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0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction

A decade and a half after the collapse of the Soviet system, Russian democracy lies in tatters. After the spectacular political breakthroughs of the late 1980s and early 1990s, democratization slowly ground to a halt. As the 1990s wore on and the new century dawned, many of the gains of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods were in jeopardy. By the time of Vladimir Putin's reelection as president of Russia in 2004, Russia's experiment with open politics was over.

To be sure, Russian citizens live in a more open polity than they did during the Soviet era. They also live a freer political existence than do the inhabitants of some other lands of the former Soviet Union. Russia did undergo substantial democratization. Unlike Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Russia did not merely slide from one form of autocratic police state to another. In contrast with Belarus and Kazakhstan, it did not swiftly revert to full-blown dictatorship after a brief opening.

Yet unlike many of its other postcommunist neighbors, Russia failed to advance to democracy. This book seeks to explain why.

The Study and Its Arguments in Context

Russia was the central entity of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet bloc. Its course of political change after the demise of communism could not be dictated by foreign powers or be driven by mechanical emulation of foreign models. Russia had the economic, bureaucratic, military, and cultural resources to make its own choices. Thus, for social scientists, Russia is the big "independent" case in the postcommunist world. It had to chart, and has charted, its own course. What is more, the fate of regime change in Russia is of immense practical significance. Russia is the core power in

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the postcommunist area, and its politics affect all other countries in the region. Russia is also a major player in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. It is one of the world's two great nuclear powers and one of its top three producers of oil and natural gas. What happens in Russia has been, and remains, central to international politics and security.

It is therefore unsurprising that Russia has been the subject of great attention in the West. Recent books have furnished penetrating accounts of post-Soviet Russian politics. Michael McFaul (2001) has published an exhaustive story of the transformation of elite politics and situated it in an original theoretical framework. George Breslauer (2002) has written an incisive study of top leaders. Timothy Colton (2000), Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul (2003), Richard Rose and Neil Munro (2002), and Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister (1997) have written illuminating books on Russian elections and voters. Thomas Remington (2001) has constructed a masterful examination of the national legislature, and Eugene Huskey (1999) has laid bare the anatomy and inner workings of the presidency. Jeffrey Kahn (2002) has explored the legal aspects of post-Soviet decentralization and relations between the central and regional governments. Debra Javeline (2003) has written an impressive study of labor politics. Timothy Frye (2000), Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman (2000), Daniel Treisman (2001), and David Woodruff (2000) have plumbed the politics of economic policymaking. William Zimmerman (2002) has unearthed the connections between public opinion and foreign policy. During the 1990s and first half of the current decade, Russia was arguably the subject of more extensive and sophisticated treatment in Anglo-American comparative political science than any other country.

This book differs in focus, argument, and method from other available studies on postcommunist Russia. First, the phenomenon I intend to explain – the dependent variable – is the failure to democratize. McFaul's (2001) and Remington's (2001) studies consider democratization, but they focus more on the emergence of stable rules than on democratization per se. Both McFaul and Remington argue that the institutions that structure political competition stabilized during the 1990s. Both explain how this process occurred. The focus of the present study is different. I am concerned with democratization rather than stabilization.

Several studies besides the present one have focused on regime change, and this one is not the first to argue that democracy has failed in Russia. Yet my argument differs from others in the way it accounts for this failure. Some works that have addressed Russia's democratic deficit hold

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Study and Its Arguments in Context

that Russian culture is incompatible with democracy (Duncan, 2000; Huntington, 1996; McDaniel, 1998). Others argue that Russia is no less democratic than one would expect, given its level of economic development (Shleifer and Treisman, 2004). Many authors fault excessively rapid economic liberalization or, in a similar vein, the imposition of inappropriate economic reform models on Russia by external powers (Cohen, 2000; Klein and Pomer, eds., 2001; Medvedev, 2000; Reddaway and Glinski, 2001).

My explanation differs from these. I do not find that cultural or historical factors provide compelling explanations for the failure of democratization. Nor is Russia's level of economic development decisive. I find that economic policy has influenced democratization. In contrast with many other studies, however, I hold that a deficit, rather than a surfeit, of economic liberalization has undermined democratization. I find, too, that Russia's extraordinary endowment of natural resources has inhibited democratization, but in ways that differ from what one finds in other resource-abundant countries. I further argue that the choice of a particular institution – the constitutional provision for a powerful presidency and a weak legislature – has compromised democratization.

None of these three variables has heretofore received adequate treatment in the literature on regime change in Russia. In my account, they explain Russia's failure to democratize.

This book also differs from others in its method. Most books on a single country rely on within-country analysis. Comparisons are often made between stages of the country's development. Both McFaul and Remington, for example, divide recent Russian history into three periods, and these serve as the authors' cases. Both authors use cross-temporal comparison to good effect. In some works on single countries, territorial entities within the country serve as the units for comparison. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss's (1997) investigation of regional politics in Russia, Barry Ames's (2001) inquiry into the causes of dysfunction in Brazilian democracy, and Ashutosh Varshney's (2003[a]) study of the causes of intercommunal violence in India are examples. The present book differs from these studies. It tests hypotheses in the context of large-N, cross-national analysis.

This book, in some respects, is a sequel to *Democracy from Scratch: Opposition and Regime in the New Russian Revolution*, which was published in 1995. In that book I sought to explain why, despite the dramatic political openings of the period of Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure as Soviet leader, a robust civil society did not emerge in Russia. I conceived of civil society broadly to include political parties, interest associations, labor unions, and

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

social movement organizations. The dependent variable was the extent of the development of civil society.

I set off for Russia in 1989 as a graduate student in search of a blossoming civil society. At home in the United States, I had read that Russia was teeming with new nonstate groups and that these groups were spawning a civil society. In the field, I encountered something different. I found not a civil society in the making but rather something I came to label a “movement society” – a realm of energetic but fragile and ephemeral political campaigns.

I attributed the failure of civil society to three factors. The first was the sequencing of political reforms. The timing of the first competitive elections, and especially the decision to hold elections before political parties were legalized, was of particular importance. The electoral openings of 1989 and 1990 were at once too sudden and too partial. Elections without bona fide parties reduced incentives for anti-regime leaders to invest in parties. The timing of the reforms encouraged a highly individualistic – almost antiorganizational – form of political entrepreneurship.

The second causal factor was the peculiar character of state agencies during the Gorbachev period. State agencies retained their potential for coercion, or at least disruption, but lost their positive capacities to make things happen. So the new autonomous organizations experienced crippling interference, yet when they nonetheless overcame it and managed to articulate demands, they found that the state agencies responsible for policy were in disarray and incapable of responding. Just as effective intermediation requires that societal groups have some influence over the state, so too must state agencies be able to deliver something of value. Yet by the end of the 1980s, state power in Russia had been reduced to negative power, meaning that the state could prevent things from happening but could not really make things happen. It could harass, obstruct, and repress, but it could not negotiate, entice, or deliver. The combination of intransigence and weakness on the part of the state circumscribed incentives for individuals to participate in the new politics of independent association. It checked the emergence of the institutions of bargaining, balancing, denying, and delivering that normally govern state–society relations.

The third cause of civil society’s travails was communist-era property relations and the social conditions they created. The state’s near monopoly on property, production, distribution, and employment stymied autonomous groups’ efforts to establish resource bases and represent interests outside the confines of state organizations.

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Study and Its Arguments in Context

The tenuous development of societal organizations dimmed democracy's prospects. I held that Russia was headed either for "democracy by default" or "moderate authoritarianism." The former would combine a fairly open political regime with weak institutions for translating popular preferences into policy; the latter would spell a mostly closed political regime, albeit one that included some channels for the expression of public voice. Writing in 1992 and 1993, I held that Russia was a democracy by default, but that the weakness of political-societal development presaged descent into moderate authoritarianism.

The present study extends the previous one, though what I seek to explain has changed. *Democracy from Scratch* tried to explain the development (or underdevelopment) of civil society. The prediction just cited was merely a closing rumination on the likely effects of civil society's underdevelopment on the future of regime change. *Democracy Derailed in Russia* attempts to explain the fate of regime change itself, and specifically the failure to democratize, through the middle of the current decade.

Russian civil society remains poorly developed, but I now focus on it only insofar as its development (or underdevelopment) has affected democratization. The present book discusses the weakness of civil society, but as just one of several factors that are embedded in a chain of causation that culminates in the failure of democratization.

Just as the dependent variable of this study is different from that of the earlier book, the determinants of the phenomenon to be explained differ as well. Some factors that I ignored in my earlier study on civil society are of central importance in postcommunist regime change. Russia's superabundance of raw materials is one such factor. Some political institutions that did not exist or whose effects were uncertain in the early 1990s also must be considered closely in any explanation of subsequent political change. The distribution of power between the president and the legislature is especially important.

Yet some of the factors in *Democracy from Scratch* that were used to explain society's weakness left a legacy that helps account for the failure of democratization. The choice of constitution in 1993 was influenced by conditions whose roots lie in the reforms of the Gorbachev period. Furthermore, continuities between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in the operation of state agencies and the nature of property relations shape latter-day politics. An urge to repress on the part of state agencies continues to check the development of autonomous organizations, which in turn impairs democratization. The endurance of economic statism has reproduced

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Soviet-era conditions and retarded socioeconomic change that would bolster open rule.

Method and Logic of Causal Inference

The methods used in this book have a much stronger cross-national thrust than those used in *Democracy from Scratch*. The empirics in the earlier book were based on ethnographic work in a single country. I have continued to conduct in-depth research in Russia during the past decade, and I draw heavily on my findings from the field in this book. But the wealth of quantitative data that has become available in recent years furnishes fresh opportunities for examining Russia in broad comparative perspective, and I use these data extensively.

The logic of causal inference is straightforward. To test hypotheses that are amenable to quantification, I use simple descriptive statistics, as well as regression analysis. In much of the analysis, I first examine the hypothesis by analyzing all countries of the world with populations of one-half million or more, and then narrow the universe to the postcommunist region alone. The postcommunist region is defined as the 28 countries of the former Soviet Union, East Europe (including the countries of the former Yugoslavia), and Mongolia. Due to a shortage of data, Bosnia is excluded entirely from this study, bringing the number of countries to 27. In testing some hypotheses, data are missing for several countries, and these countries will be excluded in the relevant analyses. If a given variable is not a determinant of regime type in cross-national analysis, it will be discarded as a potential determinant of political regime in Russia. If the variable is significant in cross-national analysis, Russia's place in the world and the region will be examined. If Russia is an outlier and is atypical in a manner that reveals that the variable is not of consequence in Russia, the variable will be discarded. If Russia is not an outlier, the variable will be considered a potentially important determinant, and its effects will be investigated further with in-depth focus on Russia.

For example, consider the claim that Russia's failure to democratize stems from Russians' fondness for alcohol (a hypothesis that I have yet to encounter in the literature and that will not be tested, accordingly). I would begin by considering whether there is any logical reason to regard drinking a determinant of political regime. If there is any basis for a positive answer, I would test empirically whether alcohol consumption per capita is a good predictor of the extent of democratization in the world as a whole and in the

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Method and Logic of Causal Inference

postcommunist region in particular. If the empirical analysis showed that alcohol consumption per capita is not a good predictor of political regime, I would rule it out as an explanation for Russia's political condition, regardless of how much Russians drink. If drinking proved to be a good predictor of regime type, however, I would examine Russia's place in comparative perspective. If heavier drinking was associated with less-democratic politics but the data showed that Russians, contrary to popular wisdom, were comparatively light drinkers, drinking would be ruled out as a determinant of Russia's democracy deficit. If Russians were indeed heavy drinkers and Russia's political condition was roughly what one would expect, given how much Russians drink, the drinking hypothesis would gain credibility and be further investigated with specific attention to Russia. If I could establish a convincing causal account of how drinking undercuts democracy, I would conclude that drinking is the enemy not only of personal health but also of political openness in Russia.

Quantitative measures are unavailable for some potentially important variables. These variables' effects must still be tested. The same logic of causal inference obtains as in quantitative analysis. Suppose that some observers argue that Russia's failure to democratize is due to the fact that the Russian people are pessimists (again, I have yet to encounter this hypothesis, but let it suffice for the purpose of illustration). Unlike drinking, pessimism cannot be easily measured using a quantitative indicator. Investigating the pessimism hypothesis would require, first, an assessment of whether pessimism theoretically could affect political regime. If an argument could be made that it might, qualitative comparison of pessimism in Russia and other countries would be undertaken. If there were good theoretical reasons to believe that pessimism countervails democracy and compelling evidence that pessimism is worse in Russia, I would further investigate the argument. If I could unearth a solid causal connection in Russia, I would conclude that the pessimism hypothesis is sound.

While the logic of causal inference used here is simple, it is also unusual in single-country studies. One of the few that does adopt such a logic is Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks's *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (2001). In order to explain why socialism never took hold, Lipset and Marks compare the United States to other advanced industrialized countries. They locate several ways in which the United States differed from countries where socialist movements did make inroads. The authors do not engage in large-N, cross-national statistical analysis. They rely on historical accounts. But their logic of causal inference

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

is largely the same as mine. What is more, like the present book, Lipset and Marks's work explains why something that might have happened did not. In their study, that something was the emergence of socialism in America; in this book, it is the emergence of democracy in Russia.

This approach to causal inference is vulnerable to criticism. Circumstances that are specific to the country under investigation may be important for understanding outcomes, and cross-national analysis may not uncover certain variables that are crucial to political change in Russia itself. Different causal paths to – and away from – democracy may exist at different times in different parts of the world, and broad global analysis might obscure factors that are central to a single country's experience.

The approach undertaken in this book addresses this legitimate concern. By testing hypotheses in the context of the postcommunist region in particular as well as in the world as a whole, I can at least detect distinctions that may be specific to countries that emerged from communist-party rule in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There may well be a discrete causal path of regime change in the postcommunist region that differs from that of, say, interwar Europe, southern Europe in the 1970s, or Latin America in the 1980s, and Russia might partake of a distinct experience by virtue of being a postcommunist country. The analyses conducted here, by alternating between a global sample of cases and postcommunist countries alone, should be able to account for regional specificities that may be of importance to the Russian experience.

Yet one might further argue that the approach may still overlook an influential factor that is unique to Russia and that cannot be uncovered even in within-region analysis. Such a possibility cannot be excluded entirely, but several precautions taken here mitigate the danger. First, I test the influence of a large number and wide range of candidate causal variables, including all those that appear prominently in the literature on regime change in post-Soviet Russia. Second, the risk of overlooking uniquely Russian conditions is also mitigated by my time in the field in Russia, which amounts to a total of almost three years following the demise of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. This experience included not only work in Moscow, where I usually resided, but also intensive field research involving several hundred interviews with a broad range of politicians, political activists, scholars, and journalists in northwest Russia (St. Petersburg and Pskov), far northern Russia (Arkhangelsk), south-central Russia (Saratov), and the Urals region (Ekaterinburg, Cheliabinsk, and Perm). I also spent about one year conducting field work in 11 postcommunist countries besides Russia between

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Method and Logic of Causal Inference

1992 and 2003. Together with the year and a half I spent in a broad range of Russian sites during the late Soviet period, this experience may reduce – though of course still not eliminate – the hazard of overlooking the importance of distinctly Russian conditions.

The overarching approach to method and causation taken here is inspired by Emile Durkheim. According to Durkheim, the investigator “must systematically discard all preconceptions” at the beginning of inquiry; doing so was “the basis of all scientific method” (1982, p. 72). To “discard all preconceptions” may sound like a grandiose and unattainable goal, but Durkheim had in mind simply eschewing controlling assumptions that were self-reinforcing and treated a priori as beyond methodical doubt, or that were subjected only to such tests as they were bound to pass, given the prior commitments of the investigator. Contemporary political science has spawned a robust industry of sparring over methods and theoretical approaches. Such debates have their place, but when showing the superiority of a given methodology or theoretical approach takes precedence over understanding the cases at hand, as it sometimes does in political science, the result may be an exercise in cramming facts into preestablished theoretical frameworks. I aim better to understand regime change in Russia and, in the best case, regime change in general in the contemporary world. I am not concerned with whether the findings demonstrate the virtues of rational choice, historical institutionalism, or some other political-scientific approach. I am interested in using theory to gain knowledge about the case, not using the case to illustrate the superiority of a particular approach to political science. I embrace Durkheim’s view, expressed in his assertion: “We do not start by postulating a certain conception of human nature, in order to deduce a sociology from it; it is rather the case that we demand from sociology an increasing understanding of humanity” (1982, p. 236). Discarding preconceptions, in practical terms, means placing substantive gains in knowledge about the subject matter above vindicating this or that scholarly paradigm.

This also means allowing the evidence to lead to the conclusions, rather than the opposite. Such an imperative does not require shunning deduction entirely, since deduction is necessary to generate a hypothesis. It does, however, mean eschewing the pretensions of a strong form of deductivism. Durkheim embraced a method advocated by J. S. Mill known as eliminative induction, in which putative causal hypotheses are systematically eliminated by comparing them with facts. While favoring induction, Durkheim also assumed that a hypothesis was needed to engage in meaningful

Cambridge University Press

0521853613 - Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

M. Steven Fish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

observation. Just as a hypothesis cannot materialize out of thin air (contra the logic of pure deductivism), neither could one imagine an “observation” in the absence of some more general understanding that made sense of the thing (contra the logic of pure inductivism). Durkheim regarded inductivism and hypothesis testing as the mutually dependent elements that constituted the core of the effort to advance scientific knowledge. In this respect, he was a methodological centrist. He formulated and worked with hypotheses, which required some deduction. Yet he spurned the exercises in making-the-facts-fit-the-theory that he saw in some works that meticulously strove to maintain the appearance of adhering to deductive thinking. He conceded that deductively based approaches were capable of generating elegant theoretical constructs. But he held that beauty was not necessarily truth, and that aesthetics furnished flimsy criteria for evaluating scientific theories or modes of inquiry (1982, pp. 67–8). The present study embraces Durkheim’s outlook and method.

This study also places comparison at the core of the effort to show causation. Durkheim held: “We have one way of demonstrating that one phenomenon is the cause of another. This is to compare the cases where they are both simultaneously present and absent, so as to discover whether the variations they display in these different combinations of circumstances provide evidence that one depends on the other.” In the absence of the ability to conduct controlled experiments, “the comparative method is the sole one suitable for sociology” (1982, p. 147).

Not just any comparative method promises sound findings, however. Durkheim argued:

Nothing is proved when, as happens so often, one is content to demonstrate by a greater or lesser number of examples that in isolated cases the facts have varied according to the hypothesis. From these sporadic and fragmentary correlations no general conclusion can be drawn. To illustrate an idea is not to prove it. What must be done is not to compare isolated variations, but series of variations, systematically constituted, whose terms are correlated with each other in as continuous a gradation as possible and which moreover cover an adequate range. For the variations of a phenomenon only allow a law to be induced if they express clearly the way in which the phenomenon develops in any given circumstances. (1982, p. 155)

This statement implies that covering the broadest universe of cases possible is desirable. Analyzing a large number of cases bolsters the possibility for displaying the “series of variations” that Durkheim found necessary to demonstrate causation. It also increases the opportunities for exhibiting the full range of variation on the variables under analysis, such that the