

Stephen Crowley, *Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation* (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2021), 306 pp., \$29.95 (pb), ISBN 9781501756283.

As a communist country, the Soviet Union was supposed to be the workers' state, but many have discounted the role of labor in Russia in the post-communist era. In his new book, Stephen Crowley addresses this shortage by detailing the development of Russia's unique post-communist labor market, its challenges and shortcomings, and its potential influence on the government. For anyone interested in better understanding the modern political and economic scene in Russia, he provides compelling reasons to take the role of labor more seriously than it has been treated in other works.

In examining labor in Russia, Crowley takes up an issue that is both important but deeply challenging to study. Independent unions are weak and workers in Russia are almost always poorly organized, if at all. He notes the formidable obstacles to study something that has, in some ways, not happened. Nonetheless, the book makes the case that the potential political influence of workers in Russia has been underestimated, especially considering the attention and concern President Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders have given it. In doing so, Crowley presents the dilemma posed by labor for Putin and Russian leaders: labor has not yet posed a serious threat to regime stability—but it could, and predicting when the tipping point will come is difficult if not impossible. Moreover, the stakes are high for authoritarian leaders concerned about losing power. Additionally, the policies required to transform Russia's labor market into a more efficient and productive one that would better promote long-term economic growth is also enormously unpopular in the short-term. Even if Putin wanted to, he might not be able to pursue better long-term economic policies without sacrificing short-term political and popular support.

The book is organized in two major parts. The first part (chapters 2 through 4) is a description of Russia's post-communist labor situation and challenges, including an insightful description of how the low labor productivity trap is driven in large part by the persistence of hundreds of Russian monotowns. These medium sized cities are economically dependent on a single sector or even a lone firm and, as a result, many are stagnating. Crowley's detailing of the rise and persistence of monotowns is useful for both experts and novices of Russian politics. Particularly interesting is Crowley's description of the very unique Russian labor market in chapter 2. Crowley explains that Russia avoided mass unemployment in the 1990s, with employers instead cutting

costs by reducing wages or not paying workers altogether. At the same time, avoiding mass layoffs was critical for avoiding a social explosion that would be bad for firm managers, local leaders, and national leadership. Thus, labor was influential not because it was organized but because of its structural role. Crowley goes on in chapter 3 to explain the economic pitfalls of Russia's low labor productivity and the difficulty of changing it. The persistence of Russia's monotowns and "aggressive immobility" of Russian labor are described in vivid detail in chapter 4, and highlight an underappreciated aspect of modern Russian life among Western observers—that there is enormous political pressure not to overhaul this outdated and inefficient labor model.

The second half of the book (chapters 5 through 8) examines different dimensions of labor politics in Russia by addressing labor protests (chapter 5), the case of Russia's largest monotown, Tolyatti (chapter 6), the possible role of labor in a color revolution (chapter 7), and the 2015 truckers' protests over a road usage tax (chapter 8). These chapters offer a better understanding of exactly why the Russian government is right to be concerned about the role of labor movements, even though these movements have generally been unorganized and unsuccessful. Chapter 6, for instance, details the many ways in which the government sought to pacify workers' demands in Tolyatti with considerable state subsidies and promises. This is probably the most compelling evidence of how much the Russian leadership is attuned to the potential for labor to cause problems. In contrast, labor appears to have played a very limited role in color revolutions. Rather, general economic grievances—which also affect workers—appeared to be one part of what provoked and sustained these political protests to overthrow corrupt leaders in post-communist countries.

In the final two chapters of the book, Crowley extends the discussion to comparisons with labor politics in Ukraine, Belarus, and China and a discussion of whether and how Russia might overcome what he labels as Russia's labor dilemma. The Russian labor market is similar to that of Ukraine and Belarus, two neighboring post-Soviet countries that also experienced what many would consider a traumatic market transition in the 1990s. The recent unsuccessful protests in Belarus against Lukashenko were spurred in part by economic conditions, although it is not clear what role, if any, labor played there. The Chinese government faced some similar labor challenges to Russia, but the centralized political system effectively managed those and meant the labor issue did not threaten regime survival.

In the concluding chapter, Crowley suggests that the labor challenge will be difficult, if not impossible, to solve. This is, in many ways, a refreshingly honest conclusion in which he does not try to hold out or advance false hope that the Russian government can fix a long-standing endemic and systemic

structural labor problem. Indeed, Crowley highlights an important and often missed point: Russian opposition leaders trying to take advantage of economic dissatisfaction often overlook that economic grievances may not translate into support for competitive democracy. Here, we are back to a central dilemma described by Adam Przeworski in the early 1990s: economic reforms considered necessary may not be easily sustained in a competitive democratic system. Unfortunately, Crowley's work also suggests that Putin has no impetus to use his authoritarian power to promote a painful restructuring of the labor market that might be better for long-term economic growth. Doing so could upset an already fragile stability in the country.

An important remaining question is whether Putin has a labor dilemma, or an economic dilemma of which labor is one component. Throughout the book, Crowley is frequently discussing general economic conditions rather than specific labor demands. Indeed, even the chapter on truckers' protests raises the question of whether these should be considered primarily or solely labor protests. Truckers' unions did get involved, but as Crowley notes, many of the trucking companies are independently operated, making those protesting both the owner and employee. The issue at stake was a road usage tax targeting a particular group. Should we think of this as a labor issue, or more of a taxation issue? In many ways, the trucker protests absolutely make sense to classify as labor protests, but there is the larger conceptual issue of where we draw the line. We have to know clearly what a labor issue is before we can say that labor *qua* labor is influential or not. And as Crowley's work shows, whether an issue is taken up by a union is not the sole determinant of whether it is a labor issue.

Admirably, Crowley transparently presents mixed evidence about the role of labor, thereby opening up a discussion about its nuanced and complicated political role in Russia. At points, this means that the book is more about how the average Russian responds to overall socioeconomic conditions rather than labor issues specifically. One possibility is that the challenge for the Russian government is not labor *per se*, but how to do just enough to pacify the population without providing long-term high quality public services coming from a system with elected officials who can be held accountable. Indeed, in chapter 8, which addresses the trucker protests, Crowley cites very convincing polling data from over time that Russians care primarily about general economic conditions. Given that workers are often poorly organized, this evidence would suggest that labor is not the central political issue. Work by Linda Cook, Ilya Matveev, Grigore Pop-Eleches, Natalia Zubarevich, and others shows that Russian citizens have a strong enduring expectation that the Russian state will provide certain services. Perhaps workers are upset about the public goods not being provided by the state and not their working conditions.

It is important to note too that labor is not a homogenous monolith. Despite the huge diversity of potential labor demands across sectors and regions of Russia, the book has limited discussion of how labor differs. There is an in-depth discussion of two groups: the AvtoVAZ workers in Tolyatti and truckers. Nonetheless, there is no systematic discussion of the different groups of workers in different industries and regions and their potential influence. This is likely because Crowley has understandably chosen to focus on highlighting instances where labor demands were the most vocal and had the most potential to be politically influential. To better understand auto and truck workers in their domestic context, however, it would have been useful to see them compared to places where labor was quiescent.

Regardless of the points raised here, Crowley's broad approach in studying labor is insightful and informative and constitutes a major contribution. He takes an expansive view that gives us a better understanding of how an often-inactive interest group—workers in Russia—may still matter a great deal to politicians in an illiberal regime. His evidence that Putin and United Russia care about monotowns like Tolyatti and the workers at major factories like AvtoVAZ is compelling. Furthermore, his explanation of Russia's unique history with labor unions lends important insight into how and why labor has remained poorly organized in the 2000s. Legislation makes true strikes nearly impossible imposing requirements such as announcing when the strike will end before it begins. Alternative unions are suppressed in favor of the dominant state-backed labor organization. Such repression explains why labor's influence is limited in Russia, and makes clear that the government is worried this could change with more freedom.

*Putin's Labor Dilemma* is an invaluable resource in understanding why and how Russia's labor movements have not successfully influenced the government in many cases, but why the Russian government still rightly worries about them. Many observers have long discounted the political sway of labor in post-communist Russia. Crowley gives us good reason to keep labor politics central in our understanding how Putin navigates stability and stagnation.

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