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ANALYSIS

The Russian Economy: the Impact of Sanctions and Falling Oil Prices, and the Prospects for Future Growth

By Julian Cooper, Birmingham, UK

Abstract
The imposition of trade and financial sanctions on Russia by the US, the European Union and some other countries as a response to the conflict in Ukraine, and the sharp decline in the price of oil, have focused attention on the performance of the Russian economy and its future prospects. These developments occurred at a time when the economy was already experiencing mounting fears of stagflation or recession. This article explores the factors responsible for the loss of momentum of the Russian economy, the impact of sanctions and lower oil prices, and future growth prospects at a time of considerable geopolitical uncertainty.

Of all the G20 countries, Russia was hit hardest by the global financial-economic crisis. After a robust initial recovery, growth faltered in 2013 at a time when the price of oil was relatively high. The Russian economy was negatively affected by the troubled economic development of most EU economies and some loss of momentum in China, since 2010 Russia's largest country trade partner. But there were also domestic factors. Most importantly, the rate of growth of investment declined. Whereas fixed investment had grown by 10–20 per cent a year before the global crisis, by 2013 the rate had fallen to 0.2 per cent. At the same time, the workforce ceased to grow and then began to decline.

As the leadership acknowledges, the model of growth that achieved impressive results prior to 2008 no longer functions effectively. New drivers of growth are needed. The constraints on growth are structural in character and not easily removed without decisive action. Over the past decade there has been a growth of the role of the state in the economy, not just as an owner of assets, but also as a regulator, at both federal and sub-federal levels. Competition is weak, perhaps not surprising in a natural resource economy dominated by large state companies, with a corresponding low level of innovation.[1] By European standards the small business sector still plays a limited role in the economy and faces many obstacles. Human capital is by and large strong, but its growth is limited by inadequate spending on education and health. Corruption remains a serious problem, though it is difficult to separate its negative impact on growth from other factors. Business-state relations are in need of improvement, and notwithstanding serious efforts by the main business associations and the business ombudsman, Boris Titov, working with the government, much remains to be done.

It is against this background that recent developments must be considered and future prospects assessed. Firstly, there is the issue of the impact of the Ukraine conflict and sanctions, together with the policy response to them. On Russia's action in Ukraine, it is worth noting that economic concerns, in particular implications for the budget and the state of external economic relations, do not appear to have been a major consideration in the government's decision making process. It is the Security Council that has been the principal body for discussion of Ukraine, a purely consultative body, chaired by the President. While finance minister, Anton Siluanov, is a member (but not the economics minister or Central Bank of Russia's governor), he is not one of the core permanent members, and discussion of Ukraine has been at meetings of permanent members only. In the USA, the Treasury Secretary is a full member of the equivalent National Security Council and eligible to attend all its meetings. Inadequate integration of policies for national security and for the country's socio-economic development is one of the central issues that the new law on strategic planning adopted in June seeks to address, but it contains no consideration of the composition of the Security Council.

Secondly, Russia must now counter sanctions imposed by the US, EU and other countries, with efforts to render the Russian economy less vulnerable to external pressure, including a search for new trade partners, especially in Asia, and measures to promote import substitution. The latter has come to the fore as a priority, above all, in the defence industry and high technology sectors in general, but also in others spheres, not least energy, faced with limited access to advanced technologies, including food production and processing, a sector obliged to respond to the retaliatory limits on import imposed by Russia itself on sanctioning nations. In addition, Russia is responding to a ban imposed by Ukraine on deliveries to it of armaments and other military equipment. But replacing imports by domestically produced

1 See Harley Balzer and Jon Askonas, 'Innovation in Russia and China Compared', Russian Analytical Digest, No.155, 23 September 2014, pp. 2–6.

goods will not be easy and could prove to have negative consequences. While there could be short-term output gains, there is a danger that costs will rise and quality decline. Companies are expecting budget support for import substitution activities; the overall cost could prove quite substantial. A programme for replacing Ukrainian defence inputs over the next two years has been approved, with a total cost of almost 40 billion roubles, but another programme to substitute for defence industry inputs currently obtained from the USA and other sanctioning countries is behind schedule, so funding has not been included in the budget for 2015.

In the years preceding Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2012, the agricultural sector was vocal in questioning the wisdom of joining. Demands for more protection were often voiced after accession. So, when deciding on counter-sanctions it is probably not surprising that a decision was made to end the import of agricultural products and food items from sanctioning countries. This was probably considered a move to promote diversification of the economy. While there may be some short term boost to output of some food items, by its nature agricultural production cannot be increased rapidly and in Russia there are also logistical issues to be addressed. Alternative external suppliers are being found, but this takes time and costs may rise. Already, food prices are increasing, for some items quite rapidly. The price and availability of food is potentially a sensitive issue for the authorities as many still recall the crisis of 1998, and an older generation remember the bare shelves of the last Soviet years. The wisdom of these counter-sanctions has been called into question by former finance minister, Aleksei Kudrin, who thinks that there are better methods of supporting agriculture, with lower social and economic costs, such as aid for the purchase of technology and favourable terms of credit.

Notwithstanding regular acknowledgement at the highest level that diversification of the Russian economy to reduce its dependence on hydrocarbons and resource extraction in general is a top priority, little has been achieved. Over the years, the share of hydrocarbons in the country's exports has in fact steadily grown. Deliveries of crude oil, oil products and natural gas accounted for just over half of all exports by value in 2000, in 2005 the share had increased to 62 per cent, in 2010 to 65 per cent and during the first nine months of 2014 the share rose to over two-thirds.[2] Export duties and various taxes on the oil and gas industries account for half of federal budget revenues. In these circumstances the Russian economy is very vulnerable to fluctuations in world oil prices and this has become evident in recent months as oil prices have declined from over $110 per barrel to $80 or less.

With a troubled economy, the issue of the federal budget, its priorities and dependability of funding, becomes important. Established precautionary policies are under attack. Since the end of the 1990s Russia has had a good record of budget stability. This has been aided by a Stabilisation Fund created in 2004. The Fund was divided into two in January 2008, to form a Reserve Fund intended to cover budget deficits arising from low oil and gas prices, and the National Welfare Fund to support the pension system. In addition, there is the so-called budget rule, which provides some insulation from sharp changes in oil prices.

The Reserve Fund proved of great value during the global financial economic crisis. With reform of the pension system low on the policy agenda, the Welfare Fund has come to be seen as a source of investment, above all for infrastructure, and now up to 60 per cent can be used for this purpose. As sanctions have taken hold, a number of companies near to the state, 'Rosneft' to the fore, have requested large-scale financial assistance from the Fund and there has been pressure to raise the threshold of its use to 90 per cent. By international standards, Russia has large foreign currency reserves (equivalent to over a year's imports), but if account is taken of the reserve funds, plus gold, the total available is little more than $200 bn. (less than six month's imports). Experience of the recent past is cautionary: between July 2008 and January 2009 the Bank of Russia ran down the reserves by over $200 bn in striving to avoid a sharp devaluation of the rouble.

The federal budget for 2015 has been based on an oil price forecast of $100 a barrel, GDP growth of 1.2 per cent, a rate of inflation of 6.7 per cent and an average exchange rate of $37.7 per rouble. By early December, with oil prices falling below $65 per barrel, these assumptions had become highly questionable. It is a budget in which the military has top priority. This stems from a firm determination to implement in full the first five years of the ambitious state armaments programme to 2020. Spending on the armed forces of the defence ministry will account for 21 per cent of total expenditure, 4.2 per cent of GDP, a share not seen since the early 1990s. As a consequence, budget shares of spending on education, health and the economy have already been reduced. This pressure on social and economic spending will now be intensified. Following Putin's state of the nation speech on 4 December, the government was instructed to amend the 2015–17 budget by reducing all spending except that on defence and security by five percent in real terms.

2 Data of Bank of Russia.

Economic forecasts for 2015 and beyond have been progressively cut back. The most sober to date has been that of the Bank of Russia, with hardly any growth expected until at least 2017. The economics ministry always tends to greater optimism, hoping for 1.2 per cent growth in 2015 followed by 2.3 per cent in 2016, and it is this forecast that provides the basis for the budget. However, it plans to issue a revised forecast in December and this is likely to take more account of the lower oil price and the depreciation of the currency. Russians may soon experience what has been a reality for many citizens of the European Union in recent years, falling per capita disposable incomes and living standards under pressure, but in the case of Russia with a higher rate of inflation and, probably, a lower level of unemployment.

Given these far from optimistic prospects for the economy, it is not surprising that some have been arguing for a fundamental change of course, with a move away from the liberal approach to macroeconomic management that has prevailed in Russia hitherto. This is no surprise. Similar demands were voiced at the time of the 1998 crisis, but then they were rejected. The principal advocate of transition to a state-led 'mobilisation' strategy is now Putin's advisor on Eurasian economic integration, Sergei Glaz'ev, an active member of the conservative, nationalist, Izborskii Club, now having some prominence. He advocates a radical change of monetary policy, envisaging a massive injection of credit by the Bank of Russia, but also the adoption of directive planning in the state sector of the economy, strict controls on capital and external economic relations in general, with extensive protection. This, he believes, will secure a rate of investment of up to 40 per cent of GDP and annual rate of growth of 6–8 per cent. It is worth noting that this statist approach has been explicitly rejected by Putin and his economic team.

Perhaps of greater danger to future economic prospects is increasing statisation and moves toward autarky by stealth, i.e. an accumulation of measures, relatively minor in themselves, for greater state intervention and control, leading to a further deterioration of the business climate and a creeping re-emergence of an administered economy. Demands for state financial support and protection are mounting, the predominantly state-owned defence industry, with increasingly centralised leadership, is playing an ever larger role in the economy, and pressure to introduce new taxes is strong, though generally resisted by the authorities. Re-orientation of the economy away from Europe towards Asia will require huge state investment, if perceptions of strained relations with the West persist.

However, there are alternatives. The opportunity for liberal reforms and policies has increased. A weakened economy and depressed living standards must haunt Putin's conjectures about Russia's heritage from his third Presidential term of office. His unprecedented level of popularity spurred by the annexation of Crimea and the reassertion of Russia as a power in the world, gives him the chance to push for more market liberalisation and incentives, with the possibility of blaming external forces for any costs they may entail. While under some pressure, the liberally orientated economic agencies still prevail. The private sector, vital to any economic modernisation, is in urgent need of a boost to its business confidence. These are conditions that could be favourable to the adoption of, and support for, far-reaching reforms. There is a window of opportunity for change; it remains to be seen whether it will be grasped.

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BOOK REVIEW

Is Russia Becoming an Unstable Petro-State?

By Peter Reddaway, Washington, D.C.

Thane Gustafson, Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

Over the last forty years, the global cost of oil has played a central role in a series of startling economic and political developments. The rude price shocks of 1973 and 1979–1980 awoke the world to the fact that henceforth oil would no longer be viewed as a cheap fuel. While whole populations had become addicted to it, its cost would now be a lot higher—and also wildly unpredictable.

For oil-importing countries, this was bad news. At the same time, the major exporters faced a different challenge: either use the windfall profits to strengthen and diversify their economies and be ready for the times when the oil price would plunge; or neglect all this, drift into addiction to the high prices by squandering them on corruption and hand-outs, face fiscal crises when the bad times come, and be labeled a petro-state[1].

Twenty years later, the giddy rise in the oil price that began in 2000 and soon spiraled from $25 a barrel in 2004 to almost $150 in 2008 gave exporters unprecedented opportunities to choose between the two paths—financial security or petro-state. But it caused serious pain to importers and exacerbated the world economic crisis that we have yet to put behind us.

However, the high price also provoked an unexpected and positive response. In the last few years the United States has suddenly shifted from experiencing a disturbing long-term dependence on expensive imported oil to seeing an increase of about 50% in its own crude oil production and the prospect of becoming the largest oil producer in the world by 2020. This has resulted from small flexible companies using refined techniques like hydro-fracking to break up layers of rock and extract so-called "tight oil". The U.S. shift has also contributed to a sharp decrease in the world oil price since June 2014.

In 2014, Vladimir Putin's irresponsible actions in Ukraine made clear that Russia's important role in the world oil market will be declining in the next few years. As a result of this and other factors, Russia may soon become politically unstable.

With this evocation of the volatility of oil issues as background, let us turn to a key and highly topical question: does the ominous label petro-state apply to Russia? This is where Thane Gustafson's *Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia* provides major help. The book is a history of the politics of Russian oil since the late 1980s that wrestles with, inter alia, exactly this question. The author concludes: "The Soviet Union was not a petro-state; but post-Soviet Russia is increasingly taking on the characteristics of one."

Gustafson's book is the fruit of a decade of research that draws on the insights of scores of experts in the oil industry, governments, think tanks, and universities[2], in Russia and the West. It splices together into an elegant and original analysis the essence of hundreds of books and articles and dozens of interviews and site visits.

Many of the Reforms Needed in the Late Soviet Period Are Still Needed Today

While *Wheel of Fortune* is an organic work that's equally accessible to scholar and generalist, it is also a sequel to the author's pioneering volume of 1989, *Crisis Amid Plenty: The Politics of Soviet Energy under Brezhnev and Gorbachev*. This covered the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. It is striking that the two books reach broad conclusions that, while the contexts differ, nonetheless have much in common. In *Crisis Amid Plenty* Gustafson sees one of the principal results of Brezhnev's failure to reform energy policy as being "the Soviets' drift into nearly exclusive reliance on oil as their primary source of hard-currency income." He also notes, writing in 1989, that while "the energy sector is a fertile and comparatively easy field for middle-range reform," if Gorbachev and his colleagues "do not act decisively," they "will find that the energy sector will continue to generate crises, diverting their resources and attention from the more difficult and fundamental tasks of reform elsewhere in the economy. In that case, the most reformable sector of the system will continue to block reform elsewhere." On the critical question of whether the political will to pursue reform—through

1 A few major exporters, notably Norway and more recently, though to a lesser extent, Brazil, have avoided this label by harnessing their windfall profits, or rents, to the task of diversifying their economies, raising living standards, and building national strength. Others, like Nigeria, Iran, Iraq under Saddam, and Saudi Arabia, have had such profits purloined by their rulers and, in varying degrees, wasted—in the sort of ways indicated above. Although the USSR was not a petro-state, after the Soviet leaders in the 1970s took the second course. The sudden price collapse of 1986 contributed to the subsequent demise of Mikhail Gorbachev's government.

2 As a colleague in the field of Russian politics, he sought my views on a number of topics, views that have not always coincided fully with his own. See later in this article.

extensive economic liberalization—still existed, by late 1989 Gustafson was developing doubts.

What does *Wheel of Fortune* conclude on similar issues? Gustafson shows that by 2010 the Kremlin's receipt of massive windfall profits from oil exports was being divided among numerous claimants, including via "an explosion of corruption." As a result, "a large part of the political and economic system had become based on oil rents."[3] He then asks: "Will the oil industry in the decades ahead be able to continue supplying the rents that support the system? The answer of this book is that it will not—unless there is a determined effort to accelerate the modernization of the oil industry itself. And that effort will be successful only if it is accompanied by a renewed commitment to modernization and reform of the political and economic system as a whole." On whether the political will for such strong medicine existed when Gustafson was finishing this book in 2012, his doubts had, as we shall see in a moment, become quite profound.

Thus the Kremlin's essential predicament in the late 1980s and again today, a quarter century later, shows little change. Preservation of the political status quo depends on a continuing influx of oil rents from abroad. And only by reforming the lucrative oil sector would it be possible to fund the essential, much bigger, and daunting task of modernizing the economic system as a whole.

What actually happened after 1989 was a plunge in the oil price, a decimation of rents, and soon—total catastrophe. Gorbachev's regime collapsed, and the USSR disintegrated.

What about the prospects today? Gustafson foresees the probability of a hefty reduction in the oil rents available to the Kremlin, due in part to the exhaustion of the Soviet oil legacy and a related steep rise in the cost of extracting oil. Often in smaller quantities than before, today's oil has to be transported from locations that are increasingly remote. Thus "the oil industry requires larger and larger inputs of capital, but responds less and less to each successive injection." Another threat to oil rents is a probable long-term decline in the oil price.[4] This will likely begin, he believes, as the global demand for oil levels off—and then goes down in response to the current surge on world markets of, in particular, cheap natural gas.

3 These statistics illustrate the growth of rents and their impact on Kremlin tax revenues: whereas in 2001 oil accounted for 34% of Russian export revenues, by 2011 its share had swelled to 52%; in dollar terms, whereas in 2000 oil export revenues were $36 billion, in 2007 they had risen to $173 billion; regarding tax revenues, whereas in 2001 oil and gas together provided 20% of government revenues, by 2011 this had grown to 40% from oil and 9% from gas. (pp. 5, 360)

4 This decline took off in the months from June 2014. See the end of this review.

All this is ominous for the Kremlin, because "rent dependence … is not simply at the heart of the system; it *is* the system. The obvious implication is that if the flow of petroleum rents were ever to slacken, Russia would be deeply destabilized."

Thus if today's Kremlin regime is to survive, it would have to heed Gustafson's above-quoted advice. Its first priority would be to modernize its essential life support system, the oil industry, and thus increase revenues. Concurrently, Western-type reforms of the whole economy and polity would be required, paid for by the larger rents. However, Gustafson evinces little hope that the conservative President Putin, whose views, like Brezhnev's in his day, favor the status quo, will embark on such a path. Indeed, he sees "growing elements of similarity between the Brezhnevian *zastoi* (or stagnation) and Russia's present regime."

On the other hand, Gustafson believes that if a new leader were to emerge and prove politically capable of adopting the sound economic strategy of former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin—a remote contingency for now—the outlook would greatly improve.

The Chaotic and Corrupt Privatization of the Oil Industry in the 1990s

To turn to the author's rich historical narrative, let me note first his analysis of the scientifically solid and relatively sophisticated oil industry of the Soviets. This developed as part of a broadly based industrial economy that did not match the model of a petro-state, whose economy must be dominated by oil and/or gas. As Gustafson points out, only from the 1970s on did the Soviet leaders give the USSR a petro-state tinge. This was when they used fossil fuel exports "as a means of propping up their sagging system, while avoiding change."

However, these industries, like the state's economic system as a whole, were inefficient, isolated from global competition, and, as time went on, increasingly prone to corruption. For these reasons the socialist economy could not withstand the competition introduced first by Gorbachev's ill-conceived reforms and then by the hurricane of market forces unleashed by the Soviet Union's collapse. Thus Russia's massive dependence on fossil fuels resulted from "the implosion of the Soviet industrial system." This earthquake "left natural resources, chiefly oil and gas, as the chief remaining sources of value, while Russian manufactured goods became even less competitive in global markets than before." In short, Russia quickly assumed the appearance of a petro-state.

As regards the chaotic developments of the 1990s, Gustafson picks his way through them with a sure touch, analyzing both Kremlin policy and the bruising hurlyburly of the increasingly privatized oil industry. Meanwhile, the gas industry exits his stage on its own trajectory, in the form of the majority state-owned monopoly Gazprom, to return only briefly in 2004–2005.

While the oil industry disintegrated much less in the 1990s than did Russia's industry as a whole, the drop in its annual production was frighteningly large. Whereas in 1987 Russia led the world with 11.4 million barrels a day, in 1996 production bottomed out at 6 million, or little more than half. While production recovered and later approached that of 1987, government experts warned later that it could go down to as little as 8 million by 2020. The Soviet oil legacy had been used up and current investment was too low to finance exploration of Russia's promising Arctic off-shore sites. Moreover, "tight oil" would not be a solution unless the number of nimble independent oil companies could—in the face of Russia's daunting statist tradition—be rapidly multiplied.

Behind the production collapse of the 1990s lay alarming upheavals that Gustafson describes with vivid vignettes. In the winter of 1991–1992, for example, "every day, more of the state companies' assets leaked to the private structures that were springing up all over oil country … as the Soviet-era stake-holders, not knowing what the future held, prepared makeshift lifeboats and began lowering away." The Soviet oil and gas ministry dissolved amid the general chaos, to be replaced by a weak Russian structure headed by an even weaker minister. This hapless official had to endure unrelenting contempt from the "oil generals" who headed state and private oil companies, as they struggled to keep the industry afloat in far-flung locations. In 1992, Gustafson attended a stormy summit of the oil industry in Samara. Here "the minister and his deputies faced the wrath of the oil generals. It was a scene straight out of an Eisenstein movie": the officials "sat lined up on a dais, looking on helplessly while the angry oil generals shouted and waved their fists." One of the latter "looked ready to charge the dais." A strike that threatened to shut down oil-field production required immediate action. Yet the minister could give him no help.

In the treasury, meanwhile, the Kremlin was trying to stanch the hemorrhaging of state revenues caused in large part by the plunge in oil rents. Eventually, in 1994, it brought some order to the violent, semi-criminal world of oil exporting. This helped to appease the International Monetary Fund, which soon produced enough funding to, for a while, keep Russia afloat.

In 1995–1996, with ad hoc privatizations of pieces of the oil industry already underway, Yeltsin's aide Anatolii Chubais decided to bet on some of the young businessmen who—as deal-makers, bankers, and financiers—were aggressively participating in this ruthless process. Through the rigged auctions of the notorious "loans-for-shares" privatization of state companies that he organized, the government "transferred a large share of Russian production of oil and other commodities to the new financial empires" of these businessmen, thus "within a few years turning their multi-million fortunes into billions." In the process the Kremlin created the coalition of so-called oligarchs—Roman Abramovich, Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and others—that financed Yeltsin's re-election in 1996. However, for doing all this, the government paid a hefty political price. The operation discredited its program for privatizing state assets "and damaged the reputations of the remaining reformers, particularly that of Anatolii Chubais."

Gustafson's intricate but gripping account of the turbulent events of 1991–1996 corrects many previous descriptions of Russia's privatization. Above all, it shows that far from the loans-for-shares takeovers having been a breakthrough, they "were more like the last act, a final state blessing … to a process that had begun two years before."

However, as the 1990s progressed, privatization and the creation of the oligarchs did not arrest the steady weakening of the state. This stemmed from chronic budget woes, low oil rents, two years of brutal war against Chechnya, and increasingly erratic, often incompetent rule by Yeltsin. By summer 1998, when the government defaulted on $40 billion in treasuries and the ruble lost three quarters of its value, all the large oil companies had been privatized. Although two of them (LUKoil and Surgutneftegaz) were headed by cautious Soviet-era oil generals who retained some loyalty to the Kremlin, the rest belonged to financial oligarchs who knew exactly how to exploit a feeble state. Increasingly, if in varying degrees, they asserted their independence and devised ever more ingenious ways to avoid paying taxes.

Putin Restores State Control of the Industry through Taxation and the Arrest of Khodorkovsky

Some of these trends went into reverse in 2000, after Yeltsin designated Putin as his successor and promptly resigned. Putin became popular by recentralizing power, enacting financial reforms, collecting more taxes, and, with some success, intimidating the oligarchs and the regional governors. By 2004 he had done what some thought impossible—established extensive Kremlin control over the oil companies. Above all, his finance minister Kudrin had found a crude but effective way to tax up to 90% of their windfall profits.

Gustafson summarizes his analysis of how such reversals could befall Big Oil in these terms: "All that had happened (in the 1990s) was that the system of state controls had gone dormant. It retained large power over the industry in theory, but in practice that power became largely latent … (P)rivate ownership was established … in the spaces temporarily left unoccupied by a corrupt and penetrated state … There were two consequences … The first was the takeover by financial capital in the second half of the 1990s. The second was the subsequent reassertion of state power and its de facto recapture of the oil industry."

However, by 2002 the state had reasserted only limited controls. The private companies now accounted for a record 80% of oil production. Nonetheless, four contentious issues still dominated relations between the Kremlin and the oil barons. How legitimate had the privatization of the industry been, and shouldn't Russia have imitated other countries by building a national oil company? How should the state conduct its relations with the industry on key issues like the division of rents and the drafting of regulations? What role should foreign companies and capital play in Russian oil? And how should the movement and sale of oil through pipelines and an export regime be regulated?

Not surprisingly, Gustafson writes, the oil companies "defended their takeover of the state's assets as legitimate, fought the mounting attempts of the state to increase its take, and trumpeted their right to dispose of their assets and move their oil as they pleased, including through private pipelines and terminals." Supporting them were, broadly speaking, members of one of Putin's two main bases of political support, namely Yeltsin's extended family and key oligarch associates, such as Chubais and Abramovich.

On the opposing side was Putin's second support base, his former colleagues in the Soviet KGB, known as *siloviki* or "wielders of armed power." He had recently promoted these people to high positions. Their presumed leader was Putin's closest associate, Igor Sechin. They tended to resent people who had become wealthy or politically powerful in the 1990s, especially oligarchs. Ideologically, they inclined to statism and anti-Western nationalism. Putin needed to gratify them and thus bring the two groups into balance. This meant that he allowed them, within reason, to use their new-found influence to undermine the super-rich oil barons. As Gustafson says, "their motives were a complex mixture of sincere policy convictions, offended beliefs, political ambition and thirst for power, and, as time went on, cynical greed."

Such is the background that frames Gustafson's masterly analysis of the watershed episode in Putin's oil policy in the 2000s: the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in October 2003 and the subsequent nationalization of his oil company Yukos. Khodorkovsky was the most driving, ambitious, innovative, and politically reckless of the oil barons. A skilled financier, he determinedly learned the nuts and bolts of oil production, hired the best Western drillers and marketers, sent scores of bright young Russians to the West for training, manipulated the Russian parliament and media, engaged in generous philanthropy, and focused relentlessly on Yukos's bottom line, making it Russia's most valuable company. Internationally, he planned a major pipeline to China and gained the support of Beijing and the Russian prime minister. More daring still, he negotiated tenaciously with the US's Chevron over the terms of an outright merger. Finally, in 2003, he declared that he might go into politics, and, at a semi-public meeting, denounced government corruption and repeatedly crossed swords with Putin.

Gustafson's comment on all this hits the mark: "Practically everything he was and did … served to unite his enemies against him, while deterring those who might otherwise have sided with him." Among other actions, his enemies inspired the writing of a document about the danger of "an oligarchic coup," and got the attorney-general's office to issue threats and conduct searches of Yukos premises. Soon a Yukos colleague, and then Khodorkovsky himself, were arrested for alleged tax evasion. Later they received heavy sentences. In addition, the attorney-general arrested scores of other Yukos figures across Russia, causing further scores to escape abroad to London.

Reflecting on some broader issues that the Yukos case resolved to the satisfaction of the hard-liners, Gustafson notes an impressive list: "The idea of an autonomous oil sector … was decisively rejected"; the transportation of crude oil would remain a state monopoly; the power of state coercion in the business world was dramatically increased; and open resistance by the oil barons to the state's inexorably rising tax demands was abandoned.

Finally, the renationalization of oil took a giant first step when the small state company Rosneft acquired most of Yukos. This brought to fruition Putin's vision of a national oil champion. Gustafson devotes an absorbing chapter to Rosneft's rise, which happened in a strange and still murky way. At first, in 2004, Putin favored turning Gazprom into a national champion of both gas and oil, by presenting it with Yukos's prime asset. At the last minute, however, this was blocked by the Yukos-related ruling of an obscure judge in Texas.[5] Promptly, the agile leaders of Rosneft, including its chairman, the above-mentioned Sechin, stepped in and bought the Yukos asset. Nonetheless, the sale of Abramovich's oil company Sibneft to Gazprom in 2005 meant that Russia soon had two national champions, one for oil and gas and one just for oil.

At this point the process of renationalization halted, but only for a time. Seven years later, in October 2012, just after Gustafson's book went to press, Rosneft bought the major company TNK-BP. This meant that Rosneft's

5 This ruling concerned the legally suspect acquisition by Gazprom of shares in Yukos that had been held by foreigners.

share of Russia's oil production would rise to almost 40%, and the share of all state companies combined to over 50%, a fact that rendered out-of-date several statements in the book that the industry "is still largely privately owned." It seems uncertain whether the demands of the Kremlin's anti-nationalization faction that Rosneft must soon privatize some of its assets will eventually win the day.

Putin Rebalances His Power-base, But Then Eschews Reform of the Oil Sector and the Whole Economy, Thus Jeopardizing the Future of His Regime

In 2005–2008, in light of the recent growth in influence of his siloviki power base, Putin did some rebalancing to appease his Yeltsin-oriented support group. He dismissed the attorney-general, a silovik closely aligned with Sechin, he allowed an ugly public war between two siloviki clans to continue for three years, thereby discrediting them both, and, most important, he engineered the election to the presidency of a Sechin enemy, Dmitri Medvedev[6]. In my opinion, this last action was a bigger blow to the Sechin camp than Gustafson suggests. Certainly too, Putin, as premier, found the task of neutralizing Medvedev's attempted self-assertion and liberalism as president more irksome than he—though not perhaps Sechin—had expected.

This ensured that Putin would thwart Medvedev's desire to be re-elected to the presidency. Instead, he himself would return. In this context Gustafson lays out some competing "visions of Russia's future." As related to the oil industry, he sums up Putin's as saying "Trust the state and stay the course," and as holding that the present ways of doing things are the best. Also, too much nationalization is undesirable; foreign companies should be used mainly for their technological and business expertise; and they should not be allowed more than minority share-holdings. Exxon Mobil, BP, and Shell were duly engaged on these conditions.

As for Putin's professed support for modernization, skepticism permeates Gustafson's sophisticated analyses of the currently lagging efforts to reform oil taxation, and also of the deeply entrenched nature of the state's regulation of oil. His references to Putin's toleration or worse of large-scale corruption and the misappropriation of government money reinforce his skepticism, although the references are rather abstract. If he had given some examples from the rich materials compiled by Russian journalists at considerable personal risk, this omnipresent vice of Putin's system would have been more vividly conveyed.

Gustafson views Kudrin's competing vision of the future as advocating the development of a sound fiscal system and genuine market mechanisms. These must all be supported by democratic institutions and an independent judiciary.[7]

While Gustafson supports Kudrin's vision, he views Putin's with concern. The mass demonstrations launched by middle-class Russians in 2011–12 revealed a growing alienation from Putin's rule that could well spread in due course to wider sections of the population. Moreover, the economy remains that of a petro-state, i.e., largely undiversified, and the Kremlin's oil rents will probably soon decline. This will force cuts in services and thus provoke popular discontent and, probably, political instability, as—we can add with hindsight—popular enthusiasm for the annexation of Crimea and invasion of S.E. Ukraine turns to disillusion over the high economic and political costs of these adventures.

In conclusion, *Wheel of Fortune* is a powerful, original, elegantly written, and remarkably comprehensive analysis of a complex topic of far-ranging importance. Thus it is a reliable basis from which to analyze the major economic changes that Putin's rash adventures in Ukraine are beginning to force on him. Since oil exports to the West have begun what will probably be a steady descent, and since world oil prices have gone down by over 30% since June 2014, he will have to try to make further sales to the hard-bargaining Chinese. At the same time, the technical support currently provided by the foreign oil companies has been sharply compromised by the Western decision to punish Putin for the recklessness of his foreign policy.

About the Author

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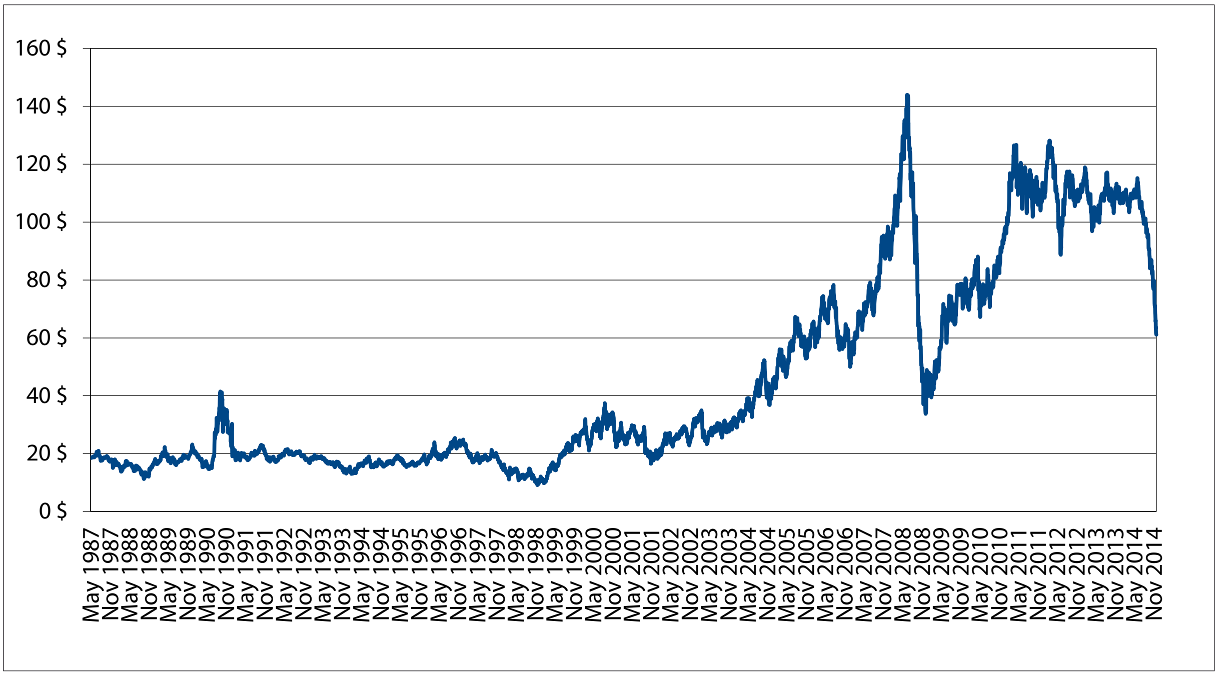
6 On all this, see my as yet unpublished 60-page article, "The Silovik War and the Nature of the Putin Regime".

7 Similarly, the late Yegor Gaidar, in his recently published history of economic growth, Russia: A Long View, MIT Press, 2012, p. 377, advocates "a regulated liberalization of the regime, the restoration of real freedom of speech, the separation of powers, an independent judicial system, an open mechanism of government decision-making, and an effective war on corruption".

STATISTICS

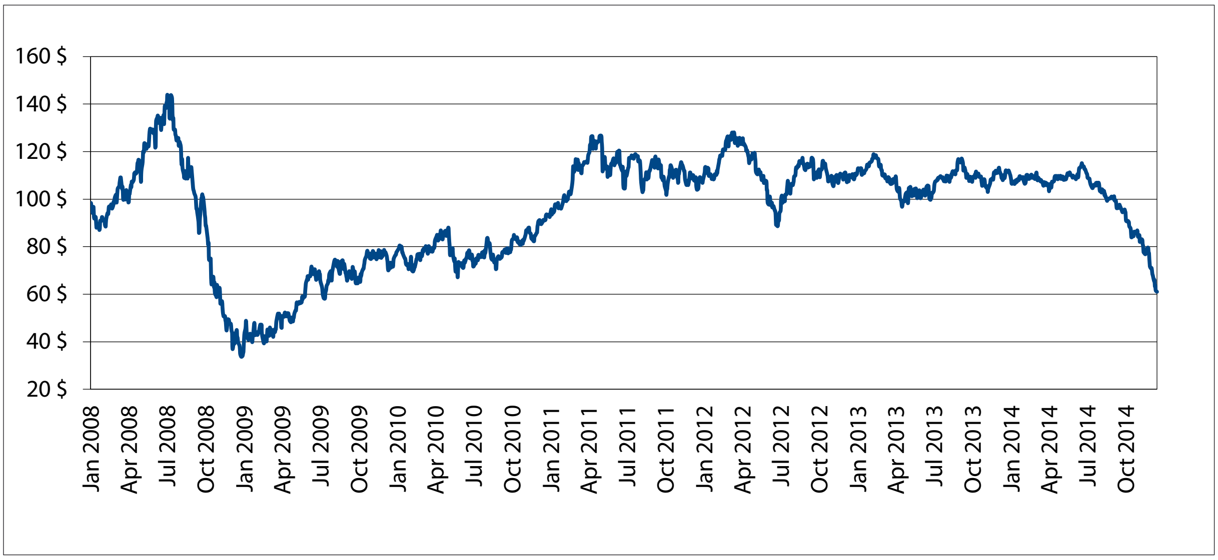
Brent, Ruble, MICEX and RTS: Important Financial Indicators at the Close of 2014

Figure 1: Europe Brent Spot Price FOB (Dollars per Barrel), 1987–2014



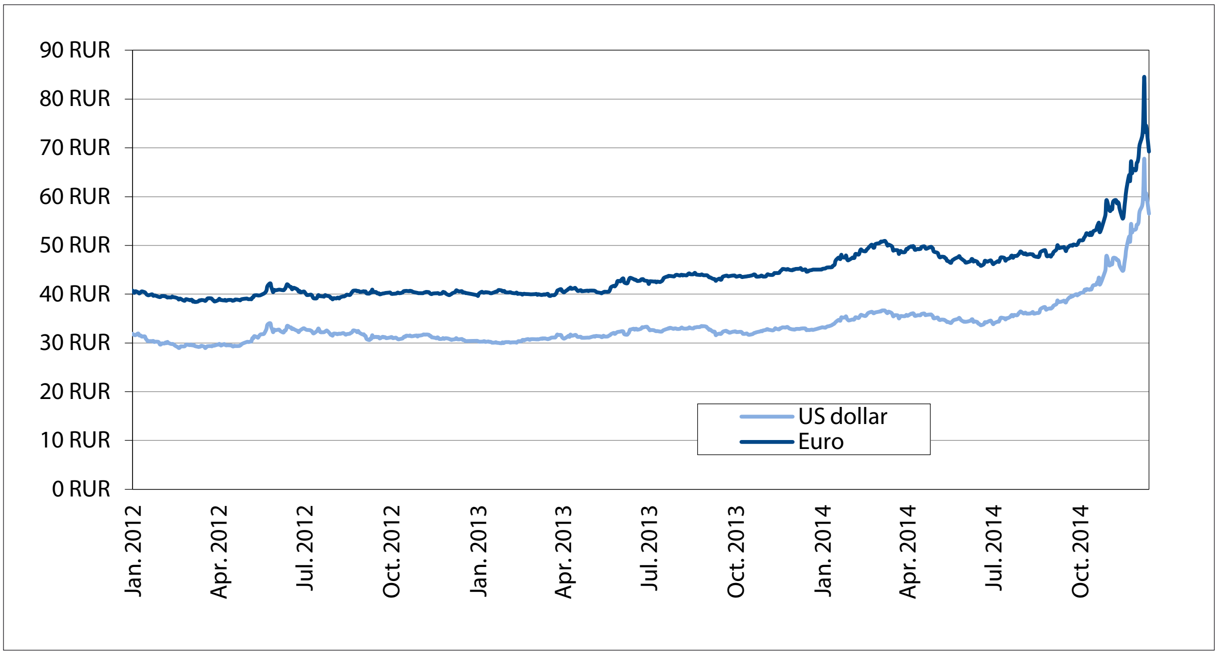
Source:: <http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist_xls/RBRTEd.xls>*; web site:* <http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=RBRTE&f=D>, *accessed 22 December 2014*

Figure 2: Europe Brent Spot Price FOB (Dollars per Barrel), 2008–2014



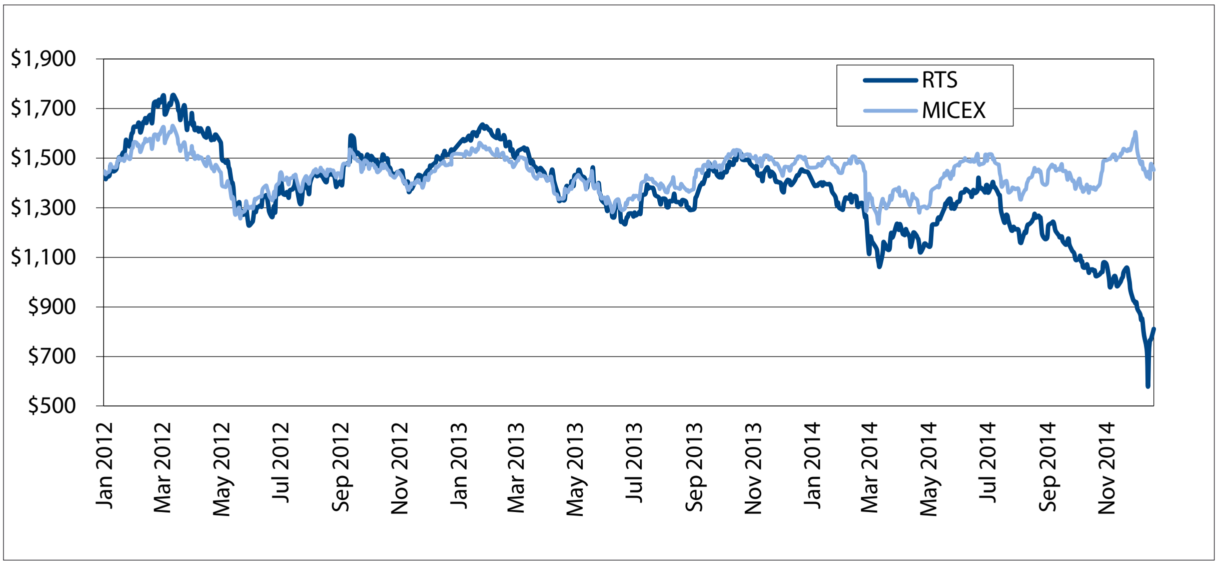
Source:: <http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist_xls/RBRTEd.xls>*; web site:* <http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=RBRTE&f=D>, *accessed 22 December 2014*

Figure 3: Exchange Rate of the Ruble to US Dollar and Euro 2012–2014



Source: web site of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation <http://www.cbr.ru/currency_base/dynamics.aspx>*, accessed on 22 December 2014*

Figure 4: Russian Stock Indices 2012–2014

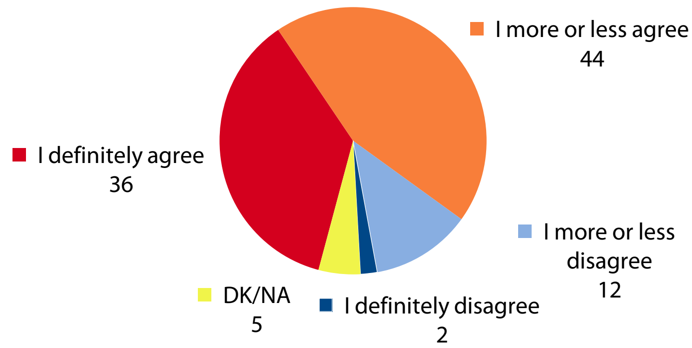


Source: web site of the Moscow Stock Exchange, <http://www.micex.ru/marketdata/indices/data/archive> *and* <http://moex.com/ru/index/RTSI/archive/>*, accessed on 22 December 2014*

OPINION POLL

Worries About the Future

Figure 1: Do You Agree With the Opinion That There Will Be a Steep Increase of Prices In Russia, That the Living Standard of the People Will Decline, and That the Economic Situation of the Country Will Deteriorate? (in Percent)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 14–17 November 2014, N = 1,600, <http://www.levada.ru/28-11-2014/vliyanie-sanktsii-na-potreblenie>

Table 1: What, In Your Opinion, Is the Main Reason For the Increase in Prices, the Decline in Living Standards, and the Deterioration of the Economic Situation of the Country? (in Percent of Respondents Who Think There Will Be Deteriorations; Several Answers Possible)

Falling oil prices	45
Sanctions of Western countries against Russia	33
The great expenses caused by the joining of Crimea [to Russia] and the support for DNR and LNR [separatist areas of Ukraine]	30
Corruption in the organs of the state	26
The particularities of the Russian economy: technological backwardness, the remains of Soviet sectoral structure, and the priorities accorded to the military-industrial complex	26
The policies of Russia vis-à-vis Crimea and Ukraine	23
The particularities of the Russian economy: an overly large state sector, the ineffectiveness of state-bureaucratic management of companies, and the influence of the state on the economy	21
The increase in spending on defence, on security and on the upkeep of the state organs, to the detriment of expenses for social needs (health care, education, science, and support for insecure groups of the population)	16
Russian counter-sanctions (ban on the import of food and other products from Western countries)	15
Other	1
Don't know/no answer	3

Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 14–17 November 2014, N = 1,600, <http://www.levada.ru/28-11-2014/vliyanie-sanktsii-na-potreblenie>

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