

**Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North. By Marlene Laruelle. Armonk, New York & London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 2014. xxvi, 251 pp. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$47.95, paper.**

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*Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* by Marlene Laruelle was written before Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent related events. So it may strike some readers as particularly appropriate that a historian is writing the review. Much indeed has changed for Russia since the spring of 2014, in Arctic strategy as in everything else. Nevertheless, a surprising proportion of the material included in Laruelle's book remains prescient.

The author's stated aim is to present "a comprehensive assessment of Russia's strategy in the Arctic" (xxiii) and the book's eight brisk chapters provide a well-rounded brief on Russia's recent approaches to the Far North. The source base for the book is heavily derived from (primarily English-language) policy literature. This material can be tedious but the author arranges it judiciously, resulting in a narrative brimming with interesting connections and compelling insights.

Laruelle strives to flesh out the various contexts in which contemporary Russian visions have been formulated. She recognizes and emphasizes the intimate relationship between the agendas of Russia's political class in the Arctic North with the country's overarching geopolitical ideas, economic goals, demographic realities, and domestic politics. She devotes much attention to conditions in the Russia Federation as a whole. The presentation of this wider context, engaged with some depth, displays the breadth of the author's analysis. In this sense, *Russia's Arctic Strategies* provides more than just another viewpoint on Russia's positions in the global Arctic "debate". It props open a wider window on Russia's north-oriented policies in the early 2010s –as they stood before the fast and furious change of priorities in 2014, when the crisis in Ukraine pushed the development of Russia's North further down Moscow's agenda. Reconstructing this recent past, Laruelle shows that even before the shift, Russia's vision for the Arctic was already riddled with contradictions.

As this book is aimed at an audience of non-Russian Arctic scholars and policy-makers, the plans and agendas vis-à-vis the Arctic of the actors and decision makers of post-Soviet Russia are contextualized alongside the strategies of other northern countries, with understandable emphasis on Canada, the United States, and Scandinavia. Laruelle emphasizes, for example, that Russia's sovereignty claims to continental seabed north of Eurasia are not only analogous to, but even derivative of Canada's claims to the sea bed north of its territory. Canada's position was worked out earlier than the legal arguments for the USSR and Russia over the Northeast Passage, and provided a model. Thus, dual contextualizations –within contemporary Russia and among international players – constitute this book's strength.

Laruelle also presents a nuanced view of the push and pull in Moscow's Arctic strategy. On the one hand, as is well known, Moscow's Putin-era Arctic policy is "centralized" – and, as

such, dominated by the president (and the Presidential Administration and Security Council). Yet, on the other hand, it is “plural” in a sense that rival military and economic agendas vie for supremacy. Laruelle contends that, in spite of the media attention lavished on the military, it is the economic interests that have been repeatedly prioritized by the Kremlin. Yet the focus on the economy does not necessarily translate to competence in executing policy.

In Russia’s national economy, in the north as elsewhere, oil and gas is the dominant sector. And yet, the economic strategy of pre-2014 Russia is shown to be surprisingly short-sighted. Essentially, the country’s decision makers simply “assumed” that oil and dry natural gas “will continue to be in high demand in the decades to come” (146). Because of these assumptions, they made little tangible investment to find new resources or make meaningful technological improvements. This approach seemed good enough when the world oil and gas prices were high. But all the while the infrastructures of the oil and gas industries, developed in Soviet times, were eroding. Gazprom, the country’s flagship natural gas conglomerate, made profits, but, according to Laruelle’s account, was able to increase production “solely by buying the shares of some of its privately owned competitors” (141). The Kremlin’s interventionist oil and gas policies vacillated between overtures to foreign investors aimed at attracting capital and upgrading technology and bouts of “resource nationalism” that scared off foreigners and intimidated the country’s own private producers. All this is to say that even in this crucial sector – the bedrock of Russia’s economy – and well before the financial crisis of 2008, let alone the political crisis of 2014, the strategies of Moscow’s policy-makers failed even on their own terms. Since 2014, the weakness turned into disaster, as Russia effectively lost a virtual natural gas war with Ukraine, bungled pipeline plans to Bulgaria and Turkey, and incurred sanctions that have scared off investors. The energy industries in the Russian North are in worse shape now than they were when Laruelle’s book was written, but it is to the author’s credit that she provides ample evidence that the prospects were far from bullish in 2013.

Yet, whatever their past miscalculations, Russia’s policy makers continue to present the Arctic as the key to the country’s brighter future. They put a hopeful gloss on Russia’s prospects even in the face of the global apprehensions about the effects of climate change, anticipating, among other benefits, that ice-free Arctic will “open up” Russia’s north, giving it lucrative connections to both Europe and East Asia. They seem to hope that the ample natural resources of Russia’s north will somehow compensate for other factors and trends, however dire, and obviate the need to adjust strategic thinking to ecological realities much less economic, demographic, and geopolitical ones. An important accomplishment of *Russia’s Arctic Strategies* is that it patiently demonstrates not only that such reasoning is overoptimistic, but how and why this is so. Russia’s political and economic elites have failed to align their visions with the real world. This book is essential for those in search of a guide to the context in which Russia’s Arctic strategy was shaped in the early 2010s and continues to be shaped today. Scholars and policy makers who specialize in the Arctic and need basic information on Russia will find it particularly useful.