Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics

by M.Steven Fish, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 334 pp.

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Fish's book focuses on the failure of Russia to democratise. He argues that the main causes have been the superabundance of natural resources, a deficit in economic liberalisation and a constitutional system which makes for a powerful presidency and a weak legislature. Fish proceeds by a comparative analysis of post-communist regimes. He employs the 'logic of causal inference' to test his hypothesis – using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. If this sounds too intimidating, readers are reassured that they can skip all the tables and still be able to 'fully comprehend the book's arguments and the evidence used to support them' (p. 6).

The first chapter provides an introduction and an overview of the arguments and methods used, and a brief synopsis of the chapters. The second chapter discusses the concept of democracy and related issues, such as political openness. A preliminary assessment of Russia's levels of democratisation is provided and comparisons drawn with other post-communist countries. Russia is not a democracy – elections are 'riddled with too much fraud and coercion to call them free' (p. 28). Two measures are employed – Voice and Accountability Scores and Freedom House's Freedom Scores. The third chapter analyses the evidence of electoral fraud, including the anecdotal. Fish demonstrates significant distortions in the electoral process and a failure to discover these by monitoring bodies. Falsifications and election-related coercion, both 'soft' and 'hard,' are identified as the most acute symptoms of electoral fraud. The author's personal experience gives this section a touch of first-hand reporting. The most common fraudulent election practices, often overlooked by electoral commissions over-influenced by 'incumbent executives,' include denying citizens access to protocols, cooking numbers [and] drawing on reservoirs of 'dead souls.'

Chapter four confronts – and largely rejects – some common explanations of why democracy has not taken hold in Russia: the level of economic development; social/ethnic diversity; the role of socio-political heritage, including a communist heritage; and religion. Fish responds by claiming that natural resources, economic development and ethnic fractionalisation are all correlated with a lack of political

openness, while the communist heritage and Orthodox religion do not have much influence. Moreover, Fish does not consider the critical role of trust in building free-market economies and democratic systems.

To swiftly dismiss religion and fondness for autocrats as factors in the limited progress of democratisation is certainly counter-intuitive! Russians themselves often describe their culture as Byzantine, implying respect for authority and hierarchy. There is a popular preference for strong, charismatic leaders. Putin's popularity is evidence of that, as is the 2004 finding that 50 percent of Russians expressed the belief that Stalin played a positive role in Russia's history, in a survey conducted by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion. Nonetheless, Fish confidently asserts that 'Russians do not, at any rate, profess overwhelmingly proauthoritarian preferences' (p. 112).

Also surprising is Fish's assertion that 'by the end of the first postcommunist decade democrats and capitalists were enjoying ascendancy over colonels and priests.' This may ring true with regards to the colonels (though the speed with which Poland fell into the embrace of NATO qualifies even this claim). But the Catholic Church remains one of the most influential powers in Poland (which receives the highest score for democratisation in Fish's tables). As for the capitalists of Poland and Russia, they are often yesterday's nomenklatura and secret services members.

Natural Resources and Democratisation

In the fifth chapter Fish develops one of his main theses: the positive statistical correlation between the abundance of natural resources, especially oil, and the failure of democratic politics (i.e. the abundance of natural resources impedes democratisation). It is an original and interesting thesis, supported by a number of mathematical models and statistical data. According to Fish, the data support the notion that natural resources corrupt, and that corruption in turn discourages political openness.

But the thesis begs a series of questions. Surely the impact of natural resources is mediated by the political system and culture? Fish touches on this argument himself, noting that Britain's, and Norway's, oil era did not lead to corruption, thanks mainly to the 'sturdy democratic regimes in place.' But Fish stops short of drawing any deeper conclusions. And why did the abundance of natural resources under the communist system, before 1990, not lead to the kind of corruption and

appropriation of state assets witnessed in the 1990s? Why does Belarus – where Lukashenko scored a recent electoral victory – continue to avoid not just free-market reforms but the scale of corruption and theft of natural assets reached in Russia in the early 1990? And is Ukraine retreating from the 'Orange Revolution,' in part to avoid the Russian model in which officials get rich quick while the rest of the population is left at the mercy of the free-market?

In outlining the truly shocking scale of corruption (the Russians spent 37 billion US Dollars on bribes), Fish fails to distinguish between everyday corruption which had become a necessary part of life, perhaps a way of life, in communist Russia, and the large-scale theft of state's assets, which occurred in Russia alongside the partial liberalisation of the economy. Fish's argument could be usefully supplemented by a consideration of the correlation between the type of political regime, corruption and the theft of state assets.

Economic Liberalisation and Democratisation

The second line of argument in Fish's book is that the merely partial liberalisation of the Russian economy has caused a more general failure of democratisation. Fish's statistical analysis suggests that economic deregulation facilitates democracy. But surely the picture is more complex? When Poland followed policies of market deregulation the result was not only healthy economic growth and fast development of private companies and businesses. The result was also a high proportion of people living in poverty, mass unemployment, and the highest income-disparities in Central Europe. The current Law and Justice Party government is increasing its control over the media, promoting Catholic values in schools and public life, and banning demonstrations of groups which do not fit its social agenda. Perhaps Belarus – where economic prosperity and avoidance of mass unemployment are present – might yet lead to a more mature pluralism and a greater political openness than in Russia or Poland.

During a political transition, the liberalisation of the economy – if stable institutions and procedures are lacking – can create favourable conditions for theft, corruption and potential capture of power by entrenched interests. This was the case in Poland, where democratic institutions were used as a façade. It is likely that a fuller liberalisation of the Russian economy would have led to even greater levels of chaos, theft and corruption.

We need a more nuanced understanding of the nexus of liberalisation and democratisation. Fish seems to assume that the fall of communist regimes should have led to the establishment of Western-style democracies, provided basic conditions – such as free elections and free media – were in place. In fact, even Polish democracy – which Fish scores the highest among the post-communist regimes – rests on shallow foundations. The elitist character of the political process created a syndrome of the 'abandoned society.' The formidable political power of the Catholic Church remained unchecked. And the prospects for democratic revival seem remote under the current government, which is demonstrably pro-Catholic and ultra-conservative.

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