

Slavomír Horák, *Rusko a Střední Asie po rozpadu SSSR*. Praha: Karolinum, 2008, 228 pp. ISBN 978-80-246-1472-4.

Literature on developments in post-Soviet Eurasia is still rather rare, not only in the Czech academia. It is therefore a double pleasure to come across such a notable piece of work as recently published by the Prague Charles University Press. In 2008, the publishing house “Karolinum” featured an original monograph entitled *Rusko a Střední Asie po rozpadu SSSR* [Russia and Central Asia after the Soviet Union demise], written in Czech by a prominent scholar of the field Slavomír Horák. The monograph is a revised and slightly expanded book version of his doctoral dissertation defended at the Charles University’s Institute for International Studies; with this book, Horák draws upon his earlier publications, namely his *Střední Asie mezi Východem a Západem* [Central Asia between the East and West] from 2005 that centered on Central Asia primarily *from within*. This latest reviewed study by Horák of Central Asia’s *external* relations thus in a sense complements his previous efforts to map the region’s post-Soviet developments.

Following a brief introduction elaborating the author’s aims and objectives, a note on the methodology as well as an evaluation of sources, the book opens with an outline of the geopolitics of Central Asia after 1991. The fall of Communism, Horák says, has ultimately shaken Russia’s long leading position in post-Soviet Eurasia. Hand in hand with Moscow’s inevitably losing its grip over its once “fraternal” republics it is thus only natural that also these newly independent states on Russia’s periphery found themselves increasingly caught up in the middle of competing powers and interests. In this context, Horák investigates one by one the role of the main outside powers in Central Asia, starting from the Muslim world; these Islamic countries, in the first place Iran, seek for influence over the nations in Central Asia, in order to promote the Islamic values in a region shaped for the several last decades by Communist secularism. Since the late 1990s, China, driven by a rapid economic expansion, has become increasingly involved in the renewed “Great Game” around Central Asia as well, mainly in search for the region’s vast energy resources. The West is as of today the region’s yet another major player which probably would not take a closer look at Central Asia, be it not for the tragic events of 9/11 and the related War on Terror in Afghanistan that effectively led to the U.S. and its Allies’ firmly establishing themselves militarily in this volatile region.

The following chapter offers a look back into the history of Russia’s relations with Central Asia. Horák begins his narration with recounting the key events that marked the Russian conquest of Central Asia, a process that was essentially completed by the last third of the nineteenth century. In the next parts of the book, he moves on portraying the Bolsheviks coming to power after 1917, the basmachi uprisings against the newly established Soviet rule, and the delimitation of the region into “national republics” under Stalin in the 1920 and 1930s, whereby also

the foundations of the Central Asian nations' modern statehood were laid down. Horák convincingly demonstrates that the Central Asian republics maintained an extremely subaltern status within the Soviet Union, referring to their generally low stage of development. Regrettably, the following years of Central Asia's existence under the Soviets are given rather sketchily in the course of further narration. This is particularly pity because it was precisely in this period that the local elites completed their forming as prospective independent political actors, a process which proved decisive for the non-democratic regimes in Central Asia to establish after 1991, and with it also for the specific paths of development they would eventually embark.

Leaving this historical excursus behind, Horák then brings the reader back again to the novel international environment that arose in Central Asia following the Soviet collapse in 1991. He claims that for keeping its influence in the region, Moscow still relies on bilateral ties of subordination and dependence, but at the same time, and to this end, it also uses a wide range of multilateral mechanisms as a leverage. Hence, the next chapter provides an overview of the key integration and cooperation organizations and projects in Central Asia. In this chapter, Horák describes and further explicates the principles, aims, and actions of the individual regional groupings in Central Asia (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Eurasian Economic Community, among others), categorized according to their functions, scope as well as external orientation. Based on this, he further points to the desperately poor, if viewed from Moscow, performance of all these groupings, a problem that is likely to have much to do with the very unreformed nature of all the parties involved. He concludes by arguing that the ever-growing number of these regional groupings notwithstanding, it is still rather disintegration than integration of this once common space that prevails, reflecting also the slowly emerging plurality of the external powers in Central Asia.

What follows is a thematic block of chapters dealing with the bilateral dimension of Russia's relations with Central Asia. This very core of Horák's book is formed by four distinct case studies analyzing the mutual relations of Russia and each of the Central Asian republics, e.g. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, respectively, Kazakhstan being excluded mainly for conceptual reasons. A chronology of the foreign policy of the individual republic introduces each of these four case studies. After this opening section, the key areas of the Russia-Central Asia relations are explored, namely politics, security, trade and business, as well as social aspects including the national minorities. Importantly, each study has a same basic structure, which is clearly advantageous for it allows for an easy comparison among the respective cases. Yet at the same time, this structure is flexible enough so that to highlight the specific features in the relations between Russia and the respective Central Asian republic as well. For instance, when dealing with Tajikistan, Horák puts the main emphasis on the continuing military presence of Russia in this perhaps most fragile republic of Central Asia. In Turkmenistan, in

contrast, he focuses primarily on Ashkhabad's troubled interaction with Moscow in the oil and gas industry. Combating extremism, for its part, is in the center of his attention in the Uzbekistan chapter, while the social dimension including labor migrants dominates the chapter on Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations.

Finally, the whole picture is complemented by a concluding chapter summarizing the book's main findings, and with it also framing the post-Soviet developments in the relations between Russia and Central Asia into a global context.

The book is thoroughly referenced, and for the sake of clarity, moreover, a number of tables, figures, and schemes throughout accompany the text. Besides, there is at the end a concise bibliography of select bibliographic titles divided into statistics, documents, and literature featuring the most important monographs and articles published in relevant academic journals of the field. Technically the publishers did a good job in editing the manuscript and preparing it for print, which is commendable. Less so, however, is that they fell short of providing this very readable text also with a basic subject index, a glossary of terms, and a map annex. This would have helped make the book also a valuable reference tool and thus make it accessible to an even broader audience of readers who would otherwise hardly dare to look for information after such a specialized and narrow monograph on this little-researched topic.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, Horák's book is to be noted for several reasons. First, the book is based on an evaluation of a truly tremendous amount of sources available in the main world's as well as in the region's local languages. Hence the author's deep knowledge of the local peculiarities that firmly draws upon his decade-long personal experience with Russia and Central Asia including frequent research trips to the region. He utilizes this kind of expertise particularly in those parts of the book that familiarize the reader with some lesser known aspects of the social life in Central Asia which would be hard, and sometimes even impossible, to obtain otherwise, given the difficult access to information for outsiders in the closed and semi-closed societies like Central Asia. Furthermore, Horák's book deserves credit also as an outstanding empirical study in terms of methodology. The book provides a sound analytical framework that helps explain the foreign policy behavior of the surveyed newly independent states in the context of the geopolitics of post-Soviet Central Asia and as such could be applied in other area studies and regional analyses as well.

Slavomír Horák's *Russia and Central Asia after the Soviet Union demise* presents a unique attempt at a systematic elaboration of the relations between Russia and Central Asia after 1991. For this reason, the reviewer very hopes that the author finds enough time to come up soon with an up-date English version of the text which he could then offer for a critical evaluation and assessment also to a wider international audience.

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