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[Review of: G. Ioffe (2008) Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark]

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Cities' set in Los Angeles, California, 'Reshaping a Region After September 11' in New York City, and 'Faith-Based Organizing for Metro Equity' and 'Values, Vision, and Message: The Spirit of Metro Equity' in Detroit, Michigan. The fourth point on the compass is 'saying yes,' in framing proactive agendas for social change. The stories included in this section are 'Bridging the Bay: University-Community Collaborations' in the San Francisco Bay Area, 'Regional Solutions that Change the Rules of the Game: Confronting Poverty' in Camden, New Jersey, 'Farms to Schools: Promoting Urban Health, Combating Sprawl, and Advancing Community Food Systems' in Southern California. The breadth of these essays is striking. For example, I was not aware of the work in 'Preserving Heirs' Property in Coastal South Carolina.'

The last section, Part III, describes the future of regional equity and sustainable metropolitan communities. Visionary voices present strategies divided by Pavel into four sections. Section I focuses on the potential of large gatherings and conventions to build the capacity of regional equity. Section II presents new public and private partnerships, methods of data collection and analysis, networking, and communication. Section III describes global linkages to combat climate change and poverty. In Section IV, Myron Orfield presents a vision for metropolitan areas to move beyond 'spatial apartheid' to a more equitable access to opportunities.

In each section, Pavel introduces the material providing a brief background and summary of the essays. One concept that was not explored clearly is that of spatial mismatch. Part II 'breakthrough stories' is the heart of the book and is the most thorough, nicely tied to the 'Compass for Transformative Leadership'. Part III, in my opinion, could have used more development but it certainly opened up rich topics for further exploration. Pavel provides a useful bibliography of writings in the study of sustainable metropolitan communities. This book is an important addition to the work of sustainability and quite readable, but I would highly recommend that the reader be at least somewhat familiar with the work of Myron Orfield before reading this book.

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Jean Surratt Humphreys

Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark.

GRIGORY IOFFE. Lanham, MD, 2008: Rowman & Littlefield. 259 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-7425-5558-7

Belarus is not a country that draws a lot of international attention. But occasionally it does, and then it appears in an unflattering light if we follow western foreign policy, mainstream media and a large part of scholarly opinion. This is 'the last dictatorship in Europe', it forms the only hole in a massive Europe including Russia and the Transcaucasian republics defined by Council of Europe membership.

Grigory Ioffe's book is meant as a counterweight. He aims to provide a nuanced view of a country with a 'cliché ridden image' and a 'low name recognition' (p. xi). The book originates in a longstanding, personal relationship, the fascination of a well-endowed geographer and annoyance that Belarus is so badly misperceived. His family moved out of Belarus to Moscow in 1941, just in time to avoid the Nazi occupation. His grandparents returned after the war and he visited frequently over the years. He moved to the US in the 1980s and followed events in Belarus closely, also picking up the western literature on the subject as it developed since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The book is clearly polemical but it is also a labour of love on a place that means something important to its author. At the same time the text is a model of scholarly detachment in its unwillingness to jump to political conclusions or start from ideological premises: it is meant to elucidate (p. xviii).

The book has seven substantive chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The first three deal with culture: language primarily and then religion as the possible bases for an ethnic community. As an historical in-between place peripheral to the centres of the Polish-Lithuanian and Russian-Ukrainian realms, internal disputes about a predominant or overarching ethnic are unavoidable. As a longstanding part of Russia and then the Soviet Union in modern times, the Russian shadow predominates. The thrust of the argument is that gradually a separate Belarus identity is taking shape

that expresses itself mostly, but not exclusively, in Russian (compare the unbeatable predominance of English to express a clearly distinctive Irish identity). The book's cover is decorated with two emblems and two flags referring to the two episodes of Belarus' young independence period, first in 1991–1995 with a regime inspired by a Belarussian identity against a Polish background and then one with a Russian background. Their symbolisms refer to Polish and Soviet allegiances with some quasi autochthonous additions. It will take time for these distinctive references to blend and be reshaped as if new. But the palimpsest on which history is written allows for many improbable combinations. National consolidation is in Ioffe's view Belarus' first political problem.

The analysis is based on a lot of empirical evidence from a multitude of sources (Ioffe's treatment of linguistic issues in Chapter 1 is particularly informative and at places evocative), and grounded in a thorough knowledge of the scholarship on nationalism (notably Anthony Smith, Gellner, Hroch). There is also a reference to Huntington's 'Clash of civilizations' and an elaboration of the cultural frontier suggested by that author and others (p. 99), that divides Belarus in two unequal parts (more on the Eastern side). I am not sure that this is very helpful in this context. The suggestion of the emergence of a Creole type of nationalism (pp. 89–97) seems to contradict the clash prediction.

There is one chapter on the economy. It emphasises the relative modernity of the Belarus industrial economy within the Soviet Union that was built up on Moscow's initiative after the complete devastation of the Second World War. It also stresses the favourable growth figures during the 2000s after the important dip during most of the 1990s. It does not go into the question if the two are related. The country has been very slow in privatising parts of the economy and income disparities have remained pretty modest, certainly compared to Russia and Ukraine. No shock therapy has been applied, the pace of transition has at best been leisurely, but transition is nevertheless underway. According to the latest statistics this is still the picture for the most recent economic crisis period that is outside the scope of the book (its narrative ends in 2007).

This success story is to a considerable degree – but, according to Ioffe, by no means entirely – due to Russia's cheap oil and gas deliveries. Oil is refined and large amounts are then profitably exported to Western Europe; gas supplies the national market, but also transits through pipelines. Russian 'subsidies' may have been in the order of 10 per cent of Belorussian GDP (derived from data on pp. 120/1, 124), which obviously is very significant. Since 2007 there have been increasingly serious disputes about the oil and gas prices that Russia wants to charge and about the possibility for Russian companies like Gazprom to acquire a controlling interest in the Belorussian companies involved in the trade and transport of energy. These economic quarrels are related to the development of the political relationship between the two countries.

Finally, there are three chapters on the politics of Belarus. One draws the landscape of political forces mostly connected to various options for ethnic community and connected preferences for a westernising market oriented economic policy and the speedy introduction of democratic governance versus preferences for order and stability based on the continuous use of earlier administrative practices. The next two are about Lukashenka, the much maligned president and his rise to (in 1994), and maintenance of power (ever since), plus a more detailed analysis of the three presidential elections that he has somehow won so far (a next one is scheduled for 2011). Ioffe concludes that despite irregularities and strong arm tactics, Lukashenka's popular victories are genuine in the sense that he is by far the most popular and best supported political leader in the country, that his political style, including its authoritarian traits, is in accordance with the expectations of the wide majority of the country, that western efforts to support dissident political forces and coerce Lukashenka are fruitless, and that finally and unexpectedly, Lukashenka has gradually and with turns increasingly set Belarus on a course that underlines its independence from Russia. His successor will most likely come from his own circle (p. 235).

Western policy (the US version, mainly during the most recent Bush administration years), has been moulded by triumphalist great power perspectives and has engaged in

active pursuance of democratisation processes, including negative sanctions against leaders that stand in the way. In the case of Belarus this policy has been utterly unsuccessful. Serious human rights violations by the regime in power have not been prevented at all, and internal support for democratising social forces has not been forthcoming. However, another political dynamic has emerged. The indigenous political forces concentrated in Lukashenka's circle were originally very positively inclined to 'ever closer union' with Russia. They have gradually come around to an ever more autonomous position for the Belarussian state in which the aim has become to get as many material benefits as possible out of this relation assisted by the Russian hope to keep its own 'near abroad' as far as possible out of the sphere of influence of the Americans and the European Union.

This is in effect a replay of many old Soviet Union and Eastern bloc games under new circumstances. How this dynamic will finally play out if US policy and certainly also the EU including Poland turn around to a more forthcoming attitude to Belarus is anybody's guess. An initial effort by the EU since 2008 has so far also been unsuccessful. (A recent

exchange of relevant views by two policy analysts can be found at <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication_view?publication.id=625>.)

The upcoming presidential election, in early 2011, gives this issue an extra sense of urgency.

What should be the optimal combination of a more positive engagement if one aims at the same time to uphold human rights? Ioffe is very reluctant to be part of that kind of debate but the second part of his title alone, strongly invites this kind of question. He is convinced that for now national consolidation should take priority over democratisation in Belarus. After his richly informed analysis of Belarus' recent development, further suggestions for a constructive, peace oriented foreign policy based on the geopolitics of all parties at hand would, however, be more than welcome. From the side of the EU, eventual Council of Europe membership for Belarus is one possible point on the list. Ioffe wants to leave all this to the politicians altogether (p. 241, which ends the text of his book), but after his scathing conclusions on their recent efforts, that recommendation is perhaps not wise.

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