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Economic Systems

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ecosys

Ceremonial science: The state of Russian economics seen through the lens of the work of 'Doctor of Science' candidates

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2012

Received in revised form 12 November 2013

Accepted 15 November 2013

Available online 29 May 2014

JEL classification:

A11

B41

I23

P39

Keywords:

Russian economics

International integration

Scientific methodology

Culture of economic decision-making

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the current status of economic research in Russia using a previously unexplored dataset of Russian 'Doctor of Science' (Dr.Sc.) theses. The Dr.Sc. degree is a postdoctoral qualification necessary for career advancement at most Russian universities. By examining the Dr.Sc. theses, we are able to provide a systematic overview of 'average' scientific standards in Russia, particularly at mass universities, at which most administrators and bureaucrats are trained. We show that the level of integration into the international scientific community in Russian economics remains low. Moreover, we obtain a picture of mostly 'ceremonial' science. The researchers combine references to 'classical' research, formal methods, and practical application merely as an instrument for presenting the argument in a more 'scientific' way.

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1. Introduction

For seven decades, Soviet economics was isolated from the international academic community. During this period, the Soviet political economy focused mainly on verbal explanations of Marxist–Leninist concepts rather than on economic analysis per se (Sutela, 1991; Sutela and Mau, 1998), with some exceptions (Bruehl and MacPhee, 1995, p. 184). As a result, the quality of Russian economic science remains affected by this legacy.

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Researchers have found substantial evidence that the way of studying economics has a significant effect on decision making, including the decision making of central bank officials and politicians.¹ Teaching economics and the public activities of economists shape the ‘economic culture of decision-makers’ (Kuzminov, 1992). This influence may be directed toward both high-level officials and lower-level bureaucrats (Furman, 1996). Yakovlev and Zhuravskaya (2013) and Libman and Obydenkova (2013) show that the attitudes and competence levels of lower-level bureaucrats have had a negative influence on political and economic institutions in Russia. If the legacy of Soviet science has persisted, it may have contributed to this negative influence.

A number of papers have investigated the state of economics in Russia.² In particular, Lokshin (2009) analyzed 250 papers on issues of poverty published in leading Russian journals between 1992 and 2006. He found that 60% of these papers did not have a clearly defined research question and half of the papers contained no references. There were no papers containing a formal theoretical model or a formal statistical test. However, there are certain disadvantages to studying the journal publications of Russian researchers. First, only a handful of Russian academics publish in leading Russian journals—specifically, those working in the capital cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg) or at the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). According to Lokshin (2009), 74% of the papers in his samples were written by researchers from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Researchers from less prestigious universities publish in their local outlets, which are difficult to collect for analysis; they are often not present on the internet or in most libraries outside of their own university.

Second, journals in Russia often have a different function than in Western academia, where they serve as a tool of dissemination of new results and selection for career advancement. In Russia, most editors consciously focus on policy-oriented topics rather than on scientific research. Therefore, they regularly publish opinion pieces, interviews, and essays. Furthermore, journals do not serve as a selection mechanism for papers because of low rejection rates. Often, editors must explicitly search for articles and even encourage authors to write them. Most journals are not peer reviewed, and there is no established hierarchy of journals that can be used as a promotion criterion (Muravyev, 2013).

Research at more prestigious institutes and universities may be unlike that of less prestigious provincial universities due to differences in resources and academic traditions. However, most Russian bureaucrats are trained at regional universities. Thus, it is interesting to study research at ‘average’ Russian universities (particularly lower-ranked provincial universities). Therefore, our paper augments existing analyses of Russian economics by introducing a novel dataset: Doctor of Economic Sciences (Dr.Sc.) theses. The Dr.Sc. degree is the second doctoral degree, similar to the German *habilitation*. This degree serves as an official promotion and appointment criterion at most Russian universities and research institutes and, particularly, at all less prestigious provincial universities. The defense procedure involves multiple senior researchers. Therefore, the theses are subject to review by academic peers. The theses are explicitly required to contain new research results and to not merely be policy related.

Using this dataset, we investigate three features of Russian economics: (1) the extent to which its research focus is similar to that of international academia, (2) the extent to which international standards of economic research are maintained, and (3) the extent to which the Russian academic community is integrated into the global one. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the dataset and the empirical strategy. The third section reports the results. The fourth section offers a discussion of the main findings, and the last section concludes.

2. Data and empirical strategy

2.1. Sample

A typical Russian Dr.Sc. thesis is a manuscript of 300–400 pages. In addition to preparing this manuscript, a candidate must publish at least one monograph and several papers in Russian academic

¹ See Bauman and Rose (2011), Carter and Irons (1991), Cipriani et al. (2009), Frank and Schultze (2000), Frank et al. (1993), Frey and Meyer (2003), Labland and Bell (1999), Marwell and Ames (1981), Rubinstein (2006), Göhlmann and Vaubel (2007), Dreher et al. (2009) and Béland and Cox (2001).

² See Alexeev et al. (1992), Auktsionek and Churkina (2002), Dezhina and Dashkev (2008), Poletaev (2008), Muravyev (2011), Kirtchik (2012), Kovzik and Watts (2001), Avtonomov et al. (2001, 2004), and Ofer and Polterovich (2000).

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