Dareg A. Zabarah

*Nation and Statehood in Moldova: Ideological and political dynamics since the 1980s.* (Balkanologische Veröffentlichungen, Bd. 53). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011. xii, 212 pp. €48 (paperback).

What is Moldova as a state and a nation? What are the implications for those living within the boundaries of what is now Moldova of the various different conceptions of Moldova? How have different conceptions of Moldova generated responses from different groups and what impact has this had upon the processes of Moldovan state building? Why did one idea of Moldovan state and nationhood triumph over another, why was the idea of Găgăuz separatism not enacted as a policy, while the ideas that led to separatism by Pridnestrovië were successful? Why were some ideas successfully implemented policy and others not?

Dareg Zabarah deftly unpicks Moldovan politics, providing a detailed account and analysis from the mid 1980s to 2010 and giving equal weight to all sides involved. Zabarah takes a bold and innovative step in analysing these problems and the debates within Moldova by seeking to extract them from the miasma of nationalism studies. Refreshingly, instead of rehashing these tired old approaches, Zabarah argues that the way to understand questions of identity, state and nationhood is to examine them as questions of ideas and policy. Using the ideas of discursive institutionalism, Zabarah argues that the conception of Moldova as a state and nation was a policy decision, the result of a battle of ideas among members of the elite responding to one another. Discursive institutionalism as a theoretical framework emphasizes the role of ideas and discourse in politics but also provides a dynamic approach to institutional change. For discursive institutionalism ideas are the substantive content of discourse and exist at three levels: policies, programs, and philosophies. For Zabarah, who draws heavily on the work of Vivian Schmidt, discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas and exists in two forms: coordinative discourse among policy actors and communicative discourse between political actors and the public. Although there is no explicit reference, this process reflects what Gramsci considered to be wars of position and wars of manoeuvre for the hegemony of ideas and thence policy.

Zabarah seeks to unpack and explain the ideas of the three main political groupings within Moldovan politics: those based around Chişinău, the Găgăuz elite and the Pridnestrovië elite, giving equal weight to analysing the actions of each. These are geographical rather than ethnic elites. Within each group internal debates about the nature and orientation of its geographical space take place. These debates are then reflected and reframed by the other elites and generate a response.
For Zabarah, the process is not static but instead a constantly evolving process, and to demonstrate this contention he develops a complex three-stage model. By adopting this approach, Zabarah extracts his analysis from the emotiveness that accompanies many discussions about Moldovan identity, while at the same time penetrating deeply into the processes that took place and explaining the decisions made by each actor at various points in time.

Beyond the theoretical innovation, Zabarah’s analysis hinges upon two key points: first, the way in which the Soviet worldview of identity and politics framed the views of the elite; second, identifying as a moment of critical juncture the language laws of 1989, whence confrontation and the prospect of separatism are seen as viable alternatives.

The author is faced with a difficult technical task of combining a complex, interwoven narrative with a multilayered theoretical framework. In this respect the book does not quite succeed as narrative and theory are not always meshed together. This reflects perhaps the main weakness of the book. The text remains more a PhD than a book intended for a wider audience, which does not help the flow of the text. There are also inconsistencies in the spelling of Russian names: sometimes the name is transliterated and other times the English equivalent is used for the same name.

One element that Zabarah does not draw out to its fullest extent is the impact of actors external to Moldova and how their own shifting positions influenced the actions of local actors. Both Russia and Romania have played a not always welcome role. Although Russia is discussed to a small degree, the impact of Romania’s stance towards Moldova appears only fleetingly. The inclusion of the influence of external actors upon the choices made by internal actors would have developed a deeper and more nuanced analysis.

A second element that could also have been developed to a much greater extent is a comparison with other former post-Soviet, post-Communist or transitional states. More could have been made of the literature on other states, and this could have provided a contextual comparison and illuminated the degree to which Moldova is representative of a common transitional experience or an outlier.

The author might also have considered the degree to which elite cohesion or fragmentation played upon the battle of ideas and policy similar to Gerald Easter’s analysis of institutional choice in the former Soviet Union. This would flesh out further the distinctions that Zabarah observes between the Chișinău, Găgăuz and Pridnestrovie elites.

Despite these minor shortcomings, this book is a profoundly important book for those with an interest in Moldova and the post-Soviet world. Even more important, the wider applicability of the theoretical framework for analysing