BP Can Improve Rosneft’s Corporate Culture

By Brook Horowitz

Hostility to BP’s Arctic alliance is understandable but misplaced. The $18 billion share swap between BP and Rosneft announced on Friday in fact provides the best opportunity for a significant change of corporate culture in Russia. The benefits of joint ventures go well beyond the environmental. They are already having a major impact on governance in the Russian industry. TNK-BP, in its early days under the leadership of Dudley — then its CEO — made a huge effort to create a culture of good corporate governance, and to a large extent it succeeded. Whether in health and safety, environmental, financial transparency or anti-corruption, there is a culture of compliance that is demonstrated in TNK-BP being one of the most open and best examples of good corporate management in Russia.

In making an assessment of the benefits and risks ahead, it is instructive to look at the record of other extractive joint ventures in Russia. BP’s existing operation, TNK-BP, seems to have managed its environmental risks well. There has been special attention to the impact of exploration and drilling, for example, in environmentally protected areas such as the wetlands in Khanty-Mansiisk in West Siberia, one of TNK-BP’s major sites and a region under the protection of the 1971 Ramsar Wetlands Convention.

Similarly, Shell’s joint venture with Gazprom, Sakhalin Energy, has taken on board the environmental concerns of international nongovernmental organizations in a way that would have been unlikely had Gazprom worked on the project alone.

While the challenges in the Arctic are on a much different scale, these examples show that a responsible environmental approach is possible in Russia. The benefits of joint ventures go well beyond the environmental. They are already having a major impact on governance in the Russian industry. TNK-BP, in its early days under the leadership of Dudley — then its CEO — made a huge effort to create a culture of good corporate governance, and to a large extent it succeeded. Whether in health and safety, environmental, financial transparency or anti-corruption, there is a culture of compliance that is demonstrated in TNK-BP being one of the most open and best examples of good corporate management in Russia.

There is a good chance that ventures such as BP’s Arctic alliance, best international practices may now be transferred to the traditionally opaque world of state companies. Rather than posing a threat to the global environment or the energy security of the West, BP’s new venture with Rosneft offers the opportunity for a significant change of corporate culture. This will help spread international business standards deeper into the Russian economy than any amount of isolationist talk and saber rattling.

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