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# Elections and Nation-Building in Belarus: A Comment on Ioffe

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**Abstract:** A Canada-based specialist on current events in Belarus and Ukraine comments on the preceding paper on the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus. The comments focus on (and in part take issue with) four major arguments of the paper: (1) the purported economic success and levels of material well-being in the country; (2) Lukashenka's reputed personal popularity; (3) incipient nation-building as a contest between Nativist, Russophile, and Creole strands of nationalism; and (4) reinforcement of Creole nationalism (and Belarusians' feelings of distinctiveness) as a result of Lukashenka's policies and growing differences with Russia involving such issues as energy transportation and supply. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: H10, H50, O18, P20. 12 references. Key words: Belarus, Lukashenka, Creole nationalism, elections, mass media.

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In his article "Unfinished Nation-Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Elections," Grigory Ioffe (2007) proposes that there are three particular forms of nation-building in that country, conveniently encapsulated by the three presidential candidates in last year's electoral contest. His paper contains several rather sweeping statements which, if I have interpreted them correctly, can be expressed as the following four points:

1. The Lukashenka regime has achieved significant economic successes, as reflected in high annual rises in GDP, and increased salaries.

2. Lukashenka is personally popular, as evidenced by various reliable opinion polls, and would have won the 2006 election comfortably without interference from government agencies on his behalf. Moreover, he is popular because his thinking and that of the majority of the population are in harmony. Underlying this comment is the sentiment that the critical attitude of the U.S. government and the EU toward Belarus and allegations that the country has evolved into a dictatorship are unwarranted. The paper explicitly calls for a change of Western policy and recognition of the political "realities" within Belarus.

3. Belarus is a country of delayed urbanization and delayed nation-building. Nevertheless, that nation-building is taking place, and has resulted in a contest between three different strands of thought: Nativist; Muscovite Liberal (Russophile); and Creole nationalism. Of the three, it is the latter, led and epitomized by the Lukashenka regime, that has won the hearts of the electorate and can bring to fruition the process of constructing the nation.

4. Under Lukashenka and his policies representing Creole nationalism, aided and abetted by aggressive Russian policies on exports of energy resources, Belarus has adopted a defensive posture toward Russia that has emphasized its differences with its neighbor rather

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than the similarities. More Belarusians over the past decade have supported an independent state rather than a state that might be integrated into Russia. However, support for independence is predicated on the policies of the president rather than the former main opposition parties such as the Belarusian Popular Front.

It should be noted at the outset that Prof. Ioffe's papers are always enlightening and well structured, and that the discussion he provokes can only be considered healthy. He has broadened the debate on the current political environment of Belarus and outlined a clearly formulated political alternative for the citizens of that republic. He attributes the idea of Creole nationalism to a Ukrainian analyst, Mykola Ryabchuk, although a similar argument had been advanced independently by the young Belarusian scholar, Natalia Leshchenko (Leshchenko, 2004). In my view, Ioffe's thesis, although not without merit, does not stand up to close analysis. Although any all-encompassing theory must to some extent simplify complex arguments and "cut corners," in this instance Ioffe has altogether ignored what I consider to be several important aspects of the internal situation in the country, made some quantum leaps in logic, and in many respects has distorted the present picture. Let us now turn to a more detailed assessment of the four major points outlined above.

### THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE

From the portrayal offered of Belarusian society, the country appears to be affluent and thriving. Belarusians "value the economy over independence" and thus are content with their situation (Ioffe, 2007, p. 42). Indeed this is the perspective offered by the government, which offers an account that can be summarized as follows: after Belarus became independent in 1991, the government of Stanislau Shushkevich (1991–January 1994) attempted to transform Belarus into a market economy through the sort of shock therapy carried out in Poland. The result was an acute economic crisis, the closure of factories, a dramatic drop in the standard of living, and severe hardship for the population. Lukashenka recognized how well Belarusians had lived in Soviet times and therefore when he came to power in the summer of 1994 immediately set about redressing these problems. Rather than giving way to market forces, the government retained control over the main enterprises. He formed a working partnership with Russia that permitted the import of cheap energy resources, he provided subsidies to factories, and offered the workforce a new "Belarusian path" to economic prosperity that was reminiscent of the late Soviet period, when Belarusian living standards surpassed the Soviet average. Before long, the results of these policies manifested themselves in unprecedented growth rates. An earlier article published by Ioffe (2004a) echoed these sentiments so closely that they were reprinted verbatim in the government "think-tank" journal, *Belaruskaya Dumka* (Ioffe, 2004b). So what is amiss with this picture?

As Ioffe himself acknowledges, the first menacing blip on the horizon of Lukashenka's utopia occurred in 2004, with the cutoff of Russian gas supplies. As this comment goes to press, the situation has deteriorated markedly due to an increasingly bitter fight with Russia over prices for gas and oil.<sup>2</sup> Some analysts lay the blame for this crisis squarely on Russia (Socor, 2007), thus corroborating the images created by Ioffe of a beleaguered Belarus struggling against the giant and oppressive Russia and its agencies Gazprom, Lukoil, and others. Yet for many years, the Belarusian economy has embellished its standing through the

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<sup>2</sup>The dispute appears to have been resolved, at least temporarily, by two separate agreements in January 2007 that increased the price of Belarusian imports of natural gas from \$46 per thousand cubic meters to \$100, and imposed a customs duty of \$180 per metric ton of oil exported to Belarus (Myers, 2007).

reselling of subsidized Russian energy imports at world prices, as well as confiscation of others at the point of customs. Lukashenka has always defended such actions with the comment that Belarus freely offers two of its military bases to the Russian army, and also serves as the transportation link for a significant portion of Russian gas heading for Western Europe (a more reliable route, he has sometimes stated, than the pipeline through Ukraine). An unreformed domestic economy in this way has been subsidized by a friendly and richer neighbor, one that often purchased Belarusian goods (machine tools, tractors, sugar, etc.) that were not always of the highest quality. Only over the past months has the Belarusian leadership seriously entertained the concept of a revised energy policy based on a domestic nuclear power station (the current embargo on constructing nuclear reactors ends in 2008) (Marples, 2006b). Thus the impressive economic statistics derive primarily from Russian “benevolence” and the withdrawal of that largesse—in the long run—was only to be expected once Gazprom, in particular, began to anticipate an end to the subsidization of the Minsk government and the introduction of market prices for its goods in the so-called Near Abroad.

Moreover, even in this period of “economic prosperity” Belarusians do not live well. The situation since the turn of the century has been described as a demographic crisis, as the country appears unable to offset the sharp and growing gap between mortality and birth rates. The population as a whole has declined from a peak of 10.24 million in 1994—the year that Lukashenka came to power—to just over 9.7 million today (*Statisticheskiiy*, 2004). That decline has been accompanied by an alarming rise in infectious diseases, cancer, and heart ailments. The health of children in particular elicits serious concern, with the onset of illnesses not previously associated with that age group as well as an apparent lack of resistance to pathologies in general (Lomat’, 2003). The number of orphans—mainly children discarded by their parents—has increased considerably, and most of these children are housed in psychiatric hospitals under appalling conditions.<sup>3</sup> These dilemmas have arisen, it should be emphasized, in addition to, rather than as a result of, the problems engendered by the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl’, and without large-scale emigration. Outside Minsk, cities appear run down and neglected, while the countryside has seen little improvement for decades.<sup>4</sup> Some of these problems can be attributed to an aging population and—in the case of the rural regions—the loss of the young and educated to the towns. Others must be attributed to the policies of the Lukashenka regime, which has failed to revamp obsolete practices in agriculture, exacerbated problems by ignoring them (including the continuing effects of the Chernobyl’ disaster), and harassed NGOs and international agencies that may have alleviated some of these predicaments to the point that they are virtually absent from Belarus. In brief, there has been no economic miracle, and Belarusians are not living much better today than they were in the pre-Lukashenka years despite assurances from the government that they have economic security, subsidized housing, and guaranteed wages and pensions.

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<sup>3</sup>Some of these children are featured in the Academy Award–winning film *Chernobyl’ Heart*, which says far more about orphans and prevailing morbidity among children than it does about the effects of the nuclear accident in Belarus.

<sup>4</sup>Minsk has clearly been designated as a sort of Potemkin village for the rest of the country, and impressions gleaned from visiting the capital would provide a very misleading impression of what the rest of the country might look like. Under Lukashenka, the city appears clean and orderly. The long-delayed reconstruction of the Palace of Culture on October Square has been completed, and the pièce de résistance of the dazzling city center is the so-called Red House, the residence of Lukashenka himself.

## LUKASHENKA'S POPULARITY

Ioffe seems genuinely impressed by the popularity of the president. Before discussing his arguments, it is worth noting that according to the terms of the 1994 Constitution, Lukashenka would no longer be the president of Belarus. His term should have ended, at the latest, in 2004. The two referenda of 1995 and 1996, which changed the political structure of the country, also served to extend Lukashenka's first mandate from the original 1999 to 2001. Even if one accepts that his second term in office commenced legally in the latter year, his presidency should still have ended in 2006. Vladimir Putin in Russia appears reluctant to serve a third term, ostensibly for personal reasons. Lukashenka had no such qualms. In this way, the pretensions of Belarus to democratic elections seem far-fetched. Other than Russia, none of the major powers accepted the conditions of the 2004 referendum that permitted Lukashenka to run for a third term as "free and fair." In this regard then, Belarus resembles less the European countries around it than the republics of Central Asia, where entry into the president's office provides a position for life. Perhaps that is why pretenders to that role are dealt with so harshly. Thus Syamon Sharetsky, chairman of the Parliament in 1999, who would legally have taken over as the temporary president in an interregnum between Lukashenka stepping down and new elections, fled the country after spending several days in a German hotel in Minsk used by the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group. His deputy, Viktor Hanchar, was kidnapped in 1999, and has never been seen since. Zyanon Paznyak, a presidential candidate in 1994 who finished third behind Lukashenka and Vyacheslau Kebich, fled Belarus in 1996 and has not returned. The political career of Uladzimir Hancharyk, who ran against Lukashenka in 2001, ended abruptly afterward. Alyaksandr Kazulin, presidential candidate in 2006, is currently serving a five-year prison sentence, and has been recognized by Amnesty International as a "prisoner of conscience" (Amnesty International, 2006).

Despite the above removal, imprisonment, or flight of leaders of the opposition, Ioffe sets out to prove that there is no climate of fear in Belarus, and that opinion polls showing Lukashenka well ahead of his opponents should not be doubted. He is also impressed with the fact that the United Opposition assembly, which elected Alyaksandr Milinkevich as its candidate, took place in Minsk, thus suggesting that the authorities were not acting in a restrictive manner. It can be argued that such opinion polls become irrelevant once the instruments of all-pervasive power have been constructed. The Lukashenka regime began quite early in its tenure to replace all the editors of mass circulation newspapers—starting with *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* and *Narodnaya hazeta*—that were not committed to supporting Lukashenka. Control over radio and television followed closely.<sup>5</sup> Since the mid-1990s the population has been fed a diet of government propaganda reminiscent of and sometimes superseding the Soviet period. The hyperbole and bombast has only increased during the recent rift with Russia. Thus the popularity of the president has been created through the official image. The only times when that image is questioned are during presidential and parliamentary elections when the government permits two 30-minute time slots on television and radio to the opposition. I have described elsewhere the conduct of the 2006 presidential elections and their aftermath (Marples, 2006a). Suffice it to say here two things: first, the regime is successful because it has monopolized the media for more than a decade and that

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<sup>5</sup>Perhaps the most amusing manifestation of the president's personal network of power is the fact that Mikhail Myasnikov, who was head of the presidential administration from 1995 to 2001, and former Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, is today the president of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

monopoly has not been offset by increased access to the Internet, *EuroNews*, and *Deutsche Welle*, described by Ioffe. Such outlets have not made major inroads in Belarus. Second, no opposition figure has been permitted to take more than a token stance against Lukashenka.

Let us now turn to Milinkevich, allegedly a Nativist candidate. Much attention is paid to comments about his background, real and alleged, and later to the impossibility of his winning an election: “It is abundantly clear that Project One [Nativism] cannot win Belarus over to the West, no matter how generously it is funded” (Ioffe, 2007, p. 55). However, this statement and the equation of Milinkevich with Nativism misrepresents the candidate’s election platform, as well the candidate himself, whose campaign manager was the leader of the unofficial Communist Party, Syarhey Kalyakin. In fact, the *raison d’être* for the election of a united candidate was to avoid narrow partisanship and party politics. Milinkevich was very careful to state the fact that his presidency would maintain good relations with both Russia and the EU (Milinkevich, 2006). Indeed one of his chief critics from the outset was Zyanon Paznyak, who accused Milinkevich of moving too close to Russia! Arguably the latter’s support from the internal Belarusian Popular Front led by Vintsuk Vyachorka<sup>6</sup> derived partly from that party’s concern for the more volatile policies espoused by the rival candidate, leader of the United Civic Party, Anatol Lyabedzka. That the Nativist platform existed in the first presidential election in 1994 is plausible; also that it served to alienate a section of the population from the Paznyak campaign. Its representatives did not participate in the 2001 election, nor were they present in 2006. The United Opposition rather sought to attract a broad spectrum of support by taking a moderate and non-Nativist approach. Thus the thesis as elaborated here, in terms of the failure of Nativism in the 2006 election, is off the mark. In fact, Milinkevich does not fit easily into any of the three designated categories, though there may be some substance to Ioffe’s citation from Kazulin that the United Democratic candidate was “pro-American and pro-Western” (Ioffe, 2007, p. 40). Perhaps he was perceived as such, and it could be posited that he spent too much of his pre-election time in the capitals of Europe. That he did so, however, is probably the only reason why he is not currently serving a prison sentence alongside Kazulin. The West’s embracing of Milinkevich may have provided propaganda fodder for the Belarusian regime, but it also for the first time provided publicity to a Belarusian opposition leader to the extent that the authorities hesitated before detaining him (although after the election he served a 15-day sentence for “petty hooliganism”).

Ioffe (2007, p. 43) cites a comment from Jan Maksymyuk of Radio Liberty to the effect that “people have a feeling that Milinkevich would not have been able to win these elections even if they were honest and free.” The statement is certainly correct, but the question is why? One cannot make such a comment in isolation. In successive elections—2001 and 2006—the opposition has been given no time to field a candidate. The opposition’s election meeting in Minsk—the fact that it was held in the capital impressed Ioffe—took place after months of delays, requests for exorbitant sums of money for the renting of buildings, and only after the United Opposition threatened to hold the meeting in Kyiv or Smolensk (which would have ensured more international publicity). Milinkevich mounted a creditable campaign, but he did not have time to make significant inroads into popular support. According

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<sup>6</sup>In 1999, the Belarusian Popular Front, which had been the republic’s main opposition party from its inception in 1989 to 1993, divided into two wings: the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, led by Vintsuk Vyachorka and the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, headed by Zyanon Paznyak (who currently resides in the United States and makes frequent visits to Warsaw). Both support a market economy, democratic society, and close ties with the European Union, as well as Belarusian as the sole state language.

to the IISEPS poll cited by Ioffe (March 27–April 6), he nevertheless may have secured the support of one-fifth of the electorate within a very short time, and despite the arrests of his election team (every major figure was arrested at least once during the campaign), harassment, destruction of computers, etc. One could thus equally well make the argument that the campaign for Milinkevich was remarkably successful.<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion seems straightforward: there is a significant and growing opposition to Lukashenka among the well-educated population of the city of Minsk. Those more susceptible to the lengthy period of official propaganda, on the other hand, have maintained their support for the president. That tells us less about the internal dynamics of Belarus than about the impact of a monopoly over information. Lukashenka has traditionally played on the fears of the population—of declining living standards, exposure to acts of international terrorism, or of serving in “foreign wars” such as those in Chechnya or Afghanistan—rather than on any well-conceived national program. The fear of the unknown is often greater than dissatisfaction with problems at home. But what does this say about the process of nation-building cited by the author?

Ioffe appears to have virtually dismissed Nativism as something alien to most Belarusians. It is difficult, however, to equate Milinkevich with the policies of the Belarusian Popular Front, which has subsequently distanced itself from him. On the other hand, Ioffe has highlighted a key issue, namely the lack of penetration of a native culture into mainstream society and a reluctance to Belarusianize society on the part of the current government. One finds the assertion that Nativism has been rejected partly on linguistic grounds to be somewhat unconvincing. Would one say for example that the pervasiveness of the English language in Ireland is a reflection of lack of Nativism in that country? Nor was urbanization in Belarus markedly late, occurring in the 1960s and 1970s as it did in several other former Soviet republics. And should one necessarily equate urbanization with nation-building? How would one explain that the “Piedmont” of nation-building in Ukraine has been the rural regions of the West, in which the urban population in several oblasts remains in a minority today? Admittedly Zyanon Paznyak, one of the founders of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and now the exiled leader of the Christian Conservative Party of the BPF, may have misjudged the predisposition of the electorate for the native language and culture. However, Belarus was subjected to intensive repressions in the 1930s that eliminated its national elite. The Great Patriotic War, which Ioffe correctly highlights as retaining a major influence in the present state, also brought rule by Partisan leaders and the perpetuation of the myth that liberation from the east rescued Belarusians from oblivion. The Soviet experiment succeeded in Belarus because policies of Russification and national self-negation could be imposed on a small population. Paznyak and others should not be castigated for trying to resurrect what they perceive as the national culture, only for misjudging how such attempts might alienate those who are ignorant of the past heritage. In other words, Nativism has failed to date because it has been premature. In 1990, the republic installed a state language that most people did not speak.

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<sup>7</sup>Incidentally, from the perusal of Ioffe’s article a reader could be forgiven for coming away with the assumption that only three candidates were running for office. In fact, the fourth candidate, Syarhey Haidukevych, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, actually finished third according to the official results. Some analysts have maintained that Haidukevych ran only to legitimize the elections in the event of an opposition boycott. Suffice it to say that the politician himself did not think that way and it is plausible that he considers himself a viable candidate for president in the event that Lukashenka should ever step down or be incapacitated through illness.

Here one must bring in the two other proposed means of nation-building—Muscovite Liberalism and Creole nationalism. If I comprehend Ioffe's paper correctly, he is arguing that the latter's emphasis on the Soviet past rather than on Belarusian territories within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland has been offset by the disassociation from Russia that has occurred in recent energy disputes. Added to this is the fact that the Belarusian ruling elite is unhappy with the neo-liberal model of Russian economic development that has led to an increasing gap in salary and subsistence levels in that country. While those statements seem reasonable, it is difficult to deduce anything *positive* in the outlook of the Lukashenka regime—i.e., to what extent is the Belarusian government advancing a conception of society, and how far is it simply responding to external events? In short, does the Lukashenka administration have a policy at all? Merely agreeing with the outlook of a blinkered electorate and feeding its imagination with harangues against external enemies is surely not enough for a 21st century government. This is less Creole nationalism than national nihilism, the only conceivable purpose of which is to extend indefinitely the personal power of one individual, Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

One can state this in an even more derogatory manner. Belarus, as a country, has been brought down to the level of "Lukashist" thought, outlook, and way of life. These phenomena are modest enough. An unhappy upbringing without a father, a career as a KGB border guard, member of the Komsomol, service as a leader and activist in collective and state farms, and belated election to a parliament and service on a committee to investigate corruption. He describes himself on his personal web page [<http://www.president.gov.by/en/press10003.html>] somewhat ambitiously as an historian and an economist. It is a mediocre biography in every respect, and reflected in the president's distrust and contempt for intellectuals, his reluctance to speak in the native language, his desire to be recognized as an accomplished athlete, and the quest for both national and international prestige. Creole nationalism really means a Creole president who has nowhere to go since the failure of the Russia-Belarus Union, which effectively ended any ambitions for leadership of Russia too.

Ioffe cites me among others as denying that Belarus is a dictatorship. At the least, one must acknowledge that it is an incomplete dictatorship, with several outstanding loopholes for independent expression. However, one can assert that Lukashenka has developed a regime of malevolent and petty authoritarianism that is centered on his personality, with all its idiosyncrasies and quirks. He has selectively and persistently set about the destruction of the nascent civil society that he inherited in 1994. In 2006, after 12 years in office, one would have thought he might offer something of substance to the electorate. Instead he declared that he would not be campaigning but would be attending to the interests of the country. In this way he perpetuated the image not of a leader of ideas or the creator of a new means to build a nation but rather of a "father figure" and protector, exaggerating external dangers (assisted incidentally by U.S. administration's designation of the country as an "outpost of evil"), whether they come from well-known opponents or erstwhile friends. If being Belarusian therefore means being a member of a small and embattled fortress community of central Europe, then it is hardly appropriate to use the phrase "nation-building." Creole nationalism's "mobilization potential in Belarus is second to none," observes Ioffe (2007, p. 52). One can respond to this statement in the affirmative, but only as long as Russia continues with what he terms its "expansionist bent" (*ibid.*). A Russia that opts for isolationism, followed by the sort of disinterest of the West in Belarus reminiscent of the early post-Soviet years, for example, would render Creole nationalism defunct very quickly.

Under Lukashenka, Belarus has regressed politically, socially, and economically. Ioffe has accepted, rather too easily in my view, the official images perpetuated by the regime. In

order to understand them better he has offered the theory of “Creole nationalism,” which I would rather term “Lukashism”—a protracted term in office without significant ideas or initiatives that has allowed Belarus to drift aimlessly in terms of social and economic development, has done nothing to arrest a deepening demographic crisis, has manipulated and debased the political structure, and retained its power by arrests, persecutions, and general harassment of the opposition. The latter comprises the nationally conscious elite, but also many workers, trade union leaders, students, and environmentalists. In 2006 it attained a degree of activism not equaled hitherto, even though prospects of a color revolution reminiscent of Kyiv in 2004 appeared far-fetched. Rather than be impressed with the so-called popularity of Lukashenka, one should comment that despite all the restrictions on civic activity and the personality cult developed around the president by the official media, the Milinkevich campaign in a matter of weeks managed to secure the support of about one-fifth of the electorate, and Kazulin caused panic merely by running for office.<sup>8</sup> Whether one agrees with the current Western policy of isolationism of what it terms “Europe’s last dictatorship” or would prefer dialogue with the Lukashenka regime,<sup>9</sup> the latter should not be construed as the reflection of popular will and an initiator of a distinct form of nation-building. By controlling all the relevant facets of state life, including the media, and through the active deployment of the Security Forces, the KGB, and the militia, the authorities ensured that Lukashenka would win yet another “elegant victory.” Ioffe’s paper suggests that the victory was merited. I maintain it was contrived and largely meaningless, and that Belarusian society and political outlook can be developed realistically only through regime change. But that is another issue entirely.

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<sup>8</sup>During the campaign, he was beaten up (and briefly arrested) while trying to register for Lukashenka’s All-Belarusian Assembly, used his allotted slots on national television to mount a personal attack on the president, and then after the election led a mass demonstration to try to free those arrested during the October Square protests. He was then arrested for a second time (on March 26) and sentenced to five years of imprisonment at a trial in July 2006.

<sup>9</sup>Incidentally, “dialogue” between the Lukashenka regime and the opposition has been tried before. It was initiated in the late 1990s by Hans Georg Wiecek, head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus. The attempt failed, ostensibly because of lack of cooperation from the government side. Belarusian Television then ran a derogatory documentary on Dr. Wiecek, and after the expiry of his term of office, the government refused to grant him visas to re-enter Belarus.

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