

Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation by Stephen Crowley (Cornell University Press, 2021; 290pp.)

Putin's Labor Dilemma presents an authoritative study – indeed definitive as far as that is possible – of labor politics in post-Soviet Russia. A veteran scholar of the subject, Crowley relies on a multi-disciplinary approach to create a rich picture of workers' discontents and protests. Russian workers are often assumed to be quiescent and long-suffering, but Crowley's recounting of the many cases and forms of labor activism from the 1990s to 2020 convinces that they have not been passive. He argues that the elite's prioritizing of stability and fear of labor unrest have acted as a serious brake on Russia's deindustrialization. This brake has helped to keep the economy in a low-unemployment, low-wage, low-productivity trap that mollifies some industrial workers at the expense of progress toward efficiency. Crowley's book thus contributes to the critical debate about the failures of economic modernization in Putin's Russia.

The most common explanations for Russia's failed economic development are elite-centric, focused on the 'resource curse', oligarchic self-interest, dominance of the *siloviki*. Crowley focuses instead at the societal level. He acknowledges that workers have not produced the feared 'social explosion', even during the long and deep 1990s depression. Nor do they have effective trade unions; the still-dominant legacy FNPR is incorporated into the regime while more militant independent unions are small and hobbled by legal restrictions. It seems that there is little reason for elites to fear labor discontent. But Crowley documents the many points and forms at which workers have mobilized since the 1990s -the succession of protests and strikes by miners, public sector employees, workers in foreign-owned plants, in large state-owned enterprises, health sector workers, transport workers, auto importers, truckers – an impressive list. More importantly, he recounts many specific points at which the political leadership has openly acknowledged fear or apprehension of growing unrest as it backed away from liberalizing reforms in the face of protests. At every turn it avoided mass layoffs and closures of large enterprises, or cushioned them with state subsidies and interventions that undermined progress toward economic modernization.

The most original and important chapters of *Putin's Labor Dilemma* focus on Russia's monotowns, the several hundred towns (in some cases cities) that rely on a single large industrial plant or industry for survival. This 'survival' is literal. Most of the monotowns were established during Russia's industrialization drive in the 1930s, around 'city-forming' industrial enterprises that provided not only most of the town's jobs but its social services, public utilities, housing, schools, medical clinics, childcare. This development strategy produced in Russia a unique 'urban geography' comprised of a few large cities and hundreds of mid-sized, more or less remote towns based on a single industry. Crowley explains how this geography creates extremely high barriers to deindustrialization because enterprise closures would mean the collapse of whole communities. The Putin regime appears loathe to force such 'creative destruction.' During the 2008 financial crisis the leadership focused great attention on these monotowns, designating the socioeconomically most vulnerable one hundred as "red" and prioritizing them for federal aid. Crowley's case study of Russia's largest monotown, Tolyatti with its dominant AvtoVAZ plant, documents in some detail the state subsidies and schemes used to cushion impacts of downsizing, as well as the conviction of AvtoVAZ's workers even in 2015 that the factory's management had social obligations toward them. While

monotowns have gradually shrunk through labor force attrition, many remain as resource-absorbing relics.

A couple of critical points should be mentioned. Crowley should have paid more attention to the millions of migrant workers who have flowed in and out of Russia since 2000, providing an almost inexhaustible source of highly-mobile, flexible, low-skilled and low-wage labor. How do these migrant workers fit into Russia's labor relations system? Do they facilitate the immobility of the domestic labor force, compensate for its dwindling numbers, affect wages? Secondly, the author might have included a chapter on sectors of the urban economy that are more modern, technologically-sophisticated, efficient, to provide a somewhat more balanced overall picture.

Overall, Crowley's book makes the critical argument that the elite's fear of workers' unrest has been a major brake on deindustrialization and modernization in Russia. He convinces this reader that workers have been more active, vocal and influential than experts realized, that we must look not only at elites' interests but at societal actors in order to understand the politics of Putin's Russia. This important, engaging and authoritative study is essential reading for all who seek such understanding.

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