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$2.7Bln Book Market Also Hit by the Crisis

By Justin Varilek

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Against a backdrop of two years of declining book sales in Russia, 250 publishing companies and literature unions from 20 countries have assembled in Moscow this week for the 13th International Book Fair Non/fiction.

Industry players will be at the trade show at the Central House of Artists exhibition center through Sunday to commiserate, understand the causes and look for light at the end of the tunnel.

"Currently the book business in Russia is very difficult," said Yelizaveta Barakhtina, publisher at Alpina Business Books. "The market started to decline last year, and the scale of the decline was very big. A lot of companies are seeing losses and all sales went down."

Printed titles declined between 2009 and 2010 by 4.6 percent and are expected to continue to decrease throughout 2011, the Federal Press and Mass Media Agency reported.

"This is specifically because of the crisis," said Maxim Krylov, an analyst at Azbooka-Atticus, one of the top five publishing houses. "And not connected to electronic books. Electronic books are not developed to the same level as in Eastern Asia and Europe."

However, according to the Federal Press and Mass Media Agency, the print industry continued to expand 3.5 percent through 2009, indicating the possibility of other causes.

Two segments are stable — children's books and educational texts.

"We have only witnessed stable trends," said Sergei Kokhanchuk, service manager for Factor, a Ukrainian publishing and consulting company that has actively sold children's books in Russia for about three years.

Concerning the effect of e-books, Kokhanchuk said: "[The Internet] affects the literary genres more, we focus on children's literature. Here there are pictures, and it is more difficult to produce electronically. We are not largely affected [by the Internet market]."

The government supports schoolbook purchases, Barakhtina told The Moscow Times in an interview, giving that segment stability.

Another problem affecting the industry could be the significant role of a few major players.

"It isn't a secret that many bookstores are owned by one of the four largest publishing houses," Kokhanchuk said, "such as AST, Eksmo, Prosveshcheniye and this creates problems for us on the market. There are very few private entrepreneurs in the Russian [book] market."

Seeking to expand the opportunities for small independent publishers, Openspace.ru launched a web site during the fair that recommends unknown authors with reviews by Bookmate.ru as well as book critics from Afisha and Kommersant.

"The whole point of this was to create something new and something that didn't exist here in Russia," said Konstantin Alyavdin, art manager at Openspace.ru. "It is a business covered in dust — [publishing houses] do not use technology, they do not use contemporary designs and very few of them are web-oriented in their strategies and promotion. They are so corporate they cannot move forward."

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