Book Review


Russia after the Global Economic Crisis is perhaps one of the best collective works on Russia produced recently. It represents comprehensive scholarly work rather than a single research project. Each of its chapters constitutes a valuable piece of information, including even its cover design, that reflects precisely the current condition of the Russian economy: the glitzy glass-and-steel high-rises of the “virtual” economy and the dilapidated concrete production facilities of the “real” sector, inherited from the Soviet era. The foreword discusses Russia’s belonging to the BRIC and expresses concern regarding the country’s place within this organization due to its relatively weak economic performance. Russia, an industrialized nation for many decades, is being compared with nations that are still undergoing the fundamental processes of industrialization. Indeed, Russia does not belong in this pool of emerging economic giants, but not because it has plunged into a financial crisis. It does not belong in this pool because it is far above it—and has been for decades.

An especially worthy chapter is that by Timothy Frye, entitled “Corruption and the Rule of Law.” As it turns out, corruption concerns not only regular people, but also businessmen both small-scale and prominent. The notion of the rule of law as it encompasses the legal system itself and the level of law enforcement, along with its dark side—corruption—becomes a defining factor in the trajectory of Russia’s economic and political development. While the Russian economy is stable and has been proven capable of withstanding the recent global economic crisis, the worries of both domestic and foreign businessmen and investors are growing. The author points out the following: “businesspeople report that in recent years the security of property rights has become more contingent on political connections. Investment decisions greatly depend on whether businesspeople believe that they can take the state to court. Moreover, political connections in legal disputes remain a powerful asset.” (p. 80). Indeed, the intersection of the rule of law, property rights, and corruption becomes an issue of paramount importance not only for Russia, but for numerous other nations. And yet there is so little literature that addresses the issues of corrupt courts; corporate and property raiding; land disputes; enforcing the rule of law in locales, regions, and distant provinces; and the fear of businessmen to invest due to the high risk of losing their property. Frye suggests redrawing Russia’s legal districts as a possible partial
solution for the problem of corruption in commercial arbitration court: “Russia’s legal jurisdictions coincide with its political jurisdictions—that is, almost every region has one arbitration court and therefore is vulnerable to pressure from a single governor. Redrawing the jurisdictions so that each arbitration court includes several regions might increase the independence of arbitration court judges by reducing their dependence on any single governor. Similarly, it would be helpful to rotate judges among several regions to make it harder for them to form close relations with governors.” (p. 94). This suggestion is somewhat reminiscent of the overlapping, redistricting, and the cadres rotation system that has existed in China for centuries. Despite its obvious merits, the chapter seems incomplete. Not accidentally, it is the shortest chapter in the book. It almost feels as though this is a part of an ongoing project that has yet to be completed by the author.

The scope of the book is impressive. It extends from Gazprom, the Russian state-owned oil and gas behemoth (p. 151), to Russia’s interests in the Manas air base in Kirgizstan (p. 250), to President Medvedev’s address on environmental issues (p. 125). Its chapters would also serve as good Encyclopedia entries about the Russian economy, politics, and society. The content of some chapters in the book, however, only vaguely corresponds to its title. For instance, I struggled to find anything that would relate to the acclaimed “Russia after the global economic crisis” in the “Federalism in Russia” chapter by Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. The task was to gather the best experts on Russian economy and politics and to produce a work that would update the existing literature on Russia. What is missing from the book is the logic of inquiry. The introduction offers a brief outline of each of the chapters, but does not substitute for a clearly positioned logic of inquiry into the subject matter: Russia after the global economic crisis. The work needs a central thesis around which all the pieces would be assembled by different authors. Instead, it falls into the trap of comprehensiveness in lieu of cohesion—a danger faced during the production of just about every edited volume or collective work.

The authors conclude that Russia’s current strategy may be productive in the short run, but it lacks perspective in the long run. They point to the need for substantial structural changes in the economy. This book would be very helpful not only for students and scholars interested in Russian economy and politics, but also for those who plan on investing, working, or being involved in other business activities in Russia in the near and not-so-near future. This book is intended for those who plan on a long-term involvement with Russia, and are in need of better understanding the country’s current and future economic developments.
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