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Some Foreign Scholars Do Have a Clue

By Konstantin Sonin

It's not uncommon to find foreign economists specializing in Russia who know absolutely nothing about the Russian economy. I remember listening to one speaker at an academic conference who, after painstakingly analyzing the data, concluded that, "strange as it may sound, the 1998 financial crisis did not lead to a downturn in Russian agricultural production."

It's far more difficult to find foreign political scientists -- academics, that is -- specializing in Russia who don't have a clue about what they're talking about. The difference is that no one expects economists to actually spend any time in the country they're studying.

Yet Yoshiko Herrera, an associate professor of government at Harvard University, spent a total of two and a half years in Samara and Yekaterinburg while working on her recently published book about "imagined economies" -- what people in the regions think and how this relates to the economic conditions in which they live. As it turns out, perceptions of economic reality are largely dependent on ideological constructions.

The analysis of how such perceptions come about is very complex, because this process occurs in the heads of millions of people and is affected by a wide range of factors. But this sort of analysis is vital. As we have seen in a number of former Soviet republics, the imagined life "without Moscow" can differ wildly from the actual situation on the ground, and this collective imagination can play a far more important role than the most competent, professional calculations. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that Herrera's book will ever attract much attention in Russia.

Two years ago, Mark Beissinger published a book on the rapid evolution of nationalism in the last years of the Soviet Union -- the result of nearly 15 years' work. Had the Kremlin's spin doctors read Beissinger's book -- or even glanced at the introduction -- before parachuting into Ukraine, they might not have made such a mess of things.

I was wrong to chide foreign economists generally at the beginning of this column, of course. Russian universities and institutes use Paul Gregory's book on Russian economic history for the simple reason that no one has written anything better on the subject. The work of Richard Ericson (you may recall the term "industrial feudalism"), Barry Ickes, Clifford Gaddy ("virtual economy") and others -- not to mention the leading lights of previous generations -- continues to make an enormous contribution to the understanding of Russia's economic problems. But it's still nice to know that political scientists who study Russia are expected to spend at least a couple of years here.

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