

*Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, edited by Bruno Coppieters. VUB University Press, 1996. 205 pp. ISBN 9-05487-117-2.

This study brings together papers presented at a conference held in Brussels in March 1994 by two Belgian academic centers, the *Centrum voor Politicologie* of the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* and the *Centre CRITEME* of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*. Despite a 1996 publication date, the book disappoints its readers by covering only the period up to the end of 1994 and leaving out the war in Chechnya. Consequently, the analysis of the conflicts provided here was already available in other sources when the book arrived on bookstore shelves around May 1997. However, the authors of *Contested Borders* make up for their delay (or the delay of the publisher) by filling an important void in the study of attempts at conflict mediation in Caucasus.

The excellent chapter by Alexei Zverev, which provides the history of the four violent conflicts – Mountainous Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ingushetia-North Ossetia – that have devastated the Caucasus, forms the core section of the book. Zverev's text is not simply descriptive, but also contains an analytic component, which helps readers understand the origins and course of events of the conflicts. Zverev, however, can be criticized for mentioning the presence among Georgian troops fighting in Abkhazia of mercenary 'sportsmen snipers from the Baltic states' (p. 51) as an established fact rather than as the unconfirmed rumor that it was in reality. Myths and rumors tend to proliferate in periods of instability and wars, and the Caucasus is no stranger to this phenomenon.

The multiplicity of mediators in the Caucasus – the United Nations (UN), the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Iran and Russia – has produced a complex web of conflict resolution efforts, which Olivier Psye and Eric Remacle help to disentangle in their chapter on the role of the UN and the CSCE (re-baptized OSCE). Both Iran and Russia get two chapters each, one concentrating on the reasons behind the Caucasian policies of the two states (by Dmitri Trenin for Russia and Firouzeh Nahavandi for Iran), and one on their role as mediators (by Dmitri Danilov for Russia and Abdollah Ramezanzadeh for Iran). The role of the third regional player, Turkey, is analyzed in the essay by Freddy De Pauw. The contributions are well written, achieve the objectives set by their authors, and help clarify how the conflicts between the various Caucasian communities have been doubled by "wars" between mediators pursuing their own conflicting agendas in the region.

Ghia Nordia examines Georgian politics prior to and after the eruption of the ethnic conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, analyzing the triangular relationship between the "center" (i.e. Moscow), Georgians, and the separatist minorities. One can agree with his conclusion that the warring parties were engaged in a vicious circle benefiting only the "center" as 'the more the minorities counted on support from the centre, the more the majority denounced them for doing so, in their turn prompting the minorities to seek protection from Moscow' (p. 84). However, he can

be criticized for placing most of the blame for this regrettable situation on the minorities who, according to him, pushed their secessionist claims without even waiting for independent Georgia to express its programs in regard to ethnic minorities (p. 83). The reputation of large segments of Georgian society for chauvinism and anti-minority sentiments was too well established throughout the former Soviet space to permit blame to fall on the Ossetians and the Abkhaz for having acted too early.

In the conclusion, Bruno Coppieters synthesizes the contributors' findings. He dwells mainly on the conflicting regional perceptions of the Caucasus' three neighbors, Iran, Russia and Turkey, and on the implications of regional security issues for global ones. What is meant by "conflicting regional perceptions" is the three regional powers' differing priorities with regard to the newly independent Caucasian and Central Asian states: Turkey prioritizes the Turkic speaking republics, while Iran is more interested in Shia Azerbaijan and Farsi-speaking Tajikistan. One also finds in the conclusion the only attempt made in the book to apply a theoretical framework – Barry Buzan's analysis of regional security – to the politics of the Caucasus.

The authors can be commended for their achievement. It would, of course, have been preferable for the book to have appeared earlier, or alternatively, to have included the 1995-1996 period. Despite all its qualities, however, *Contested Borders* is not the definitive study of the Transcaucasian republics' first years of independence that readers have been waiting for.

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