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Book review: Russia and globalization: identity, security, and society in an era of change

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Russia and Globalization: Identity, Security, and Society in an Era of Change edited by Douglas W. Blum. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. xv + 383; index. ISBN 10: 0-8018-8842-5 and 13: 978-0-8018-8842-7 (cloth: alk. paper).

Much has been written about globalization's impacts on domestic development. Russia has remained largely outside of the purview of this body of scholarship lagging behind other economically liberalized states like China and India in the scholarly attention received. Yet, as this volume demonstrates, globalization goes far beyond trans-national capital striking at the core of national identity and affecting demography, territorial cohesion, education, civil society, and national security.

The book does not purport to offer comprehensive coverage of globalization—such a task would have been impossible for one volume to tackle. Rather, Hedetoft and Blum's Introduction suggests that it aims to come up with “a basic framework for conceptualizing the complex dynamic between a Russian Federation deeply embroiled in as well as affected by globalization, and often at the same time just as actively trying to erect barriers between itself and the world of global dynamics” (p. 1).

The essays in Part One on domestic processes do a commendable job of capturing these dynamics. Consistent with globalization scholarship's focus on fragmentation, the objects of analysis are citizens, the civil society, localities, educational institutions, and industries. Developments in these areas are in stark contrast to the bombastic pronouncements of the national government—the focus of several essays in Part II. The Russian people of Korotayev and Khaltourina's essay are a far cry from the colossus that carries the torch of Eurasian civilization—a common national identity myth. Rather, their statistical analysis demonstrates that Russians' obsession with vodka as a way of coping with economic uncertainties explains why the country's demographic crisis is far more severe than even in some of the least developed post-communist states. In Bradshaw's essay, despite a few “propulsive regions” many emerge as “totally isolated from the global economy” (p. 106). Vodichev and Lamin provide intriguing insights into the persistence in Siberia of a perception of a “home country-colony” (p. 113) resource extraction dependency between European and Asian Russia. These processes demonstrate both Russia's failure to make the most of globalization and to maintain a unifying national identity in the face of territorial fragmentation.

While western donors are eager to help with developing Russia's economy and democracy through civil society support, Richter demonstrates the pitfalls of these efforts both due to the persistence of Soviet-era state-society relationships and mentalities and the failure of western donors to perceive these nuances. Konstantinov and Filonovich suggest that Western norms are being socially internalized as Russia participates in the Bologna education reform process, however there remains many a high-placed advocate “of the unique advantages of Russia's system of higher education” (p. 146). Finally, Kassianova's fascinating analysis of Russia's defense industry, which has remained statist, non-transparent, and has failed to meet the demands of global competition,

exposes a cherished myth of Russian national mythmakers—that of a cutting edge and competitive defense industry.

The Essays in Part II on foreign policy contrast with those in Part I insofar as the analytical lens shifts onto actors which have been the focus of traditional international relations scholarship, namely national policy elites. This would appear to be somewhat disappointing for a book on globalization however it is appropriate in that the essays are illustrative of the persistence of traditional mode of thinking of the Russian foreign policy establishment. The essays by Troitskiy, Solovyev, and Fenenko illustrate this tendency in that external relations are attributed to a narrow set of key government and political actors and their shifting views of justice, geopolitics, and Russian identity and its “mission,” while those outside of this elite circle are largely left out of the analysis. Fortunately, the myth that some of these actors’ dated views are crucial to shaping Russia’s experience of globalization is dispelled early on in Part I which shows its deep socio-economic impacts irrespective of the pontifications of “special path”-type thinkers or the controlling impulses of Russia’s national leaders.

Gradually, even these policy elite perceptions are shifting however, as Russia is being socialized into western norms under pressure from external actors. This is illustrated in Noreen’s essay on the Baltic area security community and Fawn’s essay on Russia-Council of Europe relations. Blum’s concluding essay nicely summarizes the identity agonies of Russia’s policy elite which, faced with the realities of global integration, sees itself as an “embattled civilizational outpost” (p. 337).

While much of the material is based on original empirical research, some has been covered elsewhere by the volume’s and other authors. However, together the essays constitute a long overdue account of globalization’s impacts on identity, security, and society in Russia and the awkward attempts of the various domestic actors at dealing with it. The book would be of great interest to students and scholars of comparative politics, political economy, globalization, and area studies.