Differences in democratic sentiment in Russia’s regions explained*

Jos Elkink
Department of Political Science
Leiden University
Wassenaarseweg 52
P.O. Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden
The Netherlands
email: jelkink@yahoo.com
March 2001

1 Introduction

For many years political scientists have studied transitions to democracy and the consolidation of new democratic regimes. Several theories have been developed to explain the transition to and consolidation of democracy. In a modern classic written by Linz and Stepan [7] the main theories have been summarized and applied to a large number of countries. In this paper I will not be concerned with those theories about the transition to democracy, only with those about its consolidation.

Most of the transition and consolidation theories have to do with the level of economic development - or other social requisites - in the country, the quality of the new institutions, the legacy of the past, or the path taken from the old regime to the new democracy. Factors that are usually kept out of the research are those connected to the geographical location of the country. Recently theories have been developed that deal with what is called democratic diffusion, the extent to which democratic sentiments are ‘transported’ across borders. Due to personal contacts among citizens

*Presented at the 29th Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research, Grenoble, France, 6-11 April, 2001.
of different regions the democratic sentiment of the population of a region will be influenced by that of its neighbours. Or more indirectly the contacts between the elites of neighbouring regions can cause the democratic sentiments of the regional elite to be influenced by their neighbours, while the democratic sentiment among the population is influenced by the behaviour and attitudes of their elite.

Most analyses have focused on the national level. Yet, in a federation like Russia not only the central authorities matter for the level of democracy in the country as a whole. When the national government is democratically elected and influential local governments are not, one can hardly speak of a democratic country. Therefore, it is interesting to look at what makes democracy feasible at a national level and what makes it feasible at a sub-national level. Those theories mentioned above should not only be tested on a national, but also on a subnational level. The current situation in the Russian Federation - with striking differences among regions - makes such a study especially interesting and possible [3]. In this paper all subjects of the Russian Federation - oblasts, krais, okrugs, cities and republics - will simply be called regions.

Usually recognized as an important factor in the consolidation of a new democracy is the strength of democratic sentiment in its population. When a large majority of the population has strong pro-democratic sentiments the new democracy is assumed to have a much better chance to survive than when the opposite is the case. Because of that an important part in explaining the consolidation of a new democracy is to explain which factors support a more democratic sentiment in the population. Since a subnational level of government is closer to the people, democratic sentiment among those people is an even more important factor in the democratisation process, than democratic sentiment at the national level.

For the Russian Federation I lack survey data concerning the democratic sentiment that could be used to compare different regions. Surveys usually do not have enough respondents from each region. For that reason another dependent variable will be used that should to a certain extent show the level of democratic sentiment, namely the support for two more democratic political parties, Yabloko and Soyuz Pravikh Sil (SPS). This data is of course only available on an aggregated level, but this is congruent with the level of measurement of the variables that are used to explain this sentiment.

The main question to be answered in this paper will be: to what extent does analysing the geographical location of a subnational region help explain the level of democratic sentiment, as compared to the more common explanation of economic development.
2 Democratic sentiment

As the dependent variable in this analysis the support for Yabloko and SPS in the elections for the State Duma in 1999 will be used. Based on the official reports of the Federal Election Commission the percentages of votes for those two parties were calculated for each region. Only the votes on the party lists were taken into account, because finding the party for every candidate in the single member districts is complicated \[4\] and useless from an analytical perspective, when the objective is to compare the support for democratic parties in different regions. As long as the same method of ignoring the single member districts is applied to all regions, which is of course the case in this analysis, it does not harm the comparability. It might even have a positive effect in the sense that in the single member districts sentiments towards the personality of the candidate might play a more important role than sentiments towards the democratic ideology of the party, while in this paper I am only interested in the democratic sentiment.

For several reasons, taking the support for those two political parties as an indicator of the strength of democratic sentiment in a region is not the preferred option. The first is that it would have been better just to ask citizens directly about their opinion on democracy. Such a survey method would make it possible to test theories on an individual level and it would be based on fewer weak assumptions. For example, a voter might vote for Yabloko for reasons that have to do with parts of the ideology or behaviour of Yabloko, other than their explicit support for democracy. Or, a voter might vote for strategic reasons, where a voter votes for a party other than the one that enjoys his or her most sympathy. Unfortunately, such data on an individual level does not seem to be available. Surveys that have been organised usually do not have their respondents spread out enough over the country and do not have enough respondents to be able to analyse the differences among 89 subgroups.

The second problem with this variable is electoral fraud. In one state the lack of support for Yabloko and SPS might be explained by a weak democratic sentiment among its citizens, which is the assumption in this paper. In another state it might merely show how well the regime knows how to control the outcome of the elections. In this case the lack of support for Yabloko and SPS might even show the opposite of what is assumed in this paper, in that it shows how undemocratic the region is. It would not say anything about the level of democratic sentiment.

The third reason why the dependent variable is debatable, is the choice of parties. The Russian party system does not seem to be very stable yet
and it is difficult to clearly identify democratic parties. This problem is even bigger when different regions are compared, since parties might differ from region to region. Even if the party system would be fully stable and identical in all regions, it is difficult to create a dichotomy of democratic and non-democratic parties. Democracy is a multi-faceted phenomenon and parties can stress certain aspects while ignoring others. Or a party can mix pro-democratic elements with clearly non-democratic ones. Or parties might not act according to their stated democratic or non-democratic ideology. For example, a party which proclaims to be democratic, but does not accept the democratic vote for non-democratic parties, is not very democratic after all. And a party which is against democracy, but accepts to have lost the elections, is acting more democratically.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for selecting Yabloko and SPS as the democratic parties in this analysis. First, to make a comparison possible we need parties that are not too small and are well enough spread out over the country. Yabloko and SPS gained support in all of Russia’s regions during the 1999 elections. Second, the parties should openly support democratic values. Yabloko clearly states in its program to be against ‘the practice of consolidation of personal power in the constitutional regime and the tendencies to change the president into a monarch with unlimited powers (...) the stimulation of regional authoritarian regimes in the subjects of the federation’ [11]. And Yabloko and SPS do not seem to be in the category where democratic ideology is combined with non-democratic behaviour.

Another element that makes these two parties interesting to analyse is that one has always been in the opposition (Yabloko), while the other one is closely connected to the current regime (SPS), so that voting for or against the current federal regime will not be a major explanation when the votes for Yabloko and SPS are taken together. Which of course does not say anything about the influence of regional politicians in power on the outcome in the region itself.

3 Economic development

Since the article of Lipset in 1959 [8] economic development has been one of the most common explanations of transitions to and consolidation of democracy. Since that article many different researchers have tested this

---

1 Orig.: ‘praktiki zakrepleniya v Konstitutsii rezhima lichnoi vlasti i tenentsii k pre-
vreshcheniyu prezidenta v monarkha s neogranichennoj vlast’yu (…) poeschchreniya av-
toritarnikh rezhimov v sub’ektakh federatsii’
correlation and found it to be true [1]. There are several hypothesis on how this correlation can be explained.

A first explanation might be that people who are very poor will not be revolutionary. Peoples first concern is food and not a specific political structure. People who have to search for food every day have no time or energy to invest in changing the government. Therefore only people who have at least a decent income and standard of living will be prone to support the democratisation of a country. This hypothesis might play a significant role in some African countries. In Russia’s regions that will presumably not be the case. This might be more important for a democratic transition or revolution in a non-democratic regime because when the regime is already implemented it does not take much of an effort to support the democratic leaders.

Not only do poor people not have the energy or resources to invest in revolution, they also cannot take the risk of political turmoil. They are too dependent on the few resources they have. When people do not have the resources to help themselves if they go through a period of chaos, they will tend to be more conservative and hold on to the current stability. They might also be tempted to support political leaders who advocate such stability instead of those who advocate democracy and freedom.

Another important reason is considered the level of education, which is usually strongly correlated with the level of economic development. Literacy makes it possible for people to read opinions other than the one they usually hear. Their better access to information makes it possible for them to be good citizens. The better the educational level in a country, the better people are able to view things from different perspectives. ‘Education presumably broadens men’s outlooks, enables them to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist and monistic doctrines, (...)’ [8, 79]. Because education is often organised or supported by the national government, it might be less connected to the level of economic development in subnational regions than it is in countries.

The fourth important reason argues that the relationship between economic development and democracy is indirect, namely through the growth of the middle class. When the economy grows, the middle class will get relatively larger. Often the middle class is associated with democracy. Middle class people are independent enough not to worry about some changes and they have an interest in living in a free regime, where they can employ economic activities easier. If the middle class is large, it is strong enough to overrule the rich and dominate the poor. It can be a moderating force between the upper and the lower classes [8, 83].
Table 1: Correlations between indicators of economic development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GDP per capita</th>
<th>Urbanisation</th>
<th>Small enterprises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanisation</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small enterprises</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this paper three indicators of economic development will be used, namely GDP per capita, the level of urbanisation and the number of small enterprises per thousand citizens. To be valid indicators for this one variable, economic development, these indicators have to be closely correlated. Table 1 shows that this is not fully true in the case of Russia’s regions. What is striking in this table is that there is no strong correlation between the number of small enterprises and the main indicator of the economic situation, the GDP per capita. This probably has to do with the specific situation of analysing regions in one country instead of several countries. In Russia the GDP per capita in several regions will be strongly determined by the existence of some very large companies. In some regions one company has a monopoly on the labour market, meaning that a dominant part of the working population is directly or indirectly employed by this one company. If that company is doing well, the GDP per capita in that region will be high, but the number of small enterprises may not be high.2

Although this correlation between the number of small enterprises and the other indicators of economic development is not very strong, it is still statistically significant. Therefore these three variables will still be used as indicators of the level of economic development.

4 Democratic diffusion

Next to the common explanation of economic development, this paper will focus on a more recent development in the theories on democratic transition, known as democratic diffusion. This is the theory that democratic regions influence neighbouring regions towards more democracy [6] [10] [9]. An important argument in this theory is the existence of international pressure to reform. For example, the main explanation in an article by Kopstein and Reilly, which can be considered as one of the important articles from this perspective, is whether or not the respective country has any chance of be-

2See for a description of the Russian economic elite: [5]
coming part of an international (economic) union, like the European Union [6]. This argument is hardly applicable in explaining democratic diffusion in subnational regions. Other arguments however, do. The most important one - especially in the case of something like democratic sentiment, as opposed to for example democratic institutions or policies - is direct personal contact between citizens of different regions. Direct relations by ways of tourism, migration - and, in conjunction with that, having family in other regions -, or comparable personal contacts through business relations. Besides personal contacts between the overall population also contacts between the elites of the regions will have an effect of democratic diffusion. The democratic sentiment among a population is also influenced by the example of its elite. So if the elite of a region is influenced by its neighbours in their democratic attitude that will cause an indirect correlation between the democratic sentiment of a region and its neighbours. It seems probable that such personal contacts will be more frequently occurring when costs for such contacts are low, which will clearly be the case when regions are nearby. There are of course more factors involved than just distance, such as the existence of proper roads, rough terrain, or large cities in neighbouring regions - which attract people - but distance will be a major factor. In this paper, which is meant as only a first indicator of whether democratic diffusion plays a role in the existence of subnational democratic sentiment or not, only distance is taken into account. On a national level other research projects do exist, that take variables such as the amount of relief in the border-area or the existence of a capital close to the border into consideration.3

Figure 1 shows the support for both parties accumulated in the regions of the Russian Federation. The darker a region is colored, the more support for the two parties. The black regions form the highest quartile of support; the white regions the lowest quartile. Although not very clearly, broad areas can be seen that seem to contain a more democratic sentiment than other areas. That is exactly what the theory of democratic diffusion would, to a certain extent, predict. If regions influence neighbouring regions a clustering of democratic regions and a clustering of nondemocratic regions should occur. Nonetheless, a mere map should not be decisive in choosing between theories. Therefore more sophisticated analysis will be used later in this paper.

3See for example: [10]
4.1 Neighbouring Russian regions

In the case of subnational regions, two distinct ways of influencing neighbours should be studied. First, the influence of neighbouring regions inside the same federation, that influence each other. Second, regions close to the border of the Russian Federation will probably be more influenced by neighbouring countries than regions further from the border. The influence of neighbouring regions is measured here in a simplified way. Methods exist that take account of detailed characteristics of the border, for example by using GIS data [10]. Those analyses are very interesting when we want to study precisely in what way the level of democratic sentiment in a region is related to that in neighbouring regions. This paper does not deal with the exact way this influence works, but with the value of this kind of explanation compared with the more common explanation of economic development. The variable that is constructed is the average of support for Yabloko and SPS in the bordering regions, not weighted for characteristics of that borderline. The average of support here means that for all the regions bordering a certain region the combined support for Yabloko and SPS has been calculated, after which the average has been taken of the bordering
regions together. If for example a region has two neighbours and the support for respectively Yabloko and SPS is in the first region 5 and 15 percent and in the other region 10 and 20 percent, the average combined support in the neighbouring regions is 25 percent. Only land borders were taken into account.

The correlation between the combined support for Yabloko and SPS and the average for that region in the bordering neighbours is .53 and clearly significant. Diffusion of democracy seems to be an important factor in the democratisation process in Russia's regions. This is not a very striking result. It is more interesting to see this explanation in a more inclusive analysis, compared with economic explanations. Such a test will be done in the last section of this paper.

4.2 Nearby regimes outside Russia

The second way of looking at effects of democratic diffusion on a regional level is to look at the influence of foreign countries on a region. To assess the level of democracy in the foreign countries bordering Russia I used the Polity IV dataset.4 This dataset contains information for all countries above a certain size concerning the level of democracy, the level of autocracy, the durability of the regime, and other variables, for every year the country exists since 1800. From this dataset only the information concerning the level of democracy has been used and only in 1999, the year in which the State Duma elections took place. From this data two variables have been constructed into the dataset of Russian regions. The first variable contains the average of the level of democracy in the countries directly bordering the region. The second variable contains the same information, but now regions that indirectly border other countries - with only one region in between - are also taken into the calculation. Both variables give the same result in the analysis. In Table 2 the second variable, thus including the second-level border regions, has been used.

Since the two ways of influencing neighbours, within and crossing national borders, do not seem to be theoretically totally different, one would not expect too much difference between the two effects. Yet, as can be seen in Table 2, the internal effect of democratic diffusion is quite strong, while the external effect shows no significant correlation at all.

Table 2: Correlations of the diffusion of democratic sentiment
\[\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Internal neighbours} & \text{External neighbours} & \text{Region} \\
\text{Internal neighbours} & 1.00 & \\
\text{External neighbours} & \text{N.S.} & 1.00 \\
\text{Region} & 0.53 & \text{N.S.} & 1.00 \\
\end{array}\]

*N.S. = not significant

5 Economic diffusion

The existence of economic transactions crossing borders was one of the explanations on how democratic diffusion could work. Yet, this also leads one to think that the phenomenon of democratic diffusion might be a spurious relationship. The argument would then be that not the neighbours’ positive attitude towards democracy has influenced the attitude in the region. Instead the neighbours’ economic development both explains their democratic attitude and influences the region’s level of economic development. The economic development in the region is then the explanation of the democratic attitude in the region. Why economic development might influence the democratic attitude in both the region and the neighbouring regions has been explained in the section on economic development. The added assumption is that the economy in the neighbouring regions will influence the economy of the region. This is not a very controversial assumption. When the economy in the neighbouring regions goes well, those neighbours will be able to intensively trade with the region, which has a positive effect on the region’s economy. In addition, neighbouring regions will often have comparable geographic characteristics, which might make them dependent on the same economic markets. For example, if an area is typically suited for mining, and the same is true for neighbouring regions, both economies will bloom when there is a high demand for mined products, while both economies will decline when the demand is low. In this explanation the region’s economy is not so much influenced by the neighbouring economy, but the two neighbouring economies are correlated due to common explaining variables.

In this scenario the difference between internal and external borders is also more understandable. The economic situation in a certain region is much more likely to be influenced by the economic situation in the country as a whole, than it will be by the situation in nearby countries. Economic
diffusion might look similar to democratic diffusion, but the way it works seems totally different. Economic diffusion is not caused by contacts between citizens of two regions or countries, but by the existence of trade between them. And this trade can be less local - international trade exists between different locations where a certain product is made and where it is needed, and these locations are not necessarily geographically connected.

6 Comparing the different explanations

So far we have only looked at theoretical hypothesis and bivariate relationships. Two theories have been described: the older theory of how economic development is a requisite for democracy and the newer one of the diffusion of democracy. What has also been explained is that the correlation of democratic diffusion might be spurious, caused indirectly by the economic performance of the region and its neighbours, and the correlation between the two. In this section all the described approaches will be combined in one statistical model. The model will be tested using a computer program for structural equation modelling, EQS [2]. In this statistical procedure, detailed information concerning the expected relations between the variables are entered into the program, so that all correlations that are assumed not to exist, will be set to zero by the estimation of the other parameters. The program will then assign regression parameters to all given correlations. After that a new covariance matrix will be established, based on this model, so that the differences between the original matrix and the new one can be analysed. The model fits when the residuals - that is, the difference between the established covariances and the original ones - are not significantly different from zero.

During the preparation of this paper, first a model was created which merely tested the relative importance of the two explanations. However, this model did not fit, nor did it after making some minor adjustments. A look at the residuals matrix made clear that especially the correlations between the indicators used for the economic development and the support for Yabloko and SPS in the neighbouring regions were too high to ignore. Since a direct correlation between a region’s economic development and the democratic sentiment of its neighbours is highly illogical, an indirect relation had to be the case. In the previous section the theoretical explanation of this indirect relationship has been given. Figure 2 shows how this extra theoretical perspective could be entered into the model. After entering the addition, the model fits significantly and the correlation between the neigh-
bours’ democratic sentiment and the democratic sentiment in the region disappears.

Figure 2: EQS model on explaining democratic sentiment

\[ \text{Neighbours' support for Yabloko and SPS} \]

\[ \text{Development} \]

\[ \text{Development} \]

\[ \text{Neighbours' support for Yabloko and SPS} \]

It should be noted that this analysis has been done in slightly the wrong order. Scientific methodology requires that first the theoretical model has to be created and can then be tested. Changing the model based on the results is a serious drawback in the interpretability of the model. In addition, the number of cases in this analysis is rather small. Due to the fact that some variables were not available for the autonomous okrugs, some regions had no neighbouring regions, or only with a sea in between, and for Chechnya not data available was, 12 cases had to be taken out of the analysis. The closer the number of parameters comes to the number of cases, the easier a model fits the data, but the less reliable the model is as an explanation of reality. Therefore, although this way of analysing seems very sophisticated, it should be kept in mind that it gives only a rough indication of the interaction between economic development and democratic diffusion in the explanation of democratic sentiment in subnational regions.
This lack of clarity is exacerbated due to the indicators that have been used. Much more detailed variables could be used in a comparable analysis, with more aspects of the region's relations with its neighbours taken into account - variables like the geographical aspect of the border region, or the kind of contacts between regions - or where the specific coherence between the middle class and economic development in the context of the Russian Federation is analysed in more depth.

Keeping those drawbacks in mind, the model still gives a rough idea of how those variables interact. As has been pointed out, the correlation that shows the effect of democratic diffusion - explaining the democratic sentiment by the democratic sentiment in the neighbouring regions - disappears when the interaction between the region's economic development and that of the neighbours is taken into account. The effect of economic diffusion, on the other hand, is very strong.

7 Conclusion

Although the theory of democratic diffusion sounds convincing and one would expect it to be an important explanation of differences in democratic consolidation in Russia's subjects of the federation, this does not seem to be the case. The levels of democratic sentiment in the regions are strongly correlated to the average level of democratic sentiment in the neighbouring regions, but this correlation is a spurious one. The correlation can be fully explained by the effect of economic diffusion: the correlation between the region's economic development and that of its neighbours.

This conclusion might be overstated. Both in the measurement of the described phenomena and in the use of sophisticated statistical analysis serious drawbacks have to be taken into consideration. Support for Yabloko and SPS is only indirectly a sign of a strong democratic sentiment and a model on only 77 cases is too easily significant.

Further analysis would be needed to analyse the exact ways in which the described phenomena work. Particularly interesting would be to enter more geographical information into the analysis, both about characteristics of the region's borders and about the economic relevant geographical situation of the region and that of its neighbouring regions. In this paper hypothesis have been written down, but not tested, on how geographical similarities between neighbouring regions strengthen economic diffusion and on how geographical characteristics of the region's borders influence the effect of democratic diffusion.
References


