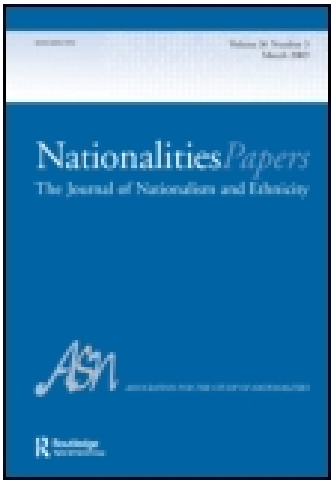

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The scholar, historian, and public advocate: the contributions of Paul Robert Magocsi to our understanding of Ukraine and Central Europe

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The scholar, historian, and public advocate: the contributions of Paul Robert Magocsi to our understanding of Ukraine and Central Europe

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In a recent reflective essay written on his dual role as a scholar and public advocate, Paul Robert Magocsi with self-deprecation described himself as a loser on the margins. The sentiment of loss came with his emotional attachment to the wrong baseball team (the Dodgers rather than the Yankees) ("The Scholar as Nation-Builder"). What is clear, however, is that Magocsi is no loser in academia. My esteemed colleagues in this symposium are echoing what has become incontrovertible: Magocsi is a towering figure in Ukrainian Studies.

Keywords: Ukraine; Magocsi; Central Europe

In a recent reflective essay written on his dual role as a scholar and public advocate, Paul Robert Magocsi with self-deprecation described himself as a loser on the margins. The sentiment of loss came with his emotional attachment to the wrong baseball team (the Dodgers rather than the Yankees) ("The Scholar as Nation-Builder"). What is clear, however, is that Magocsi is no loser in academia. My esteemed colleagues in this symposium are echoing what has become incontrovertible: Magocsi is a towering figure in Ukrainian Studies. And we could add: even if he had not written a line about the Rusyns, he would nevertheless tower over us all. Such conclusions are born out by his magisterial *A History of Ukraine*,[1] the *Illustrated History of Ukraine*, the cartographic volumes, the collections on Galicia and Sheptytskyi and, most of all, the stunning quality of his work, with its depth, nuances, and sweep. This was not exactly what was projected in Toronto's Ukrainian circles nearly 30 years ago, but since then Magocsi has developed into a leading scholar of Ukraine, and yes, of Ukrainians. He is certainly, the most prolific.

As Magocsi explains, he was always the marginal, the one from the outside looking in, growing up Protestant in a sea of northern New Jersey Italians. The contingencies of life, triggered by his personal experience of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, made him focus on a marginal topic par excellence: Transcarpathia (*Zakarpattia*) and its people. This made him raise the "theoretical proposition," in his own words, that the Rusyns might, one day, constitute a nationality. This touched a nerve and provoked a huge political storm when he was hired at the University of Toronto, being accused in the Ukrainian community in Canada of stoking the fires of separatism within Ukraine.[2] While such controversy did not affect his scholarly work, it did affect the Chair of Ukrainian Studies as an institution, cutting it off from funding sources in the community, as Taras Kuzio points out.[3] What is remarkable, in hindsight – as evidenced by the

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contributions to this symposium – is how uncontroversial Magocsi's theoretical propositions have become among scholars of Ukraine and of nationalism more generally.[4] It is not that the Rusyns *are* a nationality, but rather that they *might* become or *could* become one someday, if a critical mass of people identifying as Rusyn *nationals* can be identified. Ironically, Magocsi believed, 30 years ago in the middle of the Toronto "storm," that a Rusyn nationality option was no longer possible.[5] Since then his stance has become more ambivalent, leaving the question open.[6]

Everyone professes to be a constructivist nowadays, that is to say, adopts the position that nations are "imagined," by-products of modernity, and that identities are multiple, shifting, and so forth. In practice, however, we more often than not take nations for granted. This tension between the malleable and the durable is at the core of Magocsi's work, as highlighted by the contributors to this symposium. In Magocsi's unique case, the tension is between the scholar and the nation-builder – not the nation-builder as a public advocate (a label that Magocsi much prefers), but the nation-builder as a chronicler of the nation (or more precisely, of the nationality) steeped in the precepts of nineteenth century historiography. The scholar in Magocsi thinks in terms of multi-layered ("multiple") and mutually-exclusive identities, as with the categories of "Little Russian" and "imperial" in pre-Bolshevik Ukrainian lands ("The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework"). The nation-builder in Magocsi cannot conceive that a similar paradigm could operate between a cultural or ethnographic identity and a civic identity, in the sense of a legal affiliation toward a state (i.e. citizenship). As Motyl and Plokhy point out, Magocsi sees the nation as a collection of nationalities, and therefore his comprehensive *A History of Ukraine*, going far beyond the history of ethnic Ukrainians, can be seen as multiple nationality-building histories within Ukraine, an approach that shares the same paradigm as his harshest critics.

But why could we not conceive of Ukraine as an asymmetric integration of nationality, ethnographic, and local identities, over which an evolving sense of political identity – namely, a sense of political community around a single territory – is having a powerful influence? Why could not Magocsi think of the Rusyns as latter-day Little Russians? Not in the pejorative sense, but in a sense of individuals defining their identity outside of the nationality box?

"Magocsi the Nation-Builder," whose chronicling instincts can lead him to the treacherous proposition that nations have documentable "origins," is firmly ensconced in the nationality worldview. But I do not believe this is the case with "Magocsi the Scholar." We see this in his work on censuses and his view that how people define themselves is a function of very concrete options offered to them by a given political and social context ("Are the Armenians Really Russian?").

It could very well be that nationality remains the hegemonic category in contemporary Ukraine. Yet, with the disappearance of the nationality category in internal passports and the definite asymmetry in the acceptance of the traditional national narrative throughout Ukraine, I have my doubts.

In writing his multiple nationality-building history of Ukraine, Magocsi, to use the current lingo of international politics, takes the "territorial integrity" of Ukraine as a given and works backwards. The borders of Ukraine, for him, are a fact of history. While those borders may not be the predestined realization of the rise of the titular nationality, they are a fact all the same. Intriguingly, Kuzio calls this territorial approach to Ukrainian history "more unsettling to Russian historiography" than the traditional ethnic approach pioneered by Hrushevs'kyi, presumably since it does not reduce statehood to ethnicity. Magocsi may have clarified the matter somewhere in his prodigious

bibliography, but I have yet to see spelled out the premises of his territorial approach. Are they based on a pragmatic acceptance of international established borders since independence? Or are they more historically grounded in the sense of geographic integrity of a "borderland," as Plokhy is inviting us to rethink Ukrainian history?

The tension in a scholar's work is indicative of both vulnerability and strength. In the end, every intellectual construction has its vulnerable points. But the strength in Magocsi's opus is that he cannot be pigeonholed. We cannot put a label on him, except for one obvious matter. He is the only scholar that I know in the field not on the Internet. In this, he remains, as he put it, the marginal man on the outside looking in.

Notes

1. Now available in a second and expanded edition: *A History of Ukraine: The Lands and Its Peoples.*
2. For a lively account of the controversy, see Chapter XI ("The Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto (1977–82)") of Manoly R. Lupul, *The Politics of Multiculturalism: A Ukrainian-Canadian Memoir*. Lupul, the founding director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, found himself in the middle of the storm.
3. The Chair has since received a significant endowment and has been renamed, in Fall 2010, the John Yaremko Chair of Ukranian Studies.
4. In George Grabowicz succinct words: "The right of self-determination, particularly of collectives, is immanent and inalienable. If people feel they are different, they are." Back in the 1980s, however, this simple understanding of constructed identities was not prevalent. When my former McGill undergraduate teacher Michael Brecher stated in class that "The Palestinians are a nation because they think they are one," the argument was a revelation to me.
5. This is the conclusion of his major study on the topic: *The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus': 1848–1948*.
6. In *On the Making of Nationalities There is No End, Vol. I: Carpatho-Rusyns in Europe and North America* (360), Magocsi wrote: "[W]hether these building blocks [needed to create a nationality – language, historical ideology, publications, cultural organizations, theaters] will be fully constructed … and, most importantly, whether the masses themselves will embrace the idea of a distinct Rusyn nationality remain open questions."

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