

THE EFFECT OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL POWER ON THE POLITICAL REGIME: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF YELTSIN AND PUTIN PERIODS*

RUS BAŞKANLIK İKTİDARININ SİYASAL REJİM ÜZERİNE ETKİSİ: PUTİN VE YELTSİN DÖNEMLERİNİN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZİ

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effect of the Russian presidential power on the political regime in a comparative perspective since 1993. Yeltsin (1993-1999) and Putin (2000-incumbent) periods were analyzed firstly by examining the constitutional powers of the president. Shugart and Carey (1992), with reference to Duverger (1980), took the origin of the presidency and the degree of presidential support in parliament and among the elite under consideration. Besides, I also considered presidential popularity, keeping in mind the president's political background, as a necessary factor to be counted in for both continuation and the change in a regime. In order to confirm the change in the regime type, Freedom House and Voice & Accountability (V&A) Scores were used. The findings put forward that during the first years of the 1990s Yeltsin had to share his power with oligarchs and *the family* by adopting a more pro-western and pro-democracy stance while Putin did not share his power, thanks to his strong state understanding in line with international conjuncture. It is determined that the powers embedded in the constitution together with the political background of the president paved the way for establishing a more authoritarian regime during Putin period.

Keywords: Presidential Power, Political Regime, Russian Federation, Authoritarianism

* This article is an improved version of a study presented in 'European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference' in Hamburg (Germany) on 22-25 August 2018. The author benefited from his Ph.D. thesis titled "Democratic Experience in the Post-Soviet Russian Federation: Competitive Authoritarianism" at Institute of Social Science at Marmara University.

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Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı 1993 yılından bugüne Rus başkanlık iktidarının siyasal rejim üzerine olan etkisini karşılaştırmalı bir şekilde analiz etmektir. Yeltsin (1993-1999) ve Putin (2000-halen görevde) dönemleri öncelikle anayasada belirtilen başkanın yetkileri çerçevesinde analiz edilmiştir. Shugart ve Carey'in (1992) Duverger'e (1980) referansla önerdiği gibi başkanlık sisteminin ortaya çıkışı, parlamento ve elitler arasında başkanın sahip olduğu destek incelenmiştir. Yanı sıra, özellikle başkanın siyasal kariyeri ile birlikte değerlendirildiğinde önem kazanan başkanın kamuoyu desteği de rejimin devamlılığı çerçevesinde dikkate alınmıştır. Rejim tipindeki değişimi teyit etmek için Freedom House ve Vocie & Accountability (V&A) değerlerinden yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular göstermektedir ki özellikle 90'ların ilk yıllarında Yeltsin, Batı ve demokrasi yanlısı bir duruş benimseyerek iktidarı oligarklar ve *aile* ile paylaşmak zorunda kalmıştır. Putin ise uluslararası konjonktürden de yararlanarak güçlü devlet anlayışı çerçevesinde iktidarını paylaşmamıştır. Anayasada yer alan yetkiler başkanın siyasal kariyeri ile birlikte ele alındığında Putin döneminde daha otoriter bir rejim oluşumunu kolaylaştırdığı tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Başkanlık İktidarı, Siyasal Rejim, Rusya Federasyonu, Otoriterleşme

1. Introduction

The end of the communist regimes by the end of the Cold War gave way to the proliferation of the regimes in transition. As a result of the so-called third wave democratization (Huntington, 1993, pp. 13-25), although some preferred to call this phase as a new wave, political scientists found themselves in front of many cases of transition from authoritarian rule to democratic systems. Since the former communist system was a closed one for almost seventy years, these transitional regimes did not have experience in many realms, such as a multiparty system in politics and a free-market system in the economy. Thus, these post-communist regimes had to make their choice among institutions, constitutions, electoral systems, and other structural components. The determination of these components is vital for the country's path towards a more democratic or perhaps more authoritarian rule.

There is no doubt that the preference of these transitional governments affected the types of new regimes that have emerged within a few years in the 1990s. However, the establishment of a political regime is not only a decision to make, rather it is a process to experience. That is why, after more than a quarter of a century today, some claim that some of the transitional regimes emerged after the dissolution of the USSR are not still transitional regimes. Because they evolved into new regime types: democracies with adjectives or authoritarian regimes with adjectives. (Collier & Levitsky, 1997, pp. 430-451) One of the most well-known concepts for this regime type is competitive authoritarianism that is frequently used for the Russian political system since the beginning of the post-soviet era. (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 5) Although this argument was generally challenged by those who claim that competitive aspect of the regime is in a decrease, my main point in this study is to determine the basis of the system in terms of the semi-presidential system's effect on the type of the regime. By doing so, my target is to extend Shugart and Carey's analysis, which analyzed Russia's semi-presidential system in 1992, to Yeltsin and Putin years with a qualitative perspective. I claim that Russian presidents,

especially Putin in 2000s, benefited from the government system to stay in power and with the help of the global economic and political conditions directed the country to a more authoritarian one. In line with this objective, the origin of the Russian semi-presidential regime, which is accepted as associated with Boris Yeltsin, together with the constitutional powers of the president will be evaluated with reference to the presidential popularity. Scores of the institutions measuring political regimes will be given to confirm whether the expected change towards democratization in the regime matches with these findings. Since previous regimes had just left strong executives behind, a new government system established after the dissolution would be vital either in preventing authoritarianism or enabling it. In this context, the semi-presidential system of the Russian Federation will be scrutinized under the light of the Shugart and Carey's theoretical framework. This framework directs us to consider the Russian semi-presidential system in terms of government formation and dismissal, dissolution of the legislature, term limits of the president, veto powers, the formation of the domestic and foreign policy, the position of the prime minister and appointments to the key positions in the bureaucracy. (Shugart & Carey, 1992, pp. 18-27) The degree of presidential support among the elite and in the parliament, together with the presidential popularity among the general public, will be taken under consideration for both Yeltsin and Putin periods.

In the first section, I will try to explain post-soviet transitional regimes' dilemma to decide on their form of government. By revealing the deficiencies of the presidential system in the democratization process I will provide the reader a better understanding of the political regime in the post-soviet Russian Federation. In the second section, I will analyze the post-Soviet process in accordance with the change in the presidency. Yeltsin period will be analyzed in terms of the creation of the semi-presidential system in the Russian Federation with its roots in the USSR. Constitutional powers of the president, government formation and dismissal of the legislature, term limits of the president and other elements indicated by Shugart and Carey will be revealed. Economic policies named *shock therapy*, business elites (oligarchs) and political parties will also be taken under consideration. In the section following Yeltsin period, I will examine the Putin period bearing in mind the constitutional changes, economic recovery and other political factors affecting the Russian semi-presidential system and political regime. Since institutions measuring political regimes might reach data especially beginning with the second part of the 1990s I will be able to refer them for this period in the complementary analysis section.

2. Presidential Power and Transitional Regimes

The basic drive behind the preference of the semi-presidential system was to consolidate the newly established regime which would provide political and economic stability. It was a widely accepted phenomenon that post-authoritarian states were hostile to strong executive since they have recently defeated strong executives. That is why most political scientists determined the parliamentary form of government as the most appropriate one for post-authoritarian states. (Clark, 1998,

p. 621) The positive sides of the parliamentary system were accepted as a representation of different parts of the society through various political parties, the formation of coalitions which facilitates bringing small parties to the power and the existence of parliamentary ways to question the government. (Riggs, 1997, pp.265-259) In this way, it is believed that this system forms an obstacle to a possible return to authoritarianism.

As a bolstering analysis to this determination Linz states the deficiencies of the presidential systems in a democratic transition:

- a. Personalization of power: President is elected directly by the popular vote and s/he does not need parliamentary confidence to continue till the end of the term. Thus, just after the election and in a lame-duck situation the cost of ignoring the will of the people is highly possible.
- b. Zero-sum elections: Even if the president is elected with a percentage higher than fifty percent in the first round, the remaining will not be represented by the president.
- c. Dual legitimacy: There is always a possibility of a gridlock depending on the two representative bodies, parliament and presidency, both elected by a popular vote.
- d. Rigidity: Presidents are generally not allowed to run for the presidency after two terms. This will prevent a good president to continue to serve the country while strict measures to prevent impeachment prevents people to remove a president from his post in case of his/her ignorance of the people's will. (Linz, 1990, pp. 51-69)

Horowitz, however, criticized Linz on the grounds that he took only Latin American cases under consideration and ignored the positive role of presidential systems in divided societies. (Horowitz, 1990, pp. 73-79) In this sense, we should note that less developed countries that do not have nationally oriented strong political parties prefer to adopt presidential systems since they have no experience of parliamentary politics. (Shugart, 1999, pp. 53-88) Nevertheless, this does not mean that all presidential systems give rise to authoritarian polities. According to Beliaev, who analyzed twenty-two post-communist countries, the presidential systems' effect on the regime is not a uni-dimensional one. In his views, presidents can serve as an arbiter in the country, but also it is possible that a president patronizes the whole political process. If s/he prefers to serve as an arbiter among legislative and executive branches, then the process of democratization gets easier. However, if s/he prefers to dominate the political process through his/her legislative and non-legislative powers and patronize courts, then it negatively affects the process of democratization. (Beliaev, 2006, pp. 375-398) Chaisty argues that presidents may even act as prime ministers in parliamentary systems through using their powers on budget, cabinet management, and informal institutions. (Chaisty, Cheeseman & Power, 2014, pp. 72-94) Thus, it seems that the debate on the effect of the presidential systems on political regimes' democratization process is an endless one depending on the policies of the person in this post.

Political elites in these transitional regimes, either through delicate calculations or as a result of bitter experiences, found the basics of the western parliamentary democracies too problematic without the fundamental necessities embedded in the society. However, data out of a survey put forward that four out of thirty-one stable democracies between 1967-1992 had presidential forms of government and twenty-four out of forty-six unstable democracies also had presidential forms of government. (Mainwaring, 1993, pp. 205-207) Thus, presidential systems can be seen as a way of creating a stable political rule, but the deficiencies of this system will always stay in front of the researcher as undemocratic peculiarities.

As a mixed form of these two government systems, the semi-presidential system combines key peculiarities of presidential and parliamentary systems. As Maurice Duverger (1980) clarified, a government system is semi-presidential if the president is popularly elected and has quite considerable powers along with a prime minister and ministers that have executive powers and can be dismissed by the parliamentary vote of no-confidence. Thus, dual control of the president and parliament on the government emerges as the distinctive feature of this system. (Fish, 2005, p. 195) Depending on this definition of the semi-presidential system it might be claimed that the parliament, through scrutinizing the policies of the government and using the threat of a vote of no-confidence, may prevent the risk of the arrogant rule of an elected president. (Stacey & Choudhry, 2014, pp. 5-6) However, like all government systems, the semi-presidential system differs among countries. The striking point here is whether the president has parliamentary support. In case the president, either through his/her political party or as a result of an informal coalition of parties, has the support of a majority of the parliamentarians, then check and balance mechanism may lose its functionality.

M. Steven Fish states in his analysis of post-communist countries that nine out of twenty-seven countries have parliamentary systems, another nine have semi-presidential systems and remaining countries have a presidential system of government.¹ (Fish, 2005, p. 197) Thus, these countries provide a wide range of examples to analyze the effect of the presidential power on the political regime. However, Fish himself states that there is a huge difference in terms of open politics among four countries with a semi-presidential system including the first years of the Russian Federation (RF). (Fish, 2005, p. 198) Nevertheless, there are no clues for the consolidation of the full democratic regime in eight countries with the presidential system while eight out of nine regimes with the parliamentary system have a noteworthy level of democratic features. Thus, the effect of a presidential or semi-presidential system on a political regime necessitates explanation and further research on each case. In this study, I will follow Shugart and Carey's analysis, with reference to Duverger (1980), of

1 **Parliamentarian Regimes:** Albania, Estonia, Latvia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia (till 1999), Bulgaria, Macedonia, Slovenia.

Semi-presidential Regimes: Croatia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Russia (since October 1993), Ukraine.

Presidential Regimes: Belorussia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Armenia.

the presidential system. They take the bases of a presidential power under consideration and determine three main elements in the establishment of it: *the constitution of the country, the origin of the presidency and the degree of presidential support in parliament and among the elite*. By extending these three criteria to four, by adding *presidential popularity among the general public*, I target discovering Russia's semi-presidential system by applying these four criteria to the Russian case. My study is going to analyze Yeltsin and Putin's periods from a comparative perspective by trying to discover these four criteria for each period. By doing this, I will try to reveal the Russian government system's effect on the Russian political regime's move towards more democratic or authoritarian polity through the personal choices of these two presidents.

3. Presidential Power and The Case of Russian Federation

The Post-Soviet Russian Federation did not only experience a transfer from authoritarian politics to a democratic one but also experienced a transfer from a planned to a free-market economy. As Claus Offe pointed out this was not the case for the western experience of the beginning of the free-market economy. (Offe & Adler, 1992, p. 881) That is why post-Soviet experience is a unique one in this sense. It was inevitable that economic decisions taken by political leaders affected the whole country in all segments. Thus, the popularity of the leaders depended on the responsibility they carry on. Perhaps, that is why, Yeltsin changed his prime minister many times but he himself stayed in power as a figure over the political turmoil. However, as the president, he had the sole responsibility. Together with the inauguration of Putin with the new millennium, recovery in the Russian economy accompanied the president's populist policies based on the need for nationalization of key economic sectors and strong state understanding. (Sakwa, 2008, p. 888)

The government system of Russia in 1993 constitution is a semi-presidential one that has both presidential and parliamentary characteristics, but the system generally has been called as super-presidential due to the powerful and the unique status of the president. (White, 2011, p. 71) The Russian President is the head of the state, the guarantor of the constitution, commander in chief of the armed forces and s/he is the only person to determine the country's domestic and foreign policy. Until 2008 changes under Putin the term for office was 4 years and s/he was allowed to serve only for two consecutive terms (Article 80, 81 and 87). Yeltsin's legislative and non-legislative powers, which will be given points to evaluate the system according to Shugart and Carey's study (Shugart & Carey, 1992), are as the following. The president;

- a. Has the power to issue a decree that is binding throughout the Russian Federation (Article 90),
- b. Has the right to declare a state of emergency throughout Russia or in specific localities (Article 90),

- c. Has the right to veto parliamentary legislation while both chambers of the parliament should vote by a two-thirds majority in order to override president's veto (Article 107),
- d. Appoints prime minister with the consent of the Duma (Article 83), but in case of the rejection of the pm by the state Duma for three times, the president dissolves the Duma and call for elections. (Article 111)
- e. May dismiss the prime minister or any member of the government while the parliament has no power to question the government. In case of a second no-confidence on government by Duma, the president may dissolve the State Duma. (Article 117)
- f. Nominates the chairman of the central bank, the procurator general, the members of the constitutional court, Supreme Court, the Court of Arbitration subject to parliamentary review (Article 83 and 84).
- g. Is empowered to appoint 'authorized representatives' to Russia's regions and localities (Article 83 and 85).²
- h. Cannot be impeached due to the extremely hard measures. The only offenses to impeach the president is 'high treason or the commission of another grave crime' (Article 93).

As it is seen the political system in Russia is a different one from both pure *parliamentarian* and *presidential* systems. Although it is generally presented as a precaution to prevent the president from becoming a one-man in the country, the arrangements of a hybrid regime like in Russia strengthen the president's power and create much more guarantee to maintain his/her power especially when the ruling party has the majority in the parliament.³ Clark states that there are two more government forms in addition to parliamentary and presidential ones according to Shugart and Carey's study. Generally stated as subcategories of semi-presidential system, a *premier-presidential system* is one in which the president is elected by popular vote, possesses considerable power and also there exists a premier and a cabinet subject to confidence in the assembly. The cabinet formation is divided between the parliament and the president. However, Russia's regime after 1993 was a *president-parliamentary system* which is described by the popular election of the president, appointment and dismissal of the cabinet ministers by the president, cabinet ministers' need for parliamentary confidence and the president's power to dismiss the parliament. (Clark, 1998, pp. 631-633) Since s/he has

2 This act complicated the status of regional parliaments and the issue of election of governors and mayors. In the following years, the Putin administration terminated the election of the governors and replaced it with the appointed governors. This became one of the most criticized move increasing authoritarianism in the country.

3 In a pure presidential regime, president names and dismisses the cabinet and its members with no need for approval by the parliament (4 points acc. to. Shugart and Carey). In a pure parliamentary system, government is formed by political parties in the parliament, and parliament as a whole has options to censure, question and dismiss the government while the president's power to dismiss the parliament is highly restricted (if there is such a post, it may be a symbolic one).

the power to dismiss the parliament, the president may ignore the parliament in case of an opposition majority. This is the experience in the Russian case during the Yeltsin era. Although a strong opposition party did not have an overwhelming majority in the state Duma, the parties of power could not get even the highest number of votes and opposition parties as a whole had the majority which is even used to resist the appointment of a prime minister at the end of the nineties. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the powers of the president stated above, Yeltsin was able to keep the prime minister responsible for economic or political deterioration and stay in power without as long as his term allowed him. That is why, especially when the pro-president parties had parliamentary majority like in Putin's terms, the Russian semi-presidential system came to be called as super presidential one.

3.1. Yeltsin Period, 1991-1999

A strong argument claims that it was not possible to make the people absorb difficult decisions in a parliamentary system depending on the possible popular resistance due to simultaneous political and economic transformation. (Medvedev, 2000, pp. 25-28) Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, forced the system even before the dissolution of the USSR in order to create a presidential system in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Thus, the origin of the semi-presidential system in the Russian Federation (RF) depends on the political environment to detract the RSFSR from the Soviet Union and gain legitimacy through popular vote in comparison to the Supreme Soviet. The purpose of transferring the planned economy to a free-market economy came just after this purpose. One should not forget the reality that Yeltsin was one of the forerunners of the Soviet system before the dissolution. This means although he based his argument on a democratic transition, benefits from liberalizing the Russian economy would belong to the forerunners of the system. (Medvedev, 2000, pp. 174-187) Thus, it is not possible to be sure about Yeltsin's intentions especially in case of the popular resistance to the hard *shock therapy* decisions.

The government system of the RF is semi-presidential one which was proposed by Sartori and Pasquino to transitional societies due to its institutional flexibility. (Sartori, 1994, p. 137) Their claim was that transitional societies which harbor many problems in their structure can only be managed and transferred to a democratic society through a flexible institutional system. Yeltsin, in this sense, gave importance to economic reform before the USSR's dissolution and postponed political ones, thus gained the support of the Congress of the Peoples' Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. (McFaul & Markov, 1993, p. 146) He also postponed 1991 elections because of a communist threat. In this semi-presidential system until October 1993, the president determined the prime minister (pm), but the pm was responsible to the parliament while parliament could check the government and the president. Parliament could cancel presidential decrees; however, the president could not dissolve the parliament. (Huskey, 1996, p. 455) Nevertheless, Yeltsin has achieved to take the power from parliament to rule the country with presidential decrees for a one-year period since November 1991. The end of this one-year period would signal the beginning of a constitutional crisis that would give way

to the bombing of the White House (Government Building of Russian Federation – *Dom Pravitelstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) and later the referendum for the 1993 constitution.

Experience of Russian politics in the 1990s reveals that the threat of a communist return, the need for compensating the popular resistance to shock therapy decisions created the bases for the origin of the presidential system. A striking detail is that this system of government became possible only in case of cooperation among democrats and conservatives. That is why the 1993 constitution which was drafted by Yeltsin's own team should be analyzed in terms of its government system. (Russian Constitution, 1993) It seems that Yeltsin, with the experience of the constitutional crisis in 1993, added the necessary prescriptions to the new constitution in order to break the power of the parliament. As stated by Shugart and Carey, the empowerment of the president at such a level provides the president with a mature position to exercise explicit control over the government in the policy-making process. (Shugart & Carey, 1992, pp. 55-75) As a result, the government might only serve by implementing the policy dictated by the president. This was the case during the 90s and in case the prime minister stood against the presidents Yeltsin removed them from the office. What is striking at this point is that Putin almost did not need to take this step considering two decades of his presidency.

The cooperation among democrats and conservatives was not indefinite and the composition of the Duma beginning with 1993 parliamentary elections did not empower Yeltsin's hand during the 1990s. This was a ripe condition for power-sharing among the president and the parliament. However, no power-sharing occurred, and Yeltsin dismissed the prime minister six times until he stepped down. Even during a short period of time between 1998 and 1999, five different prime ministers were dismissed. This was a move to empower Yeltsin himself. His power to dismiss the parliament in case of two no-confidence votes within three months prevented the parliament from resisting. (Stacey & Choudhry, 2014, p. 5) There is no doubt that these acts damaged both the democratic transition period and economic recovery in Russia. The system would reach the expected support level in parliament only with Putin's term. Thus, the degree of support in parliament and among elite, as the second base of the presidential system, remained limited in the 90s. Yeltsin could rule only by depending on the constitutional arrangements which gave him the power to ignore the parliament. Yeltsin's target was to catch most of the people through staying over the political parties since he had the necessary powers to rule. However, pro-Yeltsin parties had always been known by the people and their popularity never reached the majority of the people: Russia's Choice could get only 14,5 % of votes in 1993, Our Home is Russia got 10,1 % in 1995 and Unity got 23,3 % in 1999. (Russia Votes Website, Duma Elections 1993-2003)

These percentages of votes meant that, since pro-Yeltsin parties never surpassed the Communist Party of the RF and nationalist and conservative parties followed them in the elections. Pro-Yeltsin parties could not get the necessary majority in the parliament. Even Duma could resist Yeltsin's prime minister proposal and force him to change his PM candidate at the end of the decade. He could not resist to the parliament when it was clear that his public popularity was in sharp decrease since the

1996 elections. So, he dismissed Yegor Gaidar when it was clear that the parliament would give a vote of no confidence. (Jamestown Foundation Monitor, 1999) This prevented Yeltsin from moving together with the Duma while ruling the country. Moreover, parliamentary elections have always been the forerunner of the presidential elections in Russia since it has been held one year before the presidential elections. As a result, the parliamentary elections were seen as rehearsal and this forced Yeltsin to take necessary measures in order to stay in power. (Myagkov & Ordeshook, 1999, p. 73) The most well-known example of this is the 1996 presidential elections for which Yeltsin declared his candidacy when his popularity was almost 5% just 6 months ahead of the elections. The explanation of his success of 54% of the votes in the second round of presidential election depends on the cooperation with oligarchs. Since Yeltsin never had a consolidated presidential system, which means having sufficient support in parliament, he ruled the country depending on his personal ties with the oligarchs and the “family” (Yeltsin’s close circle including his daughter Tatyana, oligarch Boris Berezovski, Roman Abramovich and Valentin Yumashev). The threat of ending Yegor Gaidar’s duty as the pm as a result of vote of no confidence in the parliament pushed Yeltsin to take him from this duty and take such frequent steps by the end of his period.

Presidential popularity among the public, in this sense, got important and was created through several means. The highest number of votes was close to 25 % for pro-Yeltsin political parties in parliamentary elections and he got only 35 % of votes in the first round of presidential elections in 1996. His presidency was guaranteed only with the second round as a result of almost 3 billion dollars’ campaign directed by oligarchs’ cooperation called *Davos Pact*. (Rakhmanova, 2016, p. 34) The support of the western countries depending on the communist threat by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (the CPRF) and the loans from the same countries for providing necessary bases for shock therapy policies created a pro-Yeltsin atmosphere in the west, too. Thus, the low degree of popularity in public increased the cost of the victory for Yeltsin and prevented him from moving independently of these forces as compared to the Putin period in the 2000s. Thus, Yeltsin’s constitutional powers enabled him to ignore the parliament and provided the option to cooperate with the oligarchs in order to stay in power. This move pulled the Russian regime to further authoritarianism by gathering power in the hands of the president rather than reaching a compromise with the parliament. The key policies to reach this target was to create public consent and increase presidential public popularity. This happened through the support of the oligarchs and the family in the 1990s. On the contrary, Putin would be able to suppress the power of the oligarchs thanks to many international (such as economic amelioration in developing countries) and domestic factors (the use of the state success in the second Chechen war).

The following period, although the same constitution was in practice at least until 2008 constitutional changes, however, witnessed a stronger president in practice depending on many variables explained in the next section.

3.2. Putin Period, 2000-2019

The origin of the semi-presidential system did not change within almost a quarter of a century in the Russian Federation. Although the system remained the same since Yeltsin proposed Putin instead of himself at the end of 1999, Putin's presidential power emerged as much less dependent on the support of the West, the Russian oligarchs, and western loans.

As Putin reshaped political life in the country, industries depending on the underground resources such as oil and natural gas came to be the most important sectors encouraged by the state. Rising oil prices gave way to increasing government budget which empowered the hands of the state against Russian oligarchs who were seen as potential economic and political rivals.⁴ In this way, the base of the presidential power came to be dependent on the forced cooperation of the oligarchs with the president in the 2000s. Russian oligarchs were given the chance of continuing with their business as long as they cooperated with the government and political leaders. (Szakonyi, 2017). Accordingly, Putin defined the Soviet period as a dead-end referring to the closed political and economic system and bolstered the free-market economy as the only way. Russia did not have any other way than development under free-market conditions and there was no time for political turmoil, economic breakdown, and radical reforms:

Russia has exceeded its limit for political and socio-economic upheavals, cataclysms and radical reforms. Our people and our country will not withstand a new radical break-up, be it under communist, national-patriotic, or radical-liberal slogans. What is needed are "evolutionary, gradual and prudent methods". (Schwarz, 2000, p. 2)

Putin's target is to reach a system which is neither closed system of Soviets nor a democratic one as defined in western political science books. His system is going to accept Russia in her own conditions and will be based on *strong state* and *national ideology, patriotism, belief in Russia's greatness and social solidarity*. Thus, it was aimed to give the necessary confidence to the public for a stable economic and political process that would mean benefit for all Russian citizens. As a response to the question about his optimism on the future of Russia's democratic system, Putin replies as the following:

History proves that all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government are transient. Only democratic systems are not transient. Whatever the shortcomings, mankind has not devised anything superior. (The Globalist, 2000)

Thus, Putin believed that the Russian political regime would be a democratic one with a super-presidential system in accordance with his political vision. However, his high public popularity

4 For instance, these numbers are explanatory for rising oil prices: 1999 (17,44 \$/barrel), 2000 (27,64 \$/ barrel), 2004 (36,05 \$/ barrel), 2005 (50,59 \$/ barrel), 2010 (77,38 \$/ barrel), 2013 (105,87 \$/ barrel). On the other hand, World oil prices decreased just after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula: 2014 (96,29 \$/ barrel), 2015 (49,49 \$/ barrel), 2016 (40,68 \$/ barrel). "Average annual OPEC crude oil price from 1960 to 2017 (in U.S. dollars per barrel)", Statista <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262858/change-in-opec-crude-oil-prices-since-1960/> Accessed on 30.09.2017.

depending on the good economic developments, the success of the United Russia as the party of power, his endeavor to suppress oppositionist oligarchs combined with his political vision damaged the transition to a democratic regime. (Gelman, 2014, pp. 504-511) That is why, in line with Putin's vision, there emerged a concept in 2006 to define the Russian system: *sovereign democracy*. Defined by Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov, sovereign democracy is:

“A form of the political life of society, under which the authorities, their organs, and actions are selected, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its variety and completeness so that all citizens, social groups, and peoples comprising it achieve material well-being, freedom and justice.” (Surkov, 2009, p. 12)

The main argument here, according to Surkov, is that Russian democracy has its roots in czarism, socialism, and oligarchy and it is vital not to lose sovereignty while obtaining features of a democratic system. To do that, this system differs from others with intellectual leadership, unified elites, a national free-market economy, and capacity to defend herself. (Surkov, 2009, pp. 9-16) But, it is clear that Surkov's arguments substantially embraced by Putin administration are deeply contradictory to western liberal democratic values. That is why the Russian regime, defined as sovereign democracy by Russian intellectuals and political leaders, is labeled as competitive authoritarian when analyzed in comparison with liberal democratic values. (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 181-235)

One of the most significant aspects of the base of the presidential power in RF with Putin came to be known as the political party of power. The bases of the United Russia, which became the party of power together with Putin was founded when it was certain that Yeltsin would not be chosen once more and the coming president would need new means of support. Established under the guidance of oligarch Berezovsky, *the Unity* later became *the United Russia* and began to be organized in all small towns of the country. Youth organizations of the party were also strongly supported and benefited from all state privileges. (Robertson, 2011, pp. 194-196) Thus, the support in the parliament and within the society organized through these means.

As it was clear at the beginning of the semi-presidential system in Russia, the legitimacy of the system is created through the popular election of the president in accordance with the 1993 constitution. Since this factor is strengthened by a party of power, controlled media, the power vertical in many aspects of the state system, the percentage of the vote for the presidency highly increased especially in the March 2018 elections.⁵ Thus, the legitimacy of the democratic system in Russia depended on the only figure in the presidency. (Fish, 2005, p. 224) This matching of the future of the country to the only political figure was made possible thanks to the semi-presidential government system that did not limit Putin in the total number of terms of presidency to be elected. However, as Walker pointed out long before, when the popularity of the president decreased, support for

5 **The percentage of vote for the United Russia in Duma Elections:** 2003 (%49.3), 2007 (%64.3), 2011 (%49.3), 2016 (%54.3); **Percentage of vote for the winner in presidential elections:** 2000 (%52.9), 2004 (%71.3), 2008 (%70.3), 2012 (%63.6), 2018 (%76.6).

democracy would also decrease as happened in the last years of the Yeltsin period. (Walker, 1994, p. 119) The beginning of the Putin era had depended on such a background.

Except 2008 arrangements that brought two years increase for terms of office, Putin has almost the same constitutional background by the end of 2019. It means the formal base of the semi-presidential system did not change. However, the origin of the presidency changed in the sense that many significant factors created necessary bases for a de facto stronger semi-presidential system:

- a. Economic development based on the export of underground sources,
- b. Increase in oil and gas prices beginning with the new millennium,
- c. Strong party organization of the United Russia which prevented Duma from being a parliament to oppose the government, (Ivanov, 2008, as cited in Levitsky & Way, p. 197)
- d. The creation of seven regions over 89 units of the RF and appointment of *polpred* (polnomochennyi predstavitel' presidenta: plenipotentiary representative of the president), (Petrov, 2002)
- e. The prevention of regional parties from entering national elections, (Remington, 2008, pp. 974-975)
- f. Appropriate international conjuncture such as 9/11 process and interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

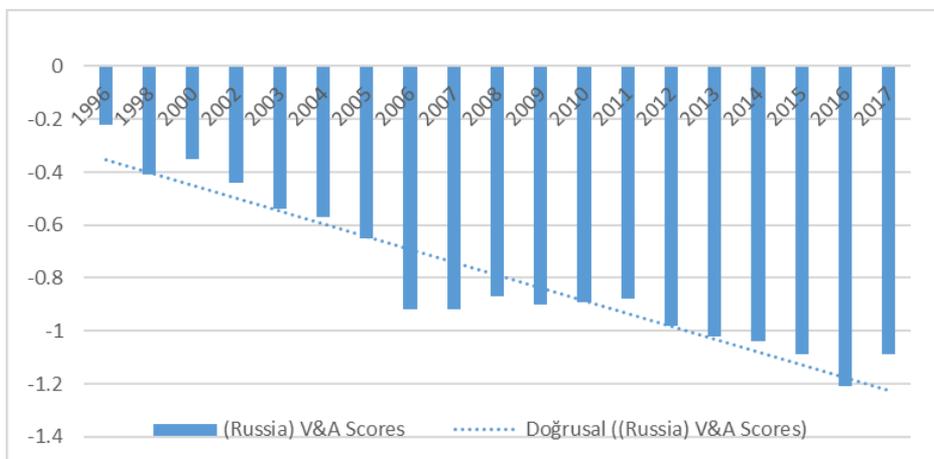
All of these developments contributed to Putin's popularity in Russia, however, his team did not confine itself to these developments. In order to increase presidential popularity among the general public, Putin administration trusted public opinion polls and shaped their policies in line with these results. Public opinion polls received from Levada Analytical Center and some others provided approval ratings since the 1990s.⁶ Even, Petrov et al. claimed that the concept of *reitingokratiya* (ratingocracy) is used referring to this system in Russia. (Petrov, Lipman & Hale, 2014, p. 5) Presidency, for instance, could delay pension reform or benefit from the positive effect of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by equalizing the will of the people with one person. In this way, the president presented as an almighty figure which contributed to the increasing popularity. However, it is a side effect that any decrease in the president's popularity will also mean decreasing belief in democracy. In fact, this was a two-sided phenomenon creating contradictory results in both periods. For instance, according to research conducted by the Levada Analytical Center, Russian public opinion has never requested a western-style democracy. Especially after they matched economic collapse with the democratization process in the 1990s Russian public opinion always preferred either a unique system based on national traditions or a Soviet-style regime with some democratic features. While this option was preferred more than 40% of the people, almost 30% preferred the incumbent regime and

⁶ For detailed information about approval ratings of Vladimir Putin on monthly base since 2010, please visit: <http://www.levada.ru/en/> Access date: 11.10.2019

only less than this amount supported a western-style democratic regime in Russia. (Russia Votes Website, 2019) Consequently, incumbent president, as happened at the end of the 1990s and since the second term of Putin in office, might have felt free to stand against liberal democratic values. The semi-presidential system with a de facto strong president became fully consolidated and the regime's move towards a more authoritarian period became indispensable under these circumstances.

Inevitably, the semi-presidential system in Russia provided necessary bases to both Yeltsin and Putin for establishing a stronger executive in the country. The legislature, even in the 90s when the pro-president parties did not have a majority, could not stand against Yeltsin due to the dismissal power of the president. There was limited opposition to the proposed prime minister in the parliament. Moreover, during the Putin period when the United Russia and other pro-president parties have a majority in the legislature, the semi-presidential system lacked a government to balance the executive power of the president. (Stacey & Choudhry, 2014, p. 7) Thus, the Russian government system came to be functioning effectively as a presidential system that is even called by many scholars as super-presidential. (Ishiyama & Kennedy, 2001, pp. 1177-1191) As a result, Yeltsin, with a more slippery base under his administration, could not dominate the state system despite the support of pro-Yeltsin oligarchs. However, Putin achieved to create necessary structure including economic, political and social aspects in accordance with the international conjuncture. Thus, the political regime of the Russian Federation moved from a more democratic to a more authoritarian one as indices prove it. The political system gained its legitimacy from the cooperation of the United Russia and other systemic political parties both in presidential elections and parliamentary voting. Although it seems more democratic than Yeltsin's cooperation with the oligarchs, the classification of the political regime moved from illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997) to competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010) within this time period depending on the practices of Putin administration.

Graphic 1: Russian Federation voice and accountability scores, 1996-2017



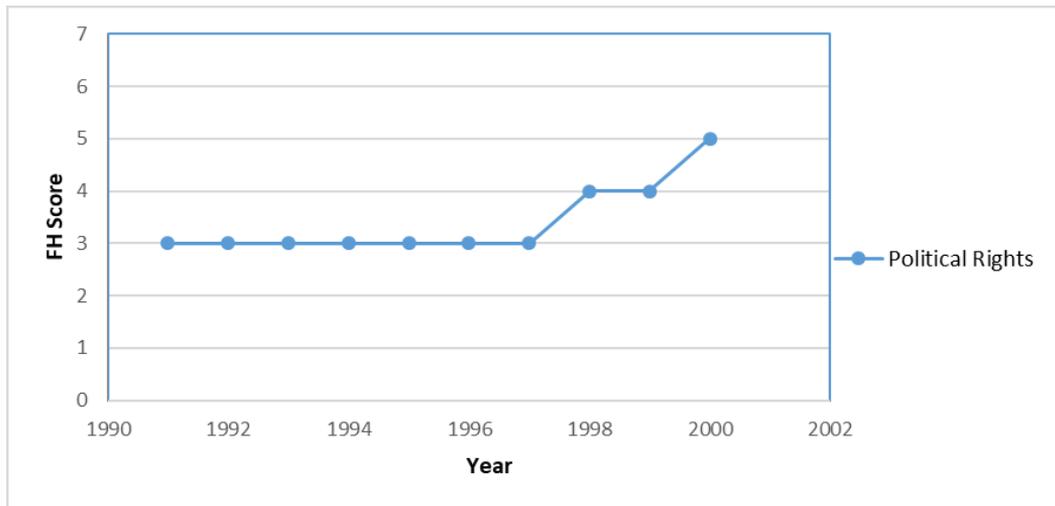
Source: The Global Economy, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Russia/wb_voice_accountability/ Access date: 11.10.2019.

Along with Freedom House, whose ratings are widely respected in the world, Voice and Accountability (V&A) ratings are well-known with an inclusive dataset used in her analysis. V&A, developed by Kaufmann, Kraay, and Matruzzi in 2003 uses data from organizations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, Human Rights Database, Political Risk Services, World Markets Online Database, and Reporters without Borders and scores openness in political regimes between - 2,5 (least open) and +2,5 (most open). (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2011, pp. 220-246) Russia could be scored in 1996, 1998, 2000 and for the following years due to the dataset V&A might reach. Thus, the footprints of openness in the Russian political regime may be found in V&A scores.

The change in government understanding from Yeltsin to Putin, suppression of the oligarchs just after Putin's inauguration, the usage of ending Chechen war as a victory, authoritarian responses to the terrorist attacks in 2004-2005 and deterioration after 2011-2012 protests are seen as critical points in Russian regimes move towards a more authoritarian structure. All these could be realized in a vicious circle of the creation of legitimacy through election of the president, separate survival powers of both legislative and executive branches in the Russian constitutional system, and lastly, president's populist policies which once again create legitimacy till the next elections. It is important to note here that separate survival gives the president necessary constitutional and legitimate base to act for his/her term of office and deny the oppositions' requests. (Shugart & Carey, 1992)

4. Complementary Analysis

The change in the Russian polity towards a more authoritarian one inevitably reflected the indices of international institutions that are working to identify the status of world countries. Thus, as Freedom House scores reveal, the post-Soviet period in Russia began with a stable process that included an embedded search for establishing a democratic regime. Search for a democratic regime at that time, especially looking back from now, was a result of the international conjuncture and atmosphere which was dominated by liberal democracy. The liberal democracy was indicated as the only way as a political regime that would bring well-being to all. Since Yeltsin preferred economic transformation before political reform, as Linz and Stepan noted, both economy and democracy weakened. (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 367) The end of the 1991-1993 period, especially after the 1996 presidential elections which signaled the end of the Yeltsin era with the next elections, clarified a deterioration in Russia's status in indices. Political rights in Russia followed a path of 3 points (1 as the most free-7 as the least free) till 1997 and civil rights followed a path of 4 points till 1998. Following years in Russia experienced a war among bankers, a political struggle among those who wanted to succeed Yeltsin. That is why the president (the family) adopted a firm stance against the opposition in the country.

Graphic 2: The USSR and Russian Federation FH political rights score, 1991-2000

Source: Freedom House Annual Scores: www.freedomhouse.org

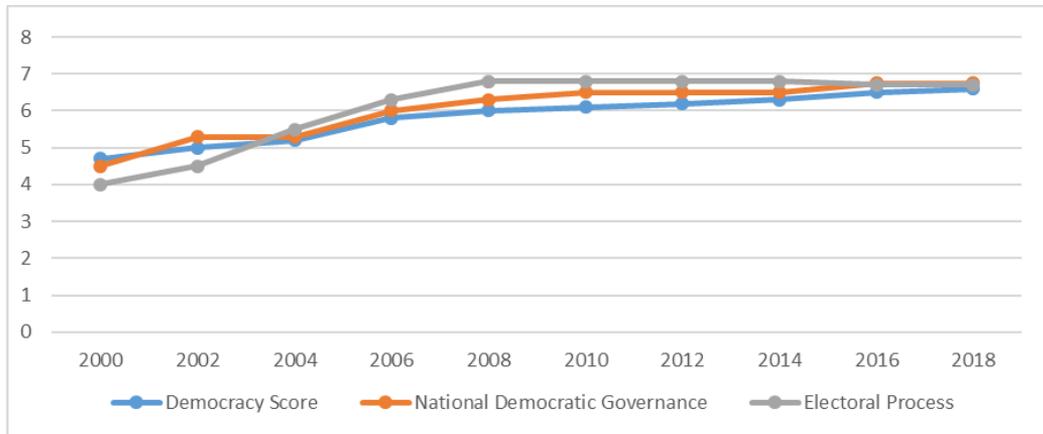
One must keep in mind that the breaking point here is the year when Yeltsin's popularity crashed with %5 just a few months before the 1996 presidential election. The cooperation with oligarchs could only postpone Yeltsin's authoritarian reply for 2 years and together with the year 1997, Russia moved to worse scores due to political turmoil of the Chechen crisis and succession problem. (Strategic Survey, 1999, pp. 119-120)

The Putin period comparing with Yeltsin gained high support in public reflected in an increased percentage of votes accompanied by the economic recovery. An increase in the well-being of the people directed voters to believe in Russia's return to the international arena as a great power. But, in order to achieve all these targets, Putin needed an increase and also stability in public support which meant an increasing emphasis on patriotism, Russia's greatness, traditionalism and the glorification of local in comparison to the global. However, when the president based his policies on these parameters and promoted them, it meant a deterioration in Russia's scores in terms of establishing a stable democracy. (Person, 2017, pp. 45-47.) As expected, this deterioration reflected not only on political rights and civil rights but also caused a roll-back in the local politics of Russia. (The EIU Russia Country Report, 2017)

Ishiyama and Velten's research on the factors that affect the political regime (Ishiyama & Velten, 1998), together with Graphic 2 showing also the electoral process in Russia, reminds us of the existence of many other factors determining the regime of a country. Electoral process of the Russian Federation has the worst deteriorating path comparing other scores included in the graphic above. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that these factors effective on the regime, due to the political vision of the Russian leadership, created a vicious circle and inevitably negatively affected the country's

regime.⁷ Although many factors are also influential in a country's regime (Kakhishvili, 2013), I tried to differentiate those of the semi-presidential system.

Graphic 3: Nations in Transit Scores in Putin Period, 2000-2018



Source: Pavel Luzin, "Report on Russia" https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NiT2018_Russia.pdf
Access Date: 13.10.2019

5. Concluding Remarks

One of the most important findings of this study is that if a country already has favorable conditions for democratization, then the presidential system may not be preferred in the first step. However, in the case of post-Soviet Russian Federation, a pro-democracy leader Boris Yeltsin felt forced to adopt the semi-presidential system to be able to conduct economic and political transformation. Accordingly, one cannot evaluate the Russian regime's last three decades without considering institutions inherited from Soviet Russia. It is also a necessity to examine Yeltsin and Putin's political career and their personal preferences related to their political positions. Although the government system may cause increasing authoritarianism in the country, this cannot be commented without considering the path that was followed.

As shown above, the findings put forward that theory and practice differ in each case study. In the case of the Russian Federation, the constitutional procedures of the 1993 constitution, whose drafting process dominated by Yeltsin's own team, provided the president with the ways of even denying the powers of the parliament through his powers. In addition, the personal qualifications converged with the international conjuncture enabled the president to dominate political life, especially

⁷ For a detailed study that de-emphasizes the importance of presidential systems' effect on the regime, please see: J. Ishiyama and M. Velten, (1998) Presidential power and democratic development in post-communist politics, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 31(3), 217-233.

after 2000, as a figure inevitable for the stable continuation of the political and economic life in the country.

The government system of a country is embedded in the constitution and deserves attention while examining the political regime. However, there is research indicates that the government system may not be in the first place in the determination of a country's regime. Ishiyama and Velten quantitatively analyzed the effect of the presidential system on the regime. They used the presidential power index and some other variables such as electoral systems and compared their results with the indices of democratization. Since they found the electoral system more effective on the regime, further research is necessary while identifying the bases of a political regime. However, in the case of post-Soviet Russian polity, it is clear that the government system enabled the president to lead the political life. Thanks to the majority in the Duma during 2000s, the president might change the electoral system, reorganize the administrative status of the regions, suppress the oligarchs and control the media by evoking super presidentialism to many scholars. The political background of both Russian presidents, together with the constitutional procedures, gave way to a more authoritarian polity in the Russian Federation.

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