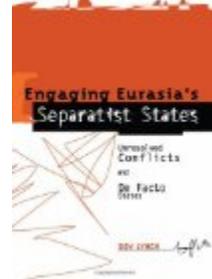
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dov Lynch. *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and de Facto States*. Forward by Richard H. Solomon. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2004. xvii + 170 pp. \$12.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-929223-54-1.

Reviewed by Naama Haviv (Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University)

Published on H-Genocide (February, 2006)



Especially When It's Broken

It is a region few people know anything about. It is possible even fewer people can bring themselves to grapple with the complex issues surrounding the de facto independence of the tiny separatist “states” of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Having broken away from the metropolitan states of Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan following Soviet collapse, these tiny regions have maintained uneasy versions of stability for over a decade, precariously balancing the maintenance of grudgingly won cease fires and the nascent building of independent state institutions, all while suffering the absence of formal recognition from both the metropolitan states and the international community. Though for years violence between the separatist and metropolitan states has been halted, it is a balance that could easily be tipped. In *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and de Facto States*, Dov Lynch draws on thorough research and travel through the region to untangle for readers the complexities that allow these de facto states to remain in their shaky version of independence, and analyzes the methods by which a more stable system might be achieved.

The regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the metropolitan state of Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan all have one pressing concern in common: they want out. Abkhazia has sought separation from Georgia mainly on ethnic grounds, despite the fact that by 1989 only 17.8 percent of the population of Abkhazia was ethnically Abkhaz,

the leaders of the region fought a bitter war to protect the Abkhaz culture and ethnicity from within the confines of an independent state. South Ossetia, by contrast, at one point had hoped to have its status elevated to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia, but had even its small amount of autonomy whisked away in the same tide of Georgian nationalism in 1989 that had made Abkhaz leaders fearful for their cultural heritage. Transnistria, had for centuries been tossed between Russian, Romanian, and Ukrainian sovereignties, and was finally joined with the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union in 1944. By the late 1980s, however, contests between the Transnistrian and Moldovan languages led to clashes, escalated by the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and competition to define the identity of the new state. This initial spark caused smoldering economic and political issues to rise to the surface—hoping to retain control over local industries and political power, Transnistrian militias sought independence for their bank of the Dnestr River. Armenian nationalism clashed with Azerbaijani nationalism in a bloody war over competing claims to the region of Nagorno-Karabakh—Azerbaijani nationalists seeing it as an area closely tied to their national “awakening” (p. 36), while Armenian nationalists have held fast to the idea of Nagorno-Karabakh’s mountains as the last bastion of Armenian “sovereignty,” all other territory once belonging to the Armenian nation having been conquered and subjugated several times over.

Cease-fires between the separatist and metropolitan states have held in all four regions since the early 1990s. Despite lack of military violence, however, relations between the separatist states and their former hosts remain variously strained, and the stability of the region hangs in delicate balance. While the separatist states have, to varying degrees, spent the last decade or so bolstering their independence by building state institutions and infrastructure, Lynch argues, the political, economic, and social consequences of non-recognition by the international community have taken their toll on individuals living within the de facto states, on the metropolitan states, and on the region as a whole. According to Lynch, “The standard of living in all of the separatist areas, which was high before the wars, has dropped catastrophically. The economies of the separatist states barely function, and the populations have suffered from widespread impoverishment and a collapse of social services and education” (p. 93). The presence of large internally displaced populations within the metropolitan states and the loss of valuable territory and resources have created a considerable strain and threat to security within the metropolitan states. The de facto areas, moreover, existing in non-recognized limbo, have become hotbeds for crime and cross-border smuggling.

As Lynch argues, any positive effects of de facto status of the separatist states are far outweighed by these negative costs. Despite maintenance of the status quo by both the separatist and metropolitan states, a solution must be found, and fast. “The post-Soviet de facto states have subsistence economies. They are riddled with crime. And they face several external threats. In sum, they appear destined to collapse” (p. 141). The instability latent in these de facto states has potential to rock the entire region, and thus, Lynch convincingly argues, the international community should quickly take an interest. Unfortunately, Lynch’s analysis shows that external efforts by both individual states and international organizations have been neither coordinated nor integrated—that is, efforts to move towards a resolution of the conflicts in the de facto states have often contradicted each other both in respect to their approaches toward each of the four conflicts, and their programs within each of the de facto

states as well—and have therefore been ineffective at best.

Lynch does not purport to put forward an all out prescription for solving the problem—particularly not for solving all four problems at once. What he does provide, however, is a clear outline of the logic and interests fueling all parties to each of the conflicts, both internal and external. Lynch’s analysis, which seeks to demystify the conflicts’ origins (so often blamed on “ancient hatreds” and the like) and to focus on the current issues sustaining the conflicts, allows him to put forth a framework through which a more integrated approach for each conflict area can be designed. Lynch’s explanation of a “five-pronged approach” (p. 142) takes a careful look at five elements that must be addressed by any international effort intending to design a lasting resolution: the status of the de facto state (with respect to the metropolitan state and in the international arena), the return of any internally displaced populations, security measures, society-to-society links, and external support (pp. 127-132). Lynch’s presentation of a framework rather than a prescription is particularly effective as it would allow regional experts to design unique satisfiers to meet the needs of the parties to each individual conflict.

Far from shying away from the complex issues that explain the logic behind the maintenance of this precarious status quo, Lynch embarks on a careful and compelling analysis of both the internal and external factors that continue to allow these situations to continue. Lynch’s analysis is at the same time concise enough to be accessible to the average reader and thoroughly grounded in research and historical background. Lynch approaches the complexities of the situation with a careful hand and expert organization so that even readers making their first forays into the study of post-Soviet states will be able to access his multilayered analysis. His book will be of interest not only to scholars focused on the region at hand, but to those studying international relations, conflict, and conflict resolution in general. The reader will likely be left quite convinced by Lynch’s arguments: while it may be true that the post-Soviet de facto states may not be as broken as they could be, they certainly seem to be prime candidates for fixing.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Naama Haviv. Review of Lynch, Dov, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and de Facto States*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11456>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.