
Review

Grigory Ioffe. *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. xxiv, 259 pp. Figures, tables, photos.

Reviewed by Michael Urban¹

As this book's title indicates, the author is concerned with more than purely scholarly matters. Yet the scholarly component in this volume is impressively high, making it perhaps the best study in English of a little-known and under-researched country, Belarus. I would like to separate the interests—scholarship and politics/foreign policy—informing this book as much as possible and to comment on each in turn.

Grigory Ioffe, whose training as a geographer was acquired in the Soviet Union, currently teaches his subject at Radford University in Virginia. By all indications, he bears an immense knowledge of things Belarusian, frequently visiting that country, following its press, and establishing personal acquaintanceships with a great number of its scholars, political actors, and commentators on public affairs. He builds his argument, foreshadowed in the second part of the book's title, by stacking brick on brick of information about the country's history, paying special attention to the pivotal category of national identity and its usual manifestation in language usage. His descriptions make for fascinating, sometimes vertiginous, reading. The first language of the overwhelming majority of Belarusians is not Belarusian, but either Russian or *trasianka* (a word meaning a mixture of hay and straw) that (ordinarily) amounts to a Creole dialect combining Russian grammar and semantics with Belarusian phonetics. The fact that the Belarusian language belonged almost exclusively to rural dwellers until the latter half of the 20th century and was first codified only in 1918 creates a number of contemporary peculiarities and, indeed, paradoxes. One of these would be the threat posed to the Belarusian language by the Belarusians themselves, who tend to insist on employing Russian in their schools, homes, and public affairs. Majoritarian democracy, as it were, gets pitted against the (would-be) national language. Another would lie in the fact that, unlike virtually all of the former non-Russian Soviet republics, there is no Russian community in Belarus organized around the idea of protecting their cultural and economic rights against the encroachments of an ethnically oriented state that they perceive as biased against them. This may be the politically salubrious outcome of the patterns of language usage that blur the ethnic lines between Russians and others.

Sandwiched between two much larger countries, and cultures, Catholic Poland and Orthodox Russia, Belarusian national consciousness has been historically subject to the insistent influence of its neighbors and remains a weak idea even today. Yet, again paradoxically, the country, with the overwhelming support of its citizens, has pursued an economic policy sharply at odds with that of its contingent states: namely, a modified version of state socialism. Ioffe lays out insightfully the conditions underlying Belarusians' unwillingness to

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adopt capitalist reforms. On the one hand, the final decades of the USSR represented unprecedented development and prosperity for Belarusians. Why should they have chosen to jettison an arrangement that was, after all, working? On the other, mass communications introduced them to the results of capitalist reforms in surrounding countries. Who would want to embrace the mass poverty, unemployment, and uncertainties unleashed all around them under the banner of “reform”?

Paradoxically yet again—at least from the viewpoint prevailing in the West—they succeeded. With negligible “assistance” from international financial institutions and the lowest rate of foreign investment per capita of any country in the region, the Belarusian economy has since the mid-1990s enjoyed steady and impressive growth rates while simultaneously escaping the steep inequalities of wealth and income that have plagued their neighbors. The fact that the country’s trade was crippled by the disintegration of the USSR and that it possesses little by way of natural resources beyond potassium makes that achievement all the more remarkable. As Ioffe demonstrates, these results were brought about primarily by a state strategy of domestic investment in combination with its geographic position, which in this instance represented a certain strength tapped by the state: fees garnered from the transit of energy to the West, parlayed into refining capacity that yielded more returns.

Turning to the political purpose enclosed in this book, it is Ioffe’s argument that the combination of these factors—a weak, amorphous national identity; an economic model that has proven successful in meeting the needs, if not the aspirations, of the overwhelming majority of citizens; and the advent of democracy—explains the success of the country’s president, Alexander Lukashenka, who has been recently re-elected in a landslide to a third term of office. This argument is trained on two groups reluctant to accept Lukashenka’s democratic credentials—Belarus’s internal nationalist intellectuals and the governments of effectively all Western countries. Whereas those groups have displayed a fondness for the phrase “last dictator in Europe,” Ioffe insists that their position amounts to an unrealistic refusal to acknowledge the fact that Lukashenka—whatever his faults—is an enormously popular leader.

With respect to the nationalist intelligentsia, Ioffe mounts a blistering critique of their politics, showing how in their own words they continually deliver the message: “We are all in favor of democracy, just not with our actually existing countrymen.” Although many readers might occasionally yawn as they wade through long polemical passages showing the utter silliness in the arguments of one or another nationalist intellectual, Ioffe’s account is not without its redeeming moments. For instance, subtextually admitting that Lukashenka, indeed, would have won the presidency last time out in a fair election, the nationalist opposition have focused their fire on alleged ballot fraud. For their part, Lukashenka’s people—who, by all indications, *would have won* a fair election—have dutifully obliged their opponents by stuffing the ballot boxes anyway.

As for Western governments, Ioffe tells us that they simply have been listening to the wrong Belarusians, namely, to the marginalized nationalist intelligentsia. Consequently, these governments mistakenly have adopted a number of anti-Belarusian policies in the name of promoting democracy in that country. The author adduces a number of reasons why so many have been led so far astray: an ignorance of actual circumstances; a fixation on the simplistic and, in the end, empty categories of geopolitics as a template for interpreting international events; the intoxication with “victory” in the Cold War, coupled with a resolve (or conceit) to pursue the battle for democracy worldwide. Tellingly absent from his list, however, is any notion that economic policy plays a role in the isolation of Belarus and the scapegoating of its leader. Especially in the case of the United States, the longstanding policy of an

Open Door—access to markets around the world—would seem to play a not insignificant role. In parallel to the cases of popular (and democratically elected) leaders in Latin America—of whom Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez would be the leading example—U.S. policy’s negative stance against Belarus might be explained not as an effort to promote democracy but as pressure to alter the economic course of a country whose actions do not conform to the neo-liberal script. I have no idea whether the author would agree with that assessment; but inasmuch as he explicitly seeks the ear of Western policy makers, he shows the good sense to politely leave it out.

Ioffe’s analysis is thus set apart from the great bulk of Western studies and commentaries on contemporary Belarus that tend to focus on the things that are not: *not* democratic, *not* reformed economically. In so doing, he sheds much needed light on the polity, economy, and society actually obtaining in that country. Among his more important contributions in that respect would be his outline of the Lukashenka regime’s national project. In the context of a souring relation with Russia in recent years—and thus the emergence of a distinct other on its border, as opposed to a state with which it was formally poised to unite—intellectuals associated with the presidential administration have been formulating a “state ideology of the Republic of Belarus.” This project, true to the Creole regime that has spawned it, takes a benign attitude toward its eastern neighbor—thus countering the rhetoric of domestic nationalists—while insisting that the sovereignty and independence of the Belarusian state must be safeguarded at all costs in order to secure the communally oriented character of the Belarusian people that might otherwise be engulfed by the tides of capitalism surrounding their country. Of course, the success of this project remains an open question. But its substitution of a social consciousness for historical and linguistic claims, so common to nationalist discourses elsewhere, provides a fascinating illustration of how a national identity might be mediated.