

THE SCHOLAR, HISTORIAN, AND PUBLIC ADVOCATE. THE
CONTRIBUTIONS OF PAUL ROBERT MAGOCSI TO OUR UNDERSTANDING
OF UKRAINE AND CENTRAL EUROPE

**The Paradoxes of Paul Robert Magocsi:
The Case for Rusyns and the Logical Necessity of
Ukrainians**

Alexander J. Motyl, Rutgers University

2 October
2008

ST. VLADIMIR INSTITUTE, TORONTO

The Paradoxes of Paul Robert Magocsi:

The Case for Rusyns and the Logical Necessity of Ukrainians

Alexander J. Motyl

Professor of Political Science

Rutgers University-Newark

Political scientists love puzzles, or paradoxes, so let me focus on one concerning Paul Robert Magocsi. Simply put, how is it possible for a Rusyn nation builder to have contributed to the historiography of Ukraine to such a significant degree that one might suspect that Magocsi is really a Ukrainian nation builder? Like all political-science puzzles, this one dissolves upon closer inspection. As I shall argue below, Magocsi resembles a Ukrainian nation builder—or perhaps even *is* a Ukrainian nation builder *malgré soi*—precisely because he is a Rusyn nation builder.

Although Magocsi is a complex thinker with a rich, fascinating, and evolving bibliographic record, I will present only a “snap shot” of his thought and focus on two sources to make my case—the *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture* and the magisterial *History of Ukraine* (referred to hereafter as,

respectively, the *Encyclopedia* and the *History*).¹ The former work will be especially useful because, as an encyclopedia, it represents something in the nature of a programmatic compendium of inter-textually related views on an exhaustive range of semantically related topics.

Magocsi's Concepts

Let us begin this exploration at the beginning—with a closer look at Magocsi's central concepts: nation, nationality, and ethnic group. According to the *History*:

- “Nation ... is used to refer to the legal citizens of a given state.”
- “The term nationality ... is used to refer to a group of people who may have one or more of the following observable characteristics in common: a distinct territory (possibly but not necessarily statehood), language, historical tradition, religion, social attitudes, and ethnographic features. Taken together, these characteristics distinguish members of one nationality from their neighbors.”

¹ Paul Robert Magocsi and Ivan Pop, eds., *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

- “It should also be noted that ethnic or ethnographic groups ... also may have all or many of these same characteristics in common. What, then, distinguishes a nationality from an ethnic group? The primary distinguishing feature is not the presence or absence of all or some of the characteristics listed above, but rather an awareness among members of a given group of people that they have such common characteristics and that it is these characteristics which distinguish them from neighboring peoples or nationalities.”
- “In other words, a nationality must have (1) certain objective elements, such as those listed above, in common; and (2) certain subjective elements – a self-perception as belonging and the will to belong to a distinct group.”²

Note some important features of these definitions. First, in contrast to most traditional nationalists who enthrone the nation, Magocsi does not. For Magocsi, a nation is nothing more than the people who happen to have a certain legal status called citizenship within a political entity called the state. There is nothing ethnic or ethnographic or even national about a nation. Indeed, by making a nation’s possession of statehood one of the “observable characteristics” of a nationality—and, presumably, of an ethnic group—Magocsi effectively subordinates the nation, the state, and the nation-state to the nationality.

² *History*, p. 352.

Second, like most traditional nationalists, Magocsi accepts, and indeed underscores, the importance of the distinction between objective and subjective characteristics. Different ethnic groups are different because they have different “observable characteristics” and therefore “look” different. But different nationalities are different both because they look different and because they *know* they look different. Looking different is thus a necessary condition of a nationality; knowing that one looks different is the sufficient condition. In other words, a nationality cannot exist unless it looks different; a nationality exists and thereby transcends the status of an ethnic group once it knows it looks different.

Observable characteristics feature prominently in this scheme, but they are secondary to subjective knowing—partly because the latter is the sufficient condition that transforms an ethnic group into a nationality, and partly because most of the observable characteristics Magocsi lists are rather less obviously observable than he suggests. Except for islands, it is not quite clear just where a “distinct territory” begins and ends. Unless codified and classified as a distinct set of speech rules, language also has fuzzy boundaries. Historical tradition, as historians would surely agree, is at least partly a function of historical writing and historiographic perceptions. Religion looks monolithic until one actually examines popular beliefs. Social attitudes, as any pollster

can attest, are remarkably fluid. And ethnographic features do not appear as a brute fact of nature, but are open to interpretation. In contrast, the claim—“We are a nationality”—is a pretty clear and indisputable Cartesian statement with genuine ontological substance. One might disagree with the proposition being expressed by the claim, but one cannot—at least in a world where things are presumed to exist—dispute the claim’s having been made.

My point is, thus, that, in Magocsi’s scheme of things, “self-perception” and “will” are central. This view places him, as I have already hinted at above, among traditional nationalists, who also believed that their nationality actually existed in some observable sense—hence their interest in collecting ethnographic materials about the *narod* or *Volk*—but that it was, to use the common parlance, “asleep” and thus in need of “awakening.” Waking the people from their slumber is the task of nationalists and nation builders—the intellectuals, poets, writers, artists, politicians, and others who already possess that self-perception and will and can therefore engage in the natural task of transforming their self-knowledge into popular self-knowledge.

Nationalists and nation builders believe that ethnic groups in Magocsi’s sense precede them and make their activity both sensible and necessary. Like all political activists who make appeals to and claims about putative popular constituencies, nationalists and nation builders assume that they are

responding and not *imposing*. Responding presupposes a certain democratic sensibility—a willingness to heed the needs of the people one represents. Such a democratic sensibility is at the very core of every self-styled nationalist or nation-building project even when, as is often the case, nationalists and nation builders presume to know better than the people. In that sense, of course, nationalists and nation builders are like all democratic leaders who also claim to know just what the true interests of the people are.

The actual beliefs and activity of nationalists and nation builders contradict two widespread notions in the literature on nations (or, to use Magocsi's terminology, nationalities) and nationalism. The first, as succinctly expressed by Ernest Gellner, is that "nationalism ... creates nations."³ Gellner may or may not be right, but no self-respecting nation builder would, or could, agree. The second, as represented by theories that emphasize social construction, would endow nationalists with the ability to make nations/nationalities out of any collection of people. Here, too, nationalists and nation builders—and Magocsi—would strongly disagree. Nationalities can emerge only from observably preexisting ethnic groups. Where Gellner and the social constructivists agree with nationalists and nation builders is on the centrality to the nation building project of nationalists and nation builders.

³ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 174.

Rusyns and the Necessity of Ukrainians

Magocsi is a Rusyn nation builder. He has written extensively about Rusyns, and he has also actively participated in the Rusyn national revival of the last three-to-four decades. It is at just this same time, however, that Magocsi has also produced a large body of authoritative publications on Ukraine and Ukrainians and thereby helped establish both as conceptually and politically real entities in North America and Europe. As I suggested above, Magocsi's Rusyn nation-building activities do not contradict his Ukrainian scholarship. Quite the contrary, Magocsi has effectively become a Ukrainian nation builder (*malgré soi*, if you will), precisely because he needs a distinct Ukraine in order to make the case for a Rusyn nationality.

Recall that, according to Magocsi, there are two central features of all nationalities—the observable characteristics and the self-perception. Seen in this light, Rusyns are no longer just an ethnic group, but not quite yet a nationality. As the *Encyclopedia* emphasizes—especially in the sections on Ethnography and History⁴—Rusyns have their own “distinct territory (possibly but not necessarily statehood), language, historical tradition, religion, social attitudes, and ethnographic features.” The Carpathian Mountains, although not quite an island, are critical to this claim as they can

⁴ *Encyclopedia*, pp. 107-112, 177-188.

be conceptualized as a distinct geographic space that, by virtue of being a borderland or boundary throughout history, could serve as the cradle for a particular people with particular objective characteristics. Not surprisingly, central to Magocsi's claims about Rusyn distinctiveness are two sub-claims: first, that the "early origins of the Carpatho-Rusyns ... were not, as is often asserted, exclusively associated with Kievan Rus"; and, second, that "Carpathian Rus' has historically been within political and cultural spheres that are firmly part of central Europe."⁵

At the same time, although distinctly observable Rusyn characteristics do exist in Magocsi's scheme—especially among the Dolyniane, or Lowlanders, inhabiting for the most part Ukraine's Zakarpattya oblast—it is obviously not the case that there exists an equally solid "awareness among members of a given group of people that they have such common characteristics and that it is these characteristics which distinguish them from neighboring peoples or nationalities." After all, even the putative core of the Rusyn ethnic group, the Dolyniane, is named after their place of residence. As a result, Rusyns as an ethnic group have been mobilized, and still are being mobilized, by nationalists and nation builders with different national agendas. Historically, Rusynophiles, Russophiles, and Ukrainophiles have competed for the loyalties of Rusyns, with each set of nation builders claiming that the ethnic

⁵ *Encyclopedia*, p. 179.

characteristics they observe should translate into awareness of belonging to, respectively, a Rusyn nationality, a Russian nationality, or a Ukrainian nationality. At present, the primary competition is, as Magocsi recognizes, between Rusynophiles and Ukrainophiles.

The existence of three nation-building projects among Rusyns is hardly surprising, and it mirrors the existence at various points in time of similarly varied nation-building projects among the Ukrainians and all other ethnic groups. But it does raise questions about the validity of Magocsi's distinctions between nationality and ethnic group. That scheme implied that observable characteristics amounted to an observable "proto-nationality" that, although asleep, could be best awakened by nation builders committed to just those observable characteristics and the proto-nationality they underpin. That three or more sets of very different nation builders can make plausible claims about representing some ethnic group obviously suggests that observable characteristics are, as I have already noted, rather more fungible than meets the eye. At the same time, it is important to remember that Magocsi is decidedly not a Gellnerian or a social constructionist who believes that nationalists can make nations out of anybody. The ideological struggle over Rusyn nationality is waged among three elites, two of whom represent neighboring nationalities with significant similarities with Rusyns. The

contestants are not, after all, Rusynophiles, Francophiles, and Sinophiles, as a strictly social constructionist interpretation would have to countenance.

For Magocsi, in any case, the fact that Rusyns do have a distinct set of observable characteristics and that Ukrainophiles can make plausible claims about representing the Rusyn ethnic group and transforming it into a Ukrainian nationality leads to two conclusions. First, the Rusynophile orientation must be defended and promoted—and Magocsi’s writings about Rusyns and his extensive community activities on behalf of Rusyns do just that. Second, and paradoxically, the Ukrainian *alternative* to Rusyns must also be defended and promoted. Magocsi the Rusyn nation builder needs Ukraine and Ukrainians for his case for Rusyn distinctiveness to be persuasive.

It is not that Ukraine represents some evil “other” for Magocsi. His thought is too sensitive and his political convictions are too liberal for so crude a view. Instead, Ukrainians *must exist* as a nationality with distinctly observable characteristics and a distinct self-perception of their own. The case for a distinct Rusyn nationality presupposes the ability to distinguish Rusyns from non-Rusyns, both in terms of observable characteristics and self-perception. Given the overwhelming ethnographic and demographic presence of Ukrainians and the strength of the Ukrainophile orientation, it is imperative

that Rusyns be established as *not*-Ukrainians. In turn, that means establishing Ukrainians as *not*-Rusyns and as *not*-Russians.

Logically, Ukrainians *must* be different from both. They must be different from Rusyns, because that difference is the very *raison d'être* of Rusyn nationality. And Ukrainians must be different from Russians, both because that difference is the *raison d'être* of Ukrainian nationality and because, while resisting the hegemonic nation-building efforts of nationalists claiming to represent 45 million people with doubts about their observable characteristics and self-perception is conceivable, resisting the hegemonic nation-building efforts of nationalists claiming to represent 150 million Russians (and 45 million Little Russians) with few doubts about their observable characteristics and self-perception may be impossible. Russians are the “absent presence” in Magocsi’s thought. He generally does not discuss them in relation to Rusyns, but the importance of Russians to Ukrainian self-perceptions as a nationality means that—again *pace* the more radical claims of social constructivism—there is no way that a Rusyn nation builder can ignore Russians or want Russian nation-building efforts to prevail among Ukrainians. While many Ukrainian nationalists and nation builders might dispute the desirability of establishing Ukrainians as not-Rusyns and Rusyns as not-Ukrainians, all would surely welcome Magocsi’s explicit claim that Ukrainians are not-Russians and his implicit claim that they must remain not-Russians.

In sum, Ukrainians logically *must* exist for Magocsi. They are, as it were, a necessary condition of his Rusyn nation-building efforts. To make the case for a distinct Ukrainian nationality and a distinct Ukraine—both with “a distinct territory (possibly but not necessarily statehood), language, historical tradition, religion, social attitudes, and ethnographic features”—is to make the case for a distinct Rusyn nationality and a distinct Carpathian Rus’ homeland. In this sense, as in so many others, Magocsi is acting in accordance with traditional nationalist beliefs—and I am tempted to say that Magocsi is very much the kind of liberal nationalist prevalent in an empire he has studied very closely, Austria-Hungary. The logic of his thought and activity is also identical to that of Ukrainian nation builders who have needed, and continue to need, a distinctly Russian Russia in order to make the case for a distinctly Ukrainian Ukraine. The paradoxes of Paul Robert Magocsi therefore dissolve, only to reveal what may be a true paradox—that all nation builders are always builders of at least two nations, their own and the other’s.

