

The Russian Semi-Presidential System: from constitution to real politics.

Russia is considered by many scholars to have a semi-presidential system of government in which an elected president shares executive power with a prime minister who must enjoy the confidence of parliament.¹ Nevertheless, it is also generally acknowledged that the 1993 constitution provides the president with extensive powers and prerogatives which might give birth to a super-presidential system, where the president, playing a central role vis-à-vis all other democratic institutions, can dominate the political process.²

The aim of this thesis is to address this debate and to demonstrate that Russia has the *constitutional potentiality* to create such a kind of system, but that in practice, this is not a given outcome. To this purpose the analysis will be divided in two sections.

In the first, the attention will turn to the 1993 constitution, considered as the main source of presidential power. In this regard the relations between the president and the main political institutions will be explored in great detail, resorting mainly to the traditional categories of comparative politics. Subsequently, drawing on the fundamental contribution of Maurice Duverger in the study of semi-presidentialism, it will be important to consider the context and the circumstances in which the constitution was adopted. This aspect is of remarkable relevance to understand the centrality of the president in the Russian political system.

In the second section, the analysis will shift from the realm of the constitution to the one of real politics, comparing the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies. It will be showed that during the 1990s president Yeltsin, though he enjoyed great constitutional powers, was unable to create a super-presidential system. Three independent centres of authority were able to limit his action: the parliament, the oligarchs and the regions. This does not mean he was a powerless figure. In fact, the constitution did provide him the necessary instruments to survive in power and partially carry out his agenda. Yeltsin was, at that time, undoubtedly the main political actor in place, yet not the dominant one.

On the other hand, a completely different evaluation can be drawn from Putin's presidency. Unlike Yeltsin, Putin has been able to reassert the presidential prerogatives acting in three different directions. First, he managed to build a large support within the State Duma thanks to a new party (*United Russia*) and a series of political reforms aiming to change the electoral and party system. Second, as pointed out by Richard Sakwa, a "new social pact" was reached by the president and the oligarchs. As long as the latter would support the regime, no investigation on the 1990s privatisations would be advanced. Who accepted the deal, was able to prosper, who did not, was defeated by the entire strength of the regime.³ Third, Putin acted towards the regions, adopting various reforms seeking to strengthen the Kremlin's influence over the Federation.

By the conclusion of this section it will be clear that in Russia a super-presidential system is not the easy outcome of a strongly pro-president constitution. Of course, that is a crucial requisite, but it is only the starting point. In order to create such a system a powerful president is also required, who is able to build up a stable coalition among the Russian economic and political elites, and at the same time, promote the

¹ See Giovanni Sartori. *Comparative Constitutional Engineering*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd. 1994. 139; Robert Elgie. *Semi-Presidentialism in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999. 14; Eugene Huskey. *Democracy and Institutional design in* in Archie Brown. *Contemporary Russian Politics*. New York: Oxford University. 2001. 37;

² See André Krouwel. *Measuring presidentialism of Central and East European countries*. 2003 Available at http://www.fsw.vu.nl/en/Images/Measuring_presidentialism_of_Central_and_East_European_countries_tcm250-42727.pdf; Richards Sakwa. *Russian Politics and Society*. 4th Edition. New York:

Routledge. 2008. 105 ; Stephen White. *Russia in Elgie. Semi-Presidentialism in Europe*. 1999. 225;

³ Richard Sakwa. *Putin Redux, Power and contradiction in contemporary Russia*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 30.

interests of a large part of the electorate. Even though this is not an easy task, Putin has been able to fulfil it and in this way he created a true super-presidential system.