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Panel:

The role of Presidents in Leading “their Own” Political Party

Party Politics in the Putin’s era: the case of United Russia

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Abstract

In the existing literature on party politics in Russia and the post-Soviet space and, in comparative terms, the paper aims to analyze the dynamics of party and regime dominance during the Putin’s era. Using a theoretical framework to understand the role of ruling parties in modern political systems and then applied to explore the Russian case, the research aims, at first, to describe both the emergence of United Russia as a major nationwide structure and its political role in the process of consolidation and persistence of authoritarian rule. Moreover, being the party a key factor in the outcome of the Russian political regime, it is still necessary to understand to what extent the role of Putin has been effective and its leadership has influenced its electoral performance and parliamentary set. The election of Dmitrii Medvedev as President of the Russian Federation in 2008 made difficult to identify the clear cut-off point for the Putin’s leadership as well as the institutional constraints of a super-presidential system has to be considered. At the eve of the next parliamentary elections Russia’s ruling parliamentary party, which has always based its policies on supporting Vladimir Putin, will not ask the president to allow them use his image in the 2016 elections campaign, in order to protect the president from possible damage to his political rating. Which are the main effects of this new strategy on the electoral success of United Russia? Is still the party of power the Putin’s political machine? Which perspectives on the presidentialization of party politics nowadays in post authoritarian regimes?

First draft. Insights are welcome!

Introduction

The personalization of politics has been much debated both at the empirical and theoretical levels. It is usually considered as a national phenomenon that changed the way to conduct electoral campaigns, paving the way to what Pippa Norris (2000) defined as a “postmodern campaign”. It is well known that, in the established democracies, national campaigns are more personalized and voters pay great attention towards leaders’ images.

This process involves all the main actors in the political process. For parties it is easier to get votes through individuals especially if the electoral system is based on a candidate-centre oriented that emphasizes personal services. Political leaders and candidates are able to attract votes in order to find solutions to citizens’ demands as well as voters are influenced by the personalities of the candidate. Moreover, media coverage has become the main tool to evaluate parties and candidates, able to influence and determine electoral choices.

In advanced Western democracies many researches have been focused on the general process of personalization where the main explanatory variables are the role of institutions, the characteristics of leadership and leaders, the electoral process and the mass media influence.

From 1970s onwards the processes of personalization, centralization, prime-ministerialization and presidentialization of politics increased the power in the hands of the executive institutions (Passarelli 2016). So it is not surprising if leaders, nowadays, play an important role in contemporary politics. This phenomenon is quite new and institutional constraints seem to be the most important reasons for its origin and development among countries.

What we know from empirical research is that presidential regimes and to a some extent also semi-presidential ones are institutional settings which can determine the rise of the presidentialization of political parties.

Constitutional system might influence effects, opportunities, creating restrictions for political actors according to the type of a presidential, semi-presidential and parliamentary regimes.

Samuels and Shugart (2010) theorizes that institutions can influence the political context where parties act and, consequently, it may happen that parties in parliamentary regimes can be “presidentialized” as well as party in presidential regime can be “parliamentarized”¹.

What it makes conceptually and empirically difference among political regimes is that the presidentialization is the direct effect of separated powers because the executive is not under legislative control (vote of confidence).

The concept of presidentialization is also related to the process of personalization of politics where individuals are the main political actors. As Passarelli points out in his remarkable book it is important to make a preliminary distinction between presidentialization and personalization² i.e. concepts that are not complementary and exclusive at all but they have in common the individual attitude in politics rather than a collective one.

So, the presidentialization of parties refers to institutional resources, constraints and opportunities. It can be also described both as centralization of leadership and a style of government, overlapping with that of personalization of politics that it consists of personal characteristics, attitudes, personal capital and charisma in making politics, instead.

Following Passarelli’s hypothesis (Passarelli 2016:12) that “political parties thus represents an empirical field on which to test the relevance of the presidentialization of politics theory“, their

¹ As Samuels and Shugart (Passarelli 2010: 6) argue parliamentary regimes are not suitable for presidentialization even if Passarelli clearly shows that four cases out of five paved the way to presidential dynamics in parliamentary systems

² What we know is that presidentialization includes personalization but “we can have personalization without presidentialization” (Passarelli 2016: 9).

genetic features can be the intervening variable that best explains the presidentialization process. Parties that are cohesive, centralized, disciplined, without faction, and with an independent leadership can facilitate the emergence of the presidentialization of parties. On the contrary, a fragmented and divided leadership, a decentralized structure inhibit such a process. Passarelli's aim is to provide theoretical and empirical evidence of this process trying to formulate a general theory that include all leaders and parties in contemporary politics.

But what about the emergence, the development and the consequences of the presidentialization of political parties in authoritarian regimes?

The focus of this paper is related to recent studies on political parties and their presidentialization i.e. when leaders are able to exert legislative influence and he/she has the power to dismiss or appoint ministers as well as how he/she is selected and what kind of influence he/she can exert on the presidential party in the Russian case.

Leaders in Russia have always had an enormous power. In line with this legacy of the past, the 1993 Constitution put the president in a strong position and made it very difficult to remove him. The complexity of Russian politics has been either greatly oversimplified or simply reduced to premature conclusions on the development of the process of democratization. This is probably due to the peculiar institutional design which is both a legacy of the late Soviet period and a democratic façade.

After the fall of Communism, the new Russian system of government has been characterized by a personified power, embodied in one person: the President of the Russian Federation.

So, the Russian case can be an empirical verification of the hypotheses of the presidentialization of political parties, taking into considerations three analytical dimensions (institutions, parties and leaders) in the following sections. First of all, a description of the institutional design implemented during the transition period 1991-1993 can provide useful information to understand the context of the discussion among conservatives and reformers about the new political regime and what kind of rules, procedures and laws were introduced after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, the dissolution of the CPSU paved the way to high levels of party fragmentation that characterized the electoral arenas in 1993-2003 period when many Russians had an aversion to the idea and terminology of party and, consequently, the term "electoral association" was introduced in the electoral law. A weak and floating party system, a polarized political environment and the electoral system had a significant influence on the level of support for specific parties and influenced their genetic features. This is the case of the United Russia's ruling party that can be considered a "party of power"³ whose political action is to maintain an authoritarian regime and assure Putin's presidency in the long run.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that the constitutional provisions reflect a shallow understanding of the separation of powers characterized by a weak position of the legislative Duma and a strong executive in the hands of the President of Russia.

In such a political and constitutional context, this article aims to describe the origins and the political reasons of the presidentialization of United Russia trying to understand the effective role played by Vladimir Putin in supporting it and, in comparative perspective, further developments in the post authoritarian regimes.

³ United Russia is called a hegemonic party, a dominant party and more often a party of power (White 2011). Further analyses should clarify these concepts that are very close to each other.

1. The President's role in the Russian institutional setting

After the breakdown of Communism, in the 1980s and 1990s the revival of legislative institutions was spread throughout Eastern Europe even if parliamentary institutions did not play a major role under Communism.

The discussion about what kind of political arrangements had to be implemented during the transition period (1991-1993) represented the historical tradition of the struggle between the weakness of parliamentary-type Soviets and the role of Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). In Gorbachev's opinion semi-presidentialism had numerous advantages for a regime in transition from one-party rule. But especially he wanted that the prime minister assumed direct responsibility for social and economic policy to stay out of politics while the president played the role of the national leader⁴.

This was particularly evident during the August coup in 1991 when Boris Yeltsin decided to dissolve the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of Deputies using extraconstitutional measures such as decrees and force. So the institutional debate shifted from a parliamentary-type to a presidential one.

The Russian Constitution was ratified by popular vote during the same 1993 balloting that produced the new bicameral parliament: the Russian Federal Assembly.

This Assembly consists of the lower house – the State Duma - which approves the president's nominee for the prime minister, gives confidence in the government and the upper one – the Federal Council – which represents each regional elites for a total of 178 full-time members since 2002. The mode of selecting representatives to both houses differs significantly and there is also a structural distinction. The State Duma has factions (the so called electoral associations that play in the electoral arena), deputy groups (political organization made of a minimum of thirty-five deputies) and the independent groups. The Duma electoral law was adopted in 1993 and based on a mixed system with the 5 percent threshold in the proportional representation of the ballot (225 seats) and “the first past the post” system in the single-member district (225), modelled on the German system. The State Duma is the principal law-maker and highly productive; it can override the upper chamber with the support of an absolute two-thirds majority.

If we look at the Federal Constitution adopted in December 1993 the system of government is the merger of some principles of the French Constitution and others of the American one. It is a semi-presidential system where both the President and the legislative State Duma are legitimized by popular elections. The separation of powers between executive and legislative paved the way to a duality of power which reminds to the conflict between the Congress and the omnipotence of the CPSU.

The 1993 Constitution elevated the presidency above parliament, but it also reserved sufficient powers for the legislature to complicate presidential rule such as to reject presidential nominees to the Constitutional Court or to override a Presidential veto of legislation. The President can veto acts of parliament; he can hire and fire ministers; he is “protector of the constitution”; he can call referenda and dismiss parliament. The Constitution confirms the President's powers in dissolving the State Duma, in supporting a government-initiated vote of confidence. Moreover the Duma's control over the government is compromised by the President's powers of dissolution.

According to article 111.4 of Constitution a President can insist on his candidate for prime minister through three successive rejections by the lower chamber after which the president can install *an interim* prime minister, dissolve the parliament, and call new elections. In the event of the President's resignation, incapacity, or death, the Constitution statutes that his powers are transferred to the prime minister and a new presidential election must be held within three months.

On the contrary, the parliament can pass a vote of no confidence in the government, in which case the president must either replace the cabinet or call new parliamentary elections. When the

⁴ As we will see this functional distinction between Prime Minister (economic policy) and President (domestic and International policies) will characterize the Russian dual system in practice.

President veto acts of parliament, a two-thirds majority of both legislative chambers can override his veto.

This shortly description of the constitutional arrangements allow us to better understand what kind of role the presidents played since the introduction of a formal semi-presidential system that rapidly *de facto* changed into a presidential one.

As a matter of fact, the first President of the Russian federation, Boris Yeltsin did not accept a strong parliamentary institution but he knew that it was strategically necessary to get its support. The parliamentary leadership had always sought to minimize executive-legislative tensions through private negotiations and tactics of accommodation with the President who distributed selective incentives (housing, vacations, and so on) to influence individual deputies. This paved the way to the so called “Yeltsin’s *dacha* politics”, based on personnel policies and benefits in order to avoid political conflicts. Moreover, Yeltsin’s political style was highly personalistic and patriarchal, sacrificing unpopular ministers as well as prime ministers⁵ and characterized by overlapping jurisdictions, the emergence of a class of “oligarchs”, a segmented regionalism, fragmented administrative and legal practices.

Yeltsin had the opportunity to transform the institutional framework into a more democratic, open and accountable system but he failed to do so and determined the rise of what Sakwa (2008) labelled as the mediavalisation of Yeltsin’s politics.

Even if Vladimir Putin⁶ has risen to power very quickly, he did not act as Yeltsin’s deferential heir and he immediately introduced bills to make Russia return to a more traditional Moscow-centred style of rule at the expense of all other veto powers. Putin wanted to re-establish strong central state power, being a coalition-builder with different parts of the political spectrum.

In Russia’s semi-presidential arrangements, one of Putin’s main goal was to construct a vertical power using his young, energetic and decisive acting leadership, to concentrate more power in the presidency and reduce oligarchs’ political influence. In his 2000 Presidency’s speech he introduced the “dictatorship of law” i.e. a system ruled by Putin’s law. His leadership cannot be part of the classic political cleavages of the age of modernity. He “was able to reconcile policies and groups that in an earlier era would have been in conflict, notably the working class and the aspirational middle class” (Sakwa 2008: 882). In doing so, he consolidated his position and domestic/foreign capital; no regional or party leaders could challenge his regime by the nominee’s control at the Federation Council. Moreover during the period 2003-2008 he was surrounded by *siloviki*⁷ and bureaucracy to implement his political programme.

After Yeltsin the population was ready for a new leader able to resuscitate the country’s pride and International image: anti-Western tone had become popular and increasingly sharp⁸. As polls periodically have shown Russians strongly trustee in Putin with high levels of confidence (lower than 70%)⁹.

The Putinite system still relies on some specific values and terms: patriotism, *derzhavnost’* (Russia as a great power), statism, social solidarity, and above all a strong state associated with his anti-political and technocratic style, and charisma. He is considered the right man for the job of leading Russia. He is reliable and desirable State leader who successfully defends Russian national interests.

There is no doubt that contemporary Russia has always been marked by the cult of personality and the proliferation of Putin images in the International and domestic press clearly confirms this

⁵ On 9 August 1999 Yeltsin fired Stepashin and appointed Putin as Prime Minister with a reputation to be fair and competent administrator.

⁶ He spent fifteen years in the security services, five years as an intelligence officer in East Germany and several years as deputy mayor under Sobchak’s guide in St. Petersburg.

⁷ The term refers to politicians from the security and military services that became part of Putin’s inner circle.

⁸ After three terms to the Russian presidency and 15 years of presence in the media, a documentary called “The President” (2015) was another way to maintain Putin’s high approval ratings.

⁹ See the main official research Institute in Russia: www.levada.ru, www.wciom.ru

trend¹⁰. Putin's image is characterized by masculinity, a tough leader who will not allow Western governments to weaken Russia¹¹.

Nevertheless, according to the Russian Constitution, President can serve two consecutive terms only (Article 81). That's why in 2008 Dmitrii Medvedev¹² became President of the Russian federation and designed Putin as Prime Minister.

As President Medvedev introduced his political programme "Strategy 2020", according to which Russia should have become one of the most developed countries, a centre of research and technological progress thanks to the strategy of five "I" meaning Institutions, Investments, Infrastructure, Innovation and Intellect.

This dual power configuration determined the so called *Tandemocracy* which was very unusual for the Russian politics but allowed Putin to maintain his authority and leadership.

Russian prime ministers are usually weak technocrats without own base of power and obedient to president (Colton, Skach 2005). It was the first time that a president had to share power with a strong prime minister. That's why in the last four years there were full of speculations about who was the real ruler of the country.

In fact, Putin's approval ratings surpassed the Medvedev's and it was the first time since 2000 that prime minister is more popular than president¹³.

President Medvedev has ruled under the shadow of his mentor and predecessor being merely a placeholder, having agreed to serve a single four-year term so that prime minister Putin could return to the stage in 2012 to reclaim his previous role.

One of the starkest differences between the two presidencies has been the economy. Medvedev had a fairly frank approach to the financial crisis, admitting it would have been "long running and very resistant," while at the same time trying to assure investors that the Russian economy would have rebound faster than expected.

On the contrary, in acting their role as President of the Russian Federation, Yelstin, Putin and Medvedev were not interested in parties activity, leadership and their development. They had an "above party politics". This is not only due to the Russian Constitution that does not allow President to be a member of a party but to the their conception of a party as a mere tool to be used in order to maintain the executive stability and regime type.

When accompanied by a presidential willingness to associate with any specific party, nonsimultaneous elections undermine the ability of presidential elections to become a focus for the formation of parties. Rather than establish a presidential party or even a presidential coalition in parliament, the president introduced a system of loyalty and/or repression with all forces in legislature.

The striking feature of the Russian constitutional design is the power imbalance between the executive and legislative branches of government. The institution of the presidency is far stronger than the parliament which cannot determine the composition of the government and can be bypassed by the president using executive decrees. Parliamentary elections which take usually place before the presidential ones are a sort of "presidential primary".

The formal structure of Russian government remained semi-presidential but with a logic of presidentialism because the presidency is where real power lies in Russia.

¹⁰ Putin's third presidential term provided new opportunities for enacting *machismo* in the foreign policy sphere. Gender-based efforts to undermine the authority of political opponents are a tool of performing legitimacy of the ruling elite against opposition (Sperling 2016).

¹¹ Nashi and Set are grassroots that support Putin. Especially youngsters are susceptible to this message of machismo as an aggressive foreign policy.

¹² He's a bookish technocrat and former law professor who had never before held elective office. In 2000, Medvedev was also named chairman of energy giant Gazprom, Russia's largest producer of natural gas. He presided over the company's gas pricing disputes with neighboring countries, most notably Ukraine.

¹³ Putin's approval ratings improve over time and it's strongly related to country's economic performance.

2. The emergence of the party of power

After the dissolution of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the end of August 1991 and the beginning of the Russian political transition, the concept of party among Russian citizens was associated to the worsening of their living standards and the period of economic and political uncertainty.

Since the election 1993 Duma which took place in a new institutional setting, the development and institutionalization of national parties was very difficult to achieve. On the one hand, some parties were found by personalities such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (leader of the Liberaldemocratic Party), Grigori Yavlinsky (leader of Yabloko), Egoir Gaidar (leader of Russia's Choice) with small and weak branches. The aftermath of the Soviet experience was, instead, represented by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) which was led by Gennadi Zyuganov and it was able to rebuild its old organizational structure also at the local level.

The first electoral cycle 1993-1995 Duma was characterized by high levels of party fragmentation, changes in the labels of some small parties, the disappearance of some and the creation of new ones (*flash parties*) because of the introduction of a new electoral law (mixed system) and the birth of multipartitism in the new Russian Federation. It is only with the 1999 Duma election that a consolidation of something like a three-party system appeared: Unity in the centre, the CPRF on the left, and an alliance of the Union of Right Forces (URF) and the liberal Yabloko to the right of the centre¹⁴.

After Russia's Choice¹⁵ (RC) in 1993 and Our home is Russia¹⁶ (OHR)¹⁷ in 1995 which were the very first Kremlin attempts to support the President in Parliament and in regional elective organs, Unity (also known as Medved) could be considered a new Kremlin's strategy to win in 1999 Duma elections without any expectations for its further party development. Unity bloc was created by 39 regional leaders to strengthen the federal authorities and to defeat the anti-Kremlin Fatherland-All Russia Party, led by the previous popular Prime Minister, Yevgenii Primakov, who could be *ex officio* a potential and competitive presidential candidate¹⁸.

At that time Yeltsin was extremely unpopular and with its "family" i.e. a dominant coalition (Panebianco 1988) of closed relatives, political and economic leaders that got benefit from the Kremlin, he was searching for a new candidate for the following presidential election in 2000¹⁹. At the end of 1999, unexpectedly the unknown Vladimir Putin was appointed Prime Minister by Yeltsin and he immediately became the new presidential candidate some months later.

Yeltsin's presidency did not rely on the support of parliament and stimulate party development in the legislature. He refused to identify himself with one party but he facilitated the emergence of the party of the Kremlin i.e. the so called "party of power" in order to assure his political stability over the long run.

Unity is the third "party of power" but with different characteristics from their predecessors (RC and OHR). The first ones provided support for the President to pass legislation but failed the process of party institutionalization. Instead, Unity bloc was created to defeat the competitive Fatherland-All Russia Party (OVR) in the 1999 Duma elections. Getting 23.3% of the vote by party

¹⁴ The centre of the Russian political spectrum is non-ideological due to the growing importance of parties created by the ruling elites.

¹⁵ In 2001 this party joined the Union of Right Forces.

¹⁶ In 1999 Duma election this party won only 8 seats and merged with United Russia faction.

¹⁷ Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was its leader till 1998. Then the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov decided to build an opposition party starting from regional leaders who were members of this party. So he created Fatherland joined by the previous Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov and other powerful governors.

¹⁸ Duma elections works as primaries for presidential elections to follow. In 2007 primaries were a private affairs and not decisive..

¹⁹ After years of loyal service, Viktor Chernomyrdin was dismissed in March 1998. His youthful successor, Sergei Kirienko, was dropped in August 1998 after the ruble collapse. His popular successor, Yevgenii Primakov, was fired in 1999 and the last one, Sergei Stepashin governed only four months.

list more than 13.3% (OVR), the government transformed Unity into a permanent party through the cooptation of the most powerful regional elites and governors and a large number of independent deputies who had been elected in the Duma.

In July 2001 the unified party “Union of Unity and Fatherland” held its first congress and some months later it became “All Russian Party of Unity and Fatherland, best known as United Russia (UR) whose first chairman was Sergei Shoigu²⁰ till 2005. So UR shifted from being the governors’ party to be considered as the President’s party with an iron discipline over its deputies.

The Duma 2003 election confirmed that UR was the most powerful ruling party (65% of votes) with a nationwide structure that would have best defined Russian party system into the next decade. To do so, the first thing that the ruling party usually implements it is the change of electoral system in order to increase or maintain its parliamentary strength and political regime. This is the case of UR which decided to move in the next 2007 Duma election from a mixed-electoral to a closed-list PR only system²¹. Kremlin wanted to make more difficult for smaller parties to win seats, including by raising the hurdle of minimum votes needed to win seats from 5% to 7%²². Using a closed-list PR if an incumbent wants to be re-elected has few alternatives besides joining the ruling party. So, PR was considered a tool to preserve the party’s local presence and facilitated the recruitment made by cooptation in the list²³. Thanks to this institutional arrangement, in 2007 UR got more than two thirds of seats in the Duma to pass favored laws, including those amending the Constitution²⁴. The other parties represented satellites and the Communists was, and still it is, the only opposition. Moreover, many cases of prominent former opposition politicians who joined UR coming from Union of Right Forces, Yabloko, LDPR and PCFR increased over time and contributed to marginalize a weak opposition²⁵.

In Russia electoral competition eroded quickly after Putin’s presidency in 2000. Elections take place with some pluralism and civil liberties exist but opposition is not able to come to power through elections.

In 2011 Duma election UR began to decline getting 49.3% of votes because it was perceived among Russians as the “party of crooks and thieves”, a term coined by activist Alexey Navalny²⁶. Putin did not deny that corruption was a serious problem for the country but he stressed that it is up to the ruling government to fight against these negative aspects, making a clear distinction between the party of power and the Russian government.

After these legislative elections a few leaders within United Russia called for investigations of fraud and reform of the party, other gave their resignation at a local levels. The demonstrations with thousands of people against ballot-stuffing and fraud by United Russia in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow were quite unexpected events and they were considered as a fairly serious challenge to Kremlin power. As Kriger (2010) points out “UR is the basis of political stability in the country, and for this reason any attack on the party of power amounts to an attack on the state”.

It was the time to change Kremlin’s strategy both at a legislative level with the implementation of law restrictions and within the party of power with a new recruitment and cooptation.

²⁰ He was previous Ministry of Emergency Situations from 1991 to 2012 and governor of Moscow Oblast in 2012.

²¹ Political scientists stress that authoritarian ruler usually adapt majoritarian systems but Colomer (2005) argues that proportional representation has become increasingly common over time.

²² Electoral changes since 2007 included a provision that parties gaining between 5% and 6.99% of the vote would be granted one or two seats, and an increase in the Duma’s term from four to five years.

²³ In regional 2010 elections UR won 76 of 83 regional parliaments.

²⁴ The first one was the change of presidential term from 4 to 6 years.

²⁵ Under current legislation, any deputies changing their party allegiance automatically forfeit their seats, which are given to the next person in the list of their original party. They may, however, quit their party and continue to sit as independents.

²⁶ He is a lawyer who is not affiliated to any Russian party. He is considered the symbol of the mass protest that took place after the 2011 Duma elections in Moscow to protest against election fraud. He is a blogger and the symbol of the Russian protest movement.

As far as the process of candidate selection for Duma elections is concerned, starting from 2006 UR introduced the system of “primary” i.e. a preliminary election that consisted of four different options chosen by each region among insiders and regional governors.²⁷

But it is only in the 2016 primaries that the electorate has included all eligible voters at both single member districts (SMDs) and party lists.

This primary was an important opportunity to increase media exposure on UR whose main goal was to offer a different party’s image: from a colorless bureaucrats party to a more class representative with teachers, doctors, sport figures and so on. That’s why many incumbents will not appear on the 18th September ballot.

In most primary race there was no real contest while high degree of intraparty controversy between governors and other candidates took place. Access to the UR site with the page created for each primary candidate made competition more transparent and it could show its “renewal” bringing new idea, new social and political representation and “greater legitimacy” for both the party and the Duma” (Slider and Petrov 2016: 7).

The median number of candidates was nine (from 2 to 30 candidates) and the turnout was an average 9.6 percent (10,5 million of voters). Nevertheless, the final choice of candidates is usually made at the UR party congress at the end of June.

Tabel 1. Russian parties of power (1993-2016)

<i>Party of power</i>	<i>Chairmen</i>	<i>Votes %</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Choice of Russia	Yegor Gaidar (1994-2001)	15.50% (1993)	70/450	Not available
Our home is Russia	Viktor Cernomyrdin (1995-2001)	10.1% (1995)	55/450	Not available
Unity	Yury Luzhkov, Sergei Shoigu	23.3% (1999)	73/450	Not available
United Russia	Sergei Shoigu (01/12/2001-04/15/2005)	37.5% (2003)	222/450	257.000
	Boris Gryzlov ²⁸ (04/15/2005-12/31/2007)	65.01% (2007)	315/450	1.980.000
	Vladimir Putin (12/31/2007-05/30/2012)	49.32% (2011)	238/450	2.009.937
	Dmitrii Medved (05/30/2012- till now)	(On 18 th September)	?/450	

Source: Author’s elaboration from data www.edinros.ru; www.kremlin.ru

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the party of power since the “founding elections” of 1993, taking into consideration both the electoral and legislative arena and the party on the ground.

All the Chairmen had a public role i.e. Ministry, Speaker of the Duma, Major of Moscow and especially, Prime Minister. The latter is particularly evident in the case of the so called Tandemocracy, a dual system where both Putin and Medvedev acted interchangeably either as President or as Prime Minister.

From 2007 to 2012 Putin became chairman of the ruling party without being a member and he refused to share popularity and authority with UR, especially when he acted as President of the Russian Federation.

²⁷ Since 2009 UR played a formal role in the selection of candidates for regional leaders. Local branches proposed a short list of typically three to five names to the president who subsequently choose his favoured candidate.

²⁸ Boris Gryzlov was the Speaker of Russia's State Duma from 29 December 2003 to 14 December 2011 and is still a close ally of Russian President.

In comparison with the previous party of powers during Yeltsin's Presidency, only UR won three consecutive elections and got a large number of seats.

In 2001 the law "on political parties" was implemented in order to reorganize party politics in the country in terms of granting a privilege position or exclude hard opposition in the political space.

Consequently, United Russia has exceeded two million people, created 82.631 primary branches and 2.595 local units (Roberts 2015) in each of 83 regions. As Gel'man argues (2006:551-552; 2008), these parties of power are top-down created groups which are usually established shortly before elections and, consequently, their regional structure is made by local branches of state administration. These regional elites usually takes care of mobilization of voters and support for party in region. A large membership and genuine popular support can also make the regime more legitimate in the eyes of the people and contribute to an image of invincibility (Bader 2011:191).

In literature on electoral authoritarianism it is argued that the emergence of a ruling party and its institutionalization can raise the life expectancy of these regimes. Consequently, UR can be considered as an hegemonic parties which lacks of autonomy, has a very little patronage at its disposal, cooptates their rivals with the distribution of spoils such as economic benefits, marginalizes existing opposition, recruits new loyal elites, stimulates mass popular involvement. Hegemonic party is a party which gets and wins votes in different elections with a share of votes bigger than its counterparts and control a large majority of seats in parliament.

The first purpose of these parties is to eliminate political competition directly or indirectly and the next 2016 Duma election will not be different from the others in terms of negative campaign, administrative resources used to mobilize voters and legal restrictions for opposition. A mixture of minor soft opposition parties, but also anti-systemic or "hard opposition groups, which are typically marginalized by the regime, denied official registration, and/or their leaders imprisoned or exiled from the country completely" (Roberts 2015: 147).

As a matter of fact, "party-based authoritarian regimes, and dictators with power-sharing institutions such as legislatures, appear to be more durable than other types of authoritarian regimes" (Roberts 2015: 916)

Conclusion

The literature on post-soviet Russia has described a variety of major aspects of the long lasting political transition.

A permanent feature of Russian politics is the presence of a leader possessing super-presidential powers in a semi-presidential system of government. Putin's presidency used some para-constitutionalism institutions to control other political actors i.e. practices such as Tandemocracy (a presidential republic governed as a parliamentary one), the State Council comprised of the heads of Russia's regions, the Presidential Council for the Implementation of National Projects that overlapped the Federal council and government.

Empirical research has shown that presidential and to a certain extent also semi-presidential systems are institutional settings which can determine the rise of presidentialization but genetic feature of political parties make the difference in accentuating these opportunities. It is true that personal leadership in political parties has a great influence but variations in party presidentialization are also affected by party characteristics and organizational changes (Passarelli 2016).

This is the case of the party of power – United Russia – that was established from the top by the state elite trying to save its power by this way, using administrative resources for electoral campaigns and program promotion under the control of state officials. Since 2001 some changes occurred in UR Statute concerning membership such as the possibility for non-members to join the parliamentary faction; the distinction between member and supporter and leadership i.e. party congress can remove leader, elected for a fixed term.

As in many authoritarian regimes, also in Russia electoral laws are a tool that ruling elites can manipulate in their efforts to maintain power. So, the shifting to a mixed system to a PR party list and viceversa for the next дума 2016 election, strongly shows the need to determine the stability of UR in the configuration of party system.

Moreover, the party of power lacks any clear ideological profile, placing itself on centrist position on left-right scale and hampering opposition to unite against power (Gel'man 2006, 551). A careful manipulation of the tone and content of campaign coverage determines the cult of personality and a State Duma majority for UR from 2003 onwards.

The consolidation of the presidential power i.e. the so called “vertical power” relies on important legal framework that facilitated the electoral strengthening of UR.

No genuine federal separation of powers, no political pluralism, weak media and informational freedoms, the emergence of a new nomenklatura in the hegemonic party – UR – which represents the core of a new patronage system.

UR was also accompanied by some specific issues, ideas and values that were used to control party politics - unity, sovereignty and stability –, to guarantee political order and strengthen the Russian State.

Table 2

Four contry comparison of party systems (2015)

	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	Russia
Political system	Presidential	Semi-presidential	Presidential	Semi-presidential
Main party of power	Nur Otan	PDPT ^a	UzLiDep ^b	United Russia
Party of power leader	Nursultan Nazarbaev (President of Kazakhstan)	Emomali Rakhmon (President of Tajikistan)	Mukhammadysu Teshbaev (parliamentarian)	Dmitrii Medvedev (prime Minister)
Name of parliament	Mazhilis	Majlisi Oli	Oliy Majlis	Gosudarstvennaya Duma
Electoral system	Party list	Mixed-list/majority	Majority (2 rounds)	Mixed-list/majority ^c
Number of parliamentary parties	3	5	5 ^d	4
Number of effective parliamentary parties ^e	1.37	1.50	4.20	2.80

Sources: Roberts S.P. (2015:150) Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/english/home.htm> (accessed May 09, 2015).

a People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan.

b Movement of Entrepreneurs and Business People-the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan.

c Russia reverted back to the previous mixed electoral system in February 2014.

d Including the allocation of 15 seats for the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan (EMU).

e Author's calculations using the Laakso and Taagepera formula (1979).

So, is it possible to argue that this party of power or presidential power can be a model to be exported? Can a domestic model to maintain “authoritarian stability” in Russia be a political strategy to promote and encourage the formation of parties of power in the near abroad?

In comparative perspective we find so many similarities among Russian and Central Asia party systems due to the Kremlin strategy to support authoritarian values in other post-communist countries. This is particularly evident in the case of UR in Russia and Nur Otan in Kazakhstan as

Del Sordi (2011) explains²⁹. But this similarity can be also extended to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan as well (Roberts 2015: 147-157)³⁰.

Russian authoritarian norm diffusion can be the reason why in Central Asia the emergence of a “hierarchical party system” arose.

The concepts of “norm diffusion” or “norm transmission” has been discussed by Mills and Joyce (2006) related to the process of democratization in post-Soviet area. The literature on the topic argue that Russia has a great influence over its post-soviet neighbours: the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shangai Cooperation Orgnisation and the Collective Security treaty Organization are clear examples.

Table 2 describes the main characteristics of the different parties of power taking in consideration the form of government, the kind of electoral system, the effective number of parties in the legislative assembly and their leaders.

The most similar cases are the Russian and Kazakhstani ones. They share similar statute, political strategy and features: to create cadre reserves, the presence of grassroots young, the use of presidential decrees, the creation of para-constitutionalism bodies such as State committees and chambers. There are also regular meetings and exchanges among their leaders that can remind us to the concept of “authoritarian linkage”, described by Levitsky and Way (2005).

“In short presidential power, as a key requisite for establishing a dominant party of power and hierarchy party system, was consolidated later in Russia than in the Central Asian cases in question” (Roberts 2015: 153). In some authoritarian regimes, this power can be more concentrated in the hands of the dictators who conserve spoils for loyalists. But these roles might have a different meaning depending upon the man occupying them.

As we have described, Russia’s particular pattern of institutions and rules have favored certain political outcomes over others. The next 2016 Duma elections will confirm if Putin does not need the presidential party as same as party of power needs Putin.

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²⁹ The same in Yeni in Azerbaijan. All these states have in common a superpresidential constitution; their economy are natural resources wealth and faced economic growth over the last decade. Both Russian and Uzbekistan Presidents are no leaders of their respective parties (Isaacs *et.al.* 2014).

³⁰ They have indetical score of Freedom House. In 2005 FH changed its assessment of the Russian Federation from “partly free” to “not free”. See www.freedomhouse.org

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