
Nation-Building in Belarus: A Rebuttal

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Abstract: The author of “Unfinished Nation Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Election” (Ioffe, 2007, this issue) responds to a critical assessment of that paper in a preceding comment (Marples, 2007). His rejoinder emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in the interpretation of mass (versus elite or academic) attitudes in Belarus and of selecting appropriate benchmarks for the evaluation of change. 15 references. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: O18, P20, Z00. Key words: Belarus, Lukashenka, nation-building, democracy, Nativism, national projects.

My paper (Ioffe, 2007) published in the present issue of *Eurasian Geography and Economics* represents an attempt to *understand* how the fledgling country of Belarus is evolving. Elections are only a lens, and I am clearly interested in the forces competing to flesh out Belarus’s identity. One of those forces is the current political regime, whose notoriety is the only discernible proof of Belarus’s existence in the news archives of the world. I also analyze the underpinnings of economic success in Belarus, a success so genuine that even such citadels of neoliberalism as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have acknowledged it. What David Marples is seeking to accomplish in his recent works and comment on my paper is worlds apart from my objective. Righteously concerned about the improprieties of Belarus’s regime, he appears to be intent on *spreading democracy*, and to this end is championing *regime change* in Belarus, as the next-to-last sentence of his comment indicates (Marples, 2007, p. 66).

I wish Marples luck, but with a considerable measure of concern. Not only is his self-imposed task more difficult than mine, but it is also outdated—“spreading democracy” and “regime change” are now among the more discredited ideas in the annals of political thought. Certainly Belarus is no Iraq, for it does not have oil, it is dangerously close to a major nuclear power, and the Belarus Democracy Act costs American taxpayers only an estimated \$27.5 million over the course of two years, not ca. \$2 billion per week (e.g., Bender, 2006; U.S. Senate, 2006). But there are similarities nonetheless. Crucial among them are some profound reasons why in much of the non-Western world people desire order more than democracy. After a short-lived democracy-and-shock-therapy experiment which, as Marples (2007, p. 60) admits, resulted in “severe hardship for the population,” Lukashenka came to personify Belarusians’ longing for order. He still does. Obviously Lukashenka did not “give way to market forces” but set out to tame them, as the alternative course of action had just produced disastrous results.

Much of what Marples says about Lukashenka can be reduced to a rhetorical question: How can *they* (Belarusians) like someone that *we* (North American academics) dislike so

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much? Or stated differently, if *they* say they like someone *we* dislike, it is because *they* are “blinkered.” *Our* certitudes are rock-solid, and *we* thus are not blinkered by definition. Hence “Belarusians deserve better,” as President George W. Bush once observed (Bush, 2005). In any case, a questioning attitude and cultural sensitivity are necessary to advance beyond such certitudes, and my disagreement with Marples has as much to do with this difference in disposition as with the difference between the self-imposed tasks. It has been a challenging task for Western scholars to decipher the common folks’ way of thinking in non-Western environments. It is easier to listen to intellectuals in those countries who are funded by Western grants and are inclined to tell Western sponsors what they want to hear.

A difference in objectives and disposition begets a difference in perspective. To me Belarus is a poor country—yes, its economy may still be the most rapidly growing in Europe, but proceeding from a low starting point.² The grandparents of today’s Belarusians first learned that they were indeed Belarusians only after the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was established. Prior to that historical event, indigenous people in the region had identified themselves as *tuteyshiya* (“locals”). Belarusians were an ethnic group with no middle or upper strata. Traditionally filled by local Jews and Poles, those social niches were vacated during World War II (Jews) and soon thereafter (Poles). As a result, the gates of upward mobility were thrust open to Belarusians for the first time. This newly acquired mobility and the fact that modernity came to Belarus wrapped in Soviet fabrics left an indelible imprint on the outlook of most Belarusians. The umbilical cord, still connecting Belarus with its Soviet heritage and Mother Russia, is remarkably strong.

For Marples, Belarus is an aberration, for it “resembles less the European countries around it than the republics of Central Asia” (Marples, 2007, p. 62), and surely this anomaly ought to be undone. As a human being, I empathize with his longing for uniformity, but as a geographer I must ask myself whether nation-building is at such an early stage in any other country in Europe. My answer is no, and on this count, as noted in my paper, Belarus can rather be likened to sub-Saharan Africa (Ioffe, 2007, p. 49). Not that this parallel adds substance to our debate. “In 1990,” notes Marples (2007, p. 64) “the republic installed a state language that most people did not speak.” This is indeed peculiar, as is Marples’s disapproval of Lukashenka’s “reluctance to speak in the native language” just a few lines farther down (Marples, 2007, p. 65). An accomplished tyrant might force people to speak in a language they did not know well, but Lukashenka revealed political savvy in electing not to counter the mass example of his fellow countrymen.

It is true that if Belarus were not an “incomplete dictatorship” but a full-fledged democracy, then “according to the terms of the 1994 Constitution, Lukashenka would no longer be the president of Belarus” (Marples, 2007, p. 62). But full-fledged democracies are organic outgrowths of development, and Belarus is not yet there. In the words of Robert Kaplan (1997), “our belief in democracy regardless of local conditions amounts to cultural hubris.”

Marples writes that Lukashenka emerged as a “father figure,” not a leader of ideas. I beg to differ with respect to the latter (ideas). Perhaps it may be more constructive, given my limited page allocation, to focus and rephrase the issue in the form of a question: In which of the neighboring countries can one find the avatar of a national leader? Would that be Yushchenko of Ukraine, whose political capital is all but spent? Or Kaczynski of Poland, whose social conservatism would be more in line with our American Bible Belt? As for the

²Per capita Gross National Income (purchasing power parity) is roughly \$8,000 (Population Reference Bureau, 2007).

“father figure,” Marples is on target, and this could not be otherwise in what still is largely a patriarchal peasant culture. According to Sergey Nikolyuk, the idea (popular among the Belarusian opposition) that there are some committed Lukashenka supporters, some supporters of the opposition (many ostensibly “democrats”), and some undecided voters in the middle is patently false. This is because most of those who dislike Lukashenka merely want to replace him with *another father figure* more to their liking. Nikolyuk (2006), himself an opposition-minded analyst, believes that there are not enough people in Belarus willing to take the risk of no longer being wards of the state.

Marples observes that I have “dismissed Nativism,” a counter-Soviet trend in national self-reflection, “as something alien to most Belarusians” (Marples, 2007, p. 64). Did I really do that? Not being a Belarusian, I would hesitate to cast any vote on their behalf. But as a researcher I must pay attention to what Belarusians say. In an essay pointedly titled “Without Us,” Valyantsyn Akudovich (2003), the most revered intellectual in the Nativist community, ruefully noted that Nativism had

. . . denied any value whatsoever to real Belarus. Lurking behind the need to return to the historical legacy, language, and cultural experiences of the past is a rigid ideological construction that does not sit well with the achievements and values of contemporary Belarusian society, because all its triumphs, accomplishments, and delights are either of communist or colonial origin. . . We have remained lonely . . . because in their absolute majority the denizens of [this] state . . . do not even budge to take a trip to the “new land” that we discovered for them. Even if they were pushed towards us by tommy-gun barrels on Lukashenka’s orders, even then they would flee to their comfy quarters . . . It does not make sense to think that the situation will change if there is somebody other than Lukashenka at the helm of power. It is not us but the “Belarusian people” who elected him, and the same “people” will throw him out (sooner or later), and then again they will elect not our but their own president; and we will again write about Belarus as a hostile territory.

Now I turn to Milinkevich, a perceived Nativist, as even Marples grudgingly admits. Milinkevich has just written an open letter to Lukashenka (Milinkevich, 2007), in which he states that “it is imperative to expeditiously overcome the schism in Belarusian society, because only a consolidated nation can withstand challenges” resulting from the trade war with Russia. “You underscore that one of the main goals of your policy is the retention of our statehood,” writes Milinkevich to Lukashenka, thereby doing precisely what Marples (2007, p. 65) claims is so difficult: “to deduce anything positive in the outlook of the Lukashenka regime.” Milinkevich also offers his help in mending fences with Europe. One does not write such a letter to an illegitimate leader! I commend Milinkevich for his initiative, in essence an endorsement of the overarching idea of my original paper (although from an unexpected source): the lack of national consolidation is more of a danger for Belarusian statehood than the much-reviled Lukashenka regime.

From our difference in perspective I move on to our disagreement on benchmarks. Marples writes that under Lukashenka, Belarus is unable to offset the sharp and growing gap between mortality and birth rates. First, the gap stopped widening in 2004, but this is a minor point. Second, has Germany been able to offset that gap under Brandt, Schmidt, Kohl, Schroeder, and Merkel? There are 17 countries in Europe with a negative rate of natural increase, and the total fertility rate has dropped to below the replacement level even in Albania, which augurs population decline in the long run. An adept of uniformity, Marples

should have commended Belarus on that score. And what is one to make of his comments about orphans, diseases, and the observation that “outside Minsk, [the country’s] cities appear run down and neglected” (Marples, 2007, p. 61)? This is a quintessential issue of benchmarks. Belarusians may choose to compare themselves even with New Zealand, but the countries they actively compare themselves to are Russia and Ukraine. Does one need to explain the reason? Both Russia and Ukraine are *worse off* than Belarus on *all* indicators mentioned by Marples. For example, in Russia, life expectancy at birth is four years shorter for men, and three for women than in Belarus.³ As for the run-down towns, my suggestion is to pay a visit to two Russian oblasts adjacent to Belarus, Smolensk and Pskov. There, one would see what “run-down” really means. Almost every rayon center in Belarus is an urban paradise compared with its Russian counterparts.

In summary, my assessment of Marples’s comment is identical to his view of my paper: “although not without merit, [it] does not stand up to close analysis” (Marples, 2007, p. 60). Except for one point. Several years ago, David and I happened to fly from Minsk on the same plane. Upon landing in Warsaw he informed me that an abridged translation of one of my previous papers (Ioffe, 2004a) showed up in the journal of an official think tank in Belarus. Shortly thereafter, David referred to my translated article (Ioffe, 2004b) in a paper of his own, implying that one should not be believed if he is published by Lukashenka (Marples, 2004). He again repeated this observation in a subsequent paper (Marples, 2006), and now again in his preceding comment on my paper in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (Marples, 2007, p. 60). Pilloried thrice, I feel entitled to wonder whether or not David Marples has run out of substantive arguments.

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³A smaller difference of that kind between the U.S. and Canada recently caused a flurry of interpretations (e.g., Torrey and Haub, 2004).

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