

## Democracy in the case of Russia

### Literature Review

*Fish, M.S. (2005). Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics.  
Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press*

In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed igniting a massive transition towards market-based economies and significant moves in the direction of democratization. Shifts toward democratization are not new of course, and have been highlighted quite well by a plethora of scholars seeking to better understand the causal mechanisms of such political phenomena. The move from communism to some form of democratic rule however has posed scholars of democratization with a new set of questions and issues. One text which seeks to contribute to the debate is M. Steven Fish's "*Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*" (2005), for which this article will review.

As mentioned, *Democracy Derailed in Russia* (Fish, 2005) is an attempt to better understand some of the concerns that have been under constant debate since the initial collapse of the Soviet system. Mainly, the author hits upon two prominent themes, the first being whether or not we can classify Russia as a democracy. For Fish, there is no debate—"Russia failed to advance to democracy" (pp. 1). Of course any such assertion necessarily depends upon the author's conception of what a democracy is, for which Fish develops and elaborates upon, and then ultimately uses to measure the former Soviet state against. The second part of the book then is used explain why democratization has

specifically failed in Russia. It follows then that Fish's dependent variable in the study is Russia's failure to democratize, which the author argues is contrary to most literature on the subject which predominately focuses on stabilization. The independent variables used to explain the outcome then are the following: (1) economic policy rather than economic development; (2) level of endowment of natural resources, and; (3) constitutional provision for a powerful presidency and a weak legislature ("super-presidentialism") (pp. 3).

In chapter two, Fish presents his concept and measure for democracy, and includes an analysis of how Russia rates in terms of democratic attainment, or rather lack thereof along such lines. Fish begins by arguing against definitions which fall into either what he terms as the "minimalist" or "maximalist" paradigms. Fish argues that minimalist definitions, such as those employed by Przeworski et al (1996, 2000), which suggest that the presence of elections alone is a sufficient condition, allow for the classification of polities in which elections are simply "shams as democracies" (pp. 17-18). On the other side of the coin however, Fish argues that "maximalist" definitions which go beyond citizenship rights and incorporate conditions such as those along the lines of socioeconomic equalities are overly restrictive and thus enigmatic as well. Fish notes "Maximalist definitions run the risk of failing to distinguish between *diagnostic features*, on the one hand, and *sustaining conditions* or *desirable outcomes*, on the other (pp. 18).

In consideration of the potential problematic issues with respect to the minimalist and maximalist definitions, Fish positions his definition within what he terms as the "conceptual mainstream," falling along the lines of Schumpeter and Dahl et al with a

focus on “the franchise and the rights needed to make it meaningful” (pp. 17). Fish’s definition however deviates from the “conceptual mainstream” in that he looks not so much at the standard “democratic-authoritarian” comparison, which he finds problematic, but at the relative degree of openness of a polity/political regime. In doing so, Fish differentiates between democracy, oligarchy (“rule by a part”), and monarchy (“rule by one”) for which he argues is a better typology for investigating polities along such a spectrum (pp. 19-20).

Having set up the definition and typology, Fish goes on in chapter three to measure the case of Russia against his rubric. Fish’s analysis goes through a discussion of Russia’s electoral system and experience and highlights blatant issues of electoral fraud, election-related coercion (both soft and hard forms), arbitrary exclusion from the electoral process/participation, and constriction of civil liberties (pp. 30-81). The analysis is both detailed and compelling making it quite difficult to disagree with his assessment.

The remaining chapters of the text, which make up the body of the argument, are geared towards addressing specifically why democracy has failed to take hold in Russia. Chapter four is devoted to addressing many of the standard explanations/hypotheses such the positive relationship between economic development and attainment, natural resource endowment, ethnic fractionalization, trust, tolerance, and orientation toward political regime, among others. Fish tests these hypotheses through the implementation of large-N, cross-national analysis using OLS regressions. The dependent variable—“extent of political openness” is predominately operationalized by relying on Voice and Accountability (VA) scores for 2002 (pp. 83).

Fish's regression analysis leads to some interesting and potentially problematic results. Namely, despite having a positive and significant estimate for economic development on that of the dependent variable (leaving aside issues such as potential endogeneity), Fish maintains that Russia's level of income suggests that it is "well behind where one would expect it to be given its income level" (pp. 105). While Fish may be correct in pointing out that based on the absolute level of GDP (in nominal terms) Russia is not necessarily so "bad-off," such absolute numbers do not shed much light on how relatively well-off society is as a whole (i.e. level of redistribution), thus leaving Fish's claim inconclusive.

A second point of contention has to do with Fish's methodological approach. In the opening chapter Fish acknowledges the potential criticisms of causal inference, namely that "broad global analysis might obscure factors that are central to a single countries experience" (pp. 8). Fish is astute to point this out, but disappointedly deviates from his own wisdom. For example, just because the estimate for "ethnic fractionalization" and "communist legacy" proved insignificant in the general regression model does not necessarily mean that it is insignificant in the specific case of Russia—yet Fish does not go beyond the general conclusions provided by the regression analysis. It is not difficult to posit that ethnic-based conflict in Chechnya for instance might have an effect on the state's relative willingness and or ability to move towards greater openness. Whether or not such a proposition is true obviously needs more attention but simply dismissing the potential explanatory power of such variables due to the "global regression results" regression is problematic.

Fish devotes the remaining chapters towards explaining what he posits are the main causal factors leading to Russia's democratic deficit. In chapter five Fish is concerned with the effect of natural resources on democracy (pp. 114). The general resource argument is as follows:

Copious endowment of raw materials may enable the state to buy off society with low taxation and high social spending and thereby allay popular demand for political accountability. It may also finance a large powerful internal security apparatus capable of repressing challengers—an apparatus that would be unaffordable in the absence of abundant rents from raw material exports. Resource abundance may also distort modernization, spurring increase in national income without inducing the socioeconomic transformations that normally accompany prosperity and that favor democracy (pp. 84).<sup>1</sup>

Fish argues that resource abundance (in the case of Russia—oil, gas, and metals), which proved to have a negative, statistically significant effect, has contributed to massive levels of corruption, distortions in economic liberalization, and has led to economic statism (pp. 127-138). If we are to follow the causal arrows then, Fish is suggesting that resource abundance in the case of Russia is one of the main causal factors of corruption, which then affects other areas related to the regime type. While this line of argument may well be true, Fish does not address other potential sources of mass corruption, such as for instance the legacy of the shortage economy under communist rule. Of course both potential sources of corruption are not necessarily mutually-exclusive. The point is that until Fish addresses this issue, his model is essentially subject to potential omitted variable bias.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally source: Ross, Michael. "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53, 3 (April 2001): 325-61

<sup>2</sup> Granted, every model is subject to omitted variable bias in some way or another, but the variable seems highly critical to the author's position and thus should be in some way or another accounted for.

Chapter six moves into the debate over the effects of economic policy on democracy and democratization. This chapter puts Fish's argument right into the heart of the "gradualism" versus "big-bang" (AKA "shock-therapy") debate. To be sure, Fish is pro "shock-therapy" and argues in many respects quite convincingly that economic and political liberalism may in fact be linked with democratization. The problem for Russia then as seen by Fish is not a surplus of political and economic liberalization, but rather a shortage of such measures (pp. 139). On this point I both agree and disagree with the author. It may be true that Russia's method of transition has had profound effects on the current level of openness—this fact is difficult to disagree with. However, the argument that "gradual" transition in the case of Russia or other post-communist states has not produced better results as Fish argues is quite a difficult leap to make. Such a discussion is far more complex than Fish presents it and is sensitive not only to the speed of measures, but also to a host of other factors such as sequencing of reforms, level of economic development prior to transition, level of decentralization/centralization prior to and post-transition, etc. In other words, Fish's assertion is interesting and plausible but again, ultimately inconclusive.

The final issue which Fish addresses is the constitutional provision for a powerful presidency and a weak legislature, in other words termed "super-presidentialism." Fish suggests five main areas where investing the majority of power in the president has been deleterious. First, Fish argues that such a system has damaged the legitimacy of the post-Soviet regime because such legitimacy has been placed in the hands of "one fallible individual." Second, the argument is made that super-presidentialism has inhibited the development of political parties. Third, it has

inhibited the quality of the political class. Fourth, it has undermined state capacity through the development of an “anti-institutional virus (in other words, present leaders have an incentive to undermine the system in order to prevent challengers and maintain power). Finally, the argument is made that such a system has exacerbated the problem of corruption (pp. 224-250). In sum, Fish argues that the institutional framework that Russia is currently operating under has had and continues to have significant effects on democracy and the process of democratization in general.

Again, Fish may very well be correct and it is quite difficult to argue against the points that he makes based on the experience of post-Communist Russia. I would also tend to argue that super-presidentialism is not directly beneficial for developing an open democracy. However, I am not convinced that Russia would have done any better if they had transitioned (or continue to transition) under any other political scheme, whether parliamentary, semi-presidential or super-presidential. Following the likes of Dahl (1971) I position myself in the camp which believes that democratization is a process—a process which does not happen overnight. At times of transition, especially so in the case of the post-Communist states (which are not only transitioning to democracy but also towards market economies), the economic, political and social environments are often characterized by instability. Many of the features which functioning democracies require, such as wide-spread commitment to the process and a strong political culture, etc. are widely under-developed if they are even there at all. In such environments then, it is not difficult to make the argument for strong leadership. The counter-position however is that if such leadership becomes entrenched, the positive effects of the short-run may eventually be outweighed in the

long-run. Simply arguing however that investing more power in the legislature will alleviate such distortions though is too simplistic an assertion.

In sum, Fish provides us with a thought provoking and informative analysis of the case of Russia's transitioning political regime. His theoretical positions are well balanced with his quantitative analysis, which is often a quality lacking in much of the literature surrounding the subject. Of course with all literature seeking to tackle as many issue areas as Fish has though, there are some problematic areas which have been touched upon in this review. Despite the shortcomings however, Fish's hypotheses are readily testable and modifiable thus making it highly useful contribution.