



RUSYA'DA DEMOKRASİ TARTIŞMALARI: 2020 ANAYASA REFERANDUMU VE ABD MERKEZLİ MEDYA VE SİVİL TOPLUM KURULUŞLARININ PUTİN'E YÖNELİK ELEŞTİRİLERİ

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DISCUSSING DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA: THE 2020 CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM AND CRITICISM OF PUTIN BY US-BASED MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

ÖZ Rusya Federasyonu günümüzde uluslararası sistemde yer alan önemli bir oyuncudur. Üstelik Rusya Kırım'ın ilhaki ile başlattığı agresif dış politika yaklaşımını Ukrayna'yı işgal ile devam ettirmiştir. Dolayısıyla bu ülkede yaşanan iç ve dış gelişmeler uluslararası kamuoyunun ilgisini çekmektedir. 1991'den beri ülkede yarı-başkanlık sistemine dayalı federatif bir yapılanma vardır. Ülke Sovyetler Birliği sonrasında Batı tipi liberal demokrasiye geçiş yapmaya çalışmıştır. 2000 yılında Rusya Devlet Başkanı olan Vladimir Putin ise merkezi otoriteyi güçlendirmek için ülkenin idari yapılanmasını yeniden oluşturarak ülkede değişim sürecini başlatmıştır. Başkan Putin ilerleyen süreçte oligark olarak adlandırılan Rus burjuvazisine, kendisini eleştiren muhalif gazetecilere, sivil toplum kuruluşlarına ve muhalefet partilerine yönelik otoriter bir tavır takınmaya başlamıştır. Başbakanlık yaptığı süreç de dahil edildiğinde yirmi dört yıldır Rus siyasetine hâkim olan Putin döneminde yapılan seçimlerin de meşruluğu özellikle Amerikan medyası ve sivil toplum kuruluşları tarafından sıklıkla sorgulanmıştır. Tüm bu tartışmaların üzerine bir de 2020 yılında anayasanın bazı maddeleri değiştirilerek Başkan Putin'e 2036 yılına kadar iktidar yolunun açılması ve Ukrayna Savaşı'ndan sonra Rus olmayan azınlıkları da etkileyecek dönüşümler yapılması Başkan Putin'in "yeni çar" olarak görülmesine sebebiyet vermiştir. Bu çalışmanın hipotezi Rusya'da Batı tipi liberal demokrasinin geliştirilemediğidir. Çalışmada önce Rusya'da Başkan Putin döneminden beri olan demokrasi tartışmalarına değinilmiş ardından Rus siyasal sisteminin üzerine oturduğu yapı ve 2020 yılında anayasada değiştirilen maddelerin içerik analizi yapılmıştır. Çalışmada ABD'nin önde gelen yayın kuruluşları ve sivil toplum örgütlerinden bazıları olan Associated Press ve The New York Times gibi Human Rights Foundation, Atlantic Council ve Wilson Center'da hem Rus Anayasasında yapılan değişikliklerin hem de anayasa referandum sürecinin nasıl analiz edildiği de araştırılmıştır. Çalışmada ABD merkezli kuruluşların Başkan Putin'i bir diktatör olarak gördükleri ve sadece 2020 anayasa referandumunu değil ülkede yapılan diğer bazı seçimleri de seçmen sahtekarlığı olduğu ve bağımsız denetçilerin gözlem yapmalarına müsaade edilmemesi nedeniyle meşru görmedikleri sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bazı muhalif Rus gazetecilerin ve siyasilere yaşadıkları da Rusya'nın anti-demokratik bir ülke olduğuna ilişkin savların güç kazanmasına yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya Federasyonu, demokrasi, anayasa, Vladimir Putin

ABSTRACT Today, the Russian Federation is a major player in the international system.

Moreover, Russia has continued its aggressive foreign policy, which began with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine. As a result, internal and external developments in this country attract the attention of the international community. Since 1991, the country has had a federal structure based on a semi-presidential system. After the Soviet Union, the country attempted to transition to a Western-style liberal democracy. In 2000, Vladimir Putin, who became President of Russia, started the process of change in the country by reorganizing the administrative structure of the country in order to strengthen the central authority. In the following period, President Putin began to adopt an authoritarian attitude towards the Russian bourgeoisie, the so-called oligarchs, opposition journalists who criticized him, civil society organizations and opposition parties. The legitimacy of the elections held under President Putin, who has dominated Russian politics for



twenty-four years, including his term as Prime Minister, has often been questioned, especially by the American media and civil society organizations. In addition to all these debates, the amendment of some articles of the constitution in 2020, which opens the way for President Putin to stay in power until 2036, and the changes that will also affect non-Russian minorities after the war in Ukraine, have led President Putin to be seen as the "new Tsar". The hypothesis of this study is that Western-style liberal democracy has not developed in Russia. The study began with an overview of the debates on democracy in Russia since the era of President Putin, followed by an analysis of the structure of the Russian political system and a content analysis of the articles amended in the 2020 Constitution. The study also examines how the leading US media and civil society organizations, such as the Associated Press and the New York Times, as well as the Human Rights Foundation, the Atlantic Council and the Wilson Center, analyzed both the amendments to the Russian Constitution and the content of the articles. The study concludes that US-based organizations view President Putin as a dictator and consider not only the 2020 constitutional referendum but also several other elections in the country to be illegitimate because of voter fraud and the fact that independent observers were not allowed to observe them. The experience of some dissident Russian journalists and politicians has also strengthened the argument that Russia is an anti-democratic country.

Keywords: *Russian Federation, democracy, constitution, Vladimir Putin*



INTRODUCTION

Boris Yeltsin was the first elected president of the Russian Federation, and the newly established country was trying to erase the traces of the Soviet System. While the Russian Federation was being built, Western-style democratic institutions were taken as an example and the economy was to be transformed into a liberal system. Russia's political and economic transformation process did not achieve the desired performance in a short time. The country was plunged into an economic crisis and its international image suffered. Vladimir Putin has been the critical decision-maker in Russia since December 31, 1999, when Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation. President Putin aimed to improve the economy, solve political problems, and increase public faith and trust in the regime. While President Putin aimed to restore Russia to its former glory, he also began to display authoritarian behavior at home. The Russian Federation's democratic adventure started to suffer with President Putin's refusal to give space to the opposition. President Putin, who had been the country's key decision-maker since 2000, was about to expire when he changed the constitution to allow him to remain president until 2036, leading Western states to label Russia anti-democratic.

Taking into account the political structure of the Russian Federation, which was established on 25 December 1991, the core of this study will be formed around the constitutional referendum to be held in 2020 in the context of debates on democracy. The hypothesis of the study is that Western-style liberal democracy has not been fully developed in the country due to some practices and decisions made during the thirty-three years of the country's federal history, especially during the term of President Putin. To this end, the research questions of the study are as follows: What powers does the Russian Constitution grant to the President, the Government of the Federation and the Federal Assembly? What changes has the 2020 constitutional referendum brought? How have the American press and civil society organizations interpreted these developments in the Russian political system? The study concludes that the amendments to the 2020 Constitution have further fuelled the debate about whether democracy exists in Russia, which is why President Putin has been accused by the American press of being an anti-democratic and totalitarian leader.

BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATES ON DEMOCRACY UNDER THE PRESIDENCY OF VLADIMIR PUTIN: OLIGARCHS, JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN RUSSIA

Vladimir Putin has been the key decision-maker in Russia since 31 December 1999, when Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation. During his long political career, President Putin has been widely criticized both at home and in the international press for some of his decisions. For example, in his early years in office, President Putin focused on purging Russia's oligarchs, who controlled Russian media, factories and energy companies. Saying that "those who impose the influence of capital on power should stop acting like a class", President Putin first intimidated Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Platon Lebedev, Yevgeny Chichvarkin, the Bilalov brothers and Oleg Deripasko, also known as the "Big Seven", and then began to show them the power of the presidency in Russia. For example, Boris Berezovsky, a prominent figure in the banking sector and owner of the television channel ORT, fled the country fleeing political repression, but was found dead in his home in the UK in 2013. Vladimir Gusinsky, the owner of the Segodnya newspaper and the NTV channel, was arrested but fled the country while his trial was still pending. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the owner of Yukos Oil Company, was convicted of tax evasion (Aydınlık Newspaper, 2022). In this way, President Putin strengthened his political authority while sending a message



to other powerful figures in the system. However, President Putin did not target all oligarchs in the first years of his rule. Therefore, some of this class, which became disproportionately wealthy thanks to their relations with the state, continued to exist in the system and did not question the President's political authority. There are still Russian oligarchs who control some critical sectors. For example, former soccer player Boris Rotenberg, who Forbes Magazine estimates to have an economic wealth of 1.3 billion dollars, has good relations with President Putin. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, the US decided to impose economic sanctions on Boris Rotenberg and freeze his assets, citing his good relations with President Putin. Boris Rotenberg was not subject to EU sanctions because he is a Finnish citizen (Forbes, 2023). Some prominent Russian oligarchs, whose assets President Putin did not touch and kept in his close circle, and their income status are briefly as follows; Vladimir Potanin with assets worth \$25.2 billion, Alexey Mordashov and Leonid Mikhelson with assets worth \$22 billion, Vladimir Lisin with income worth \$21.2 billion, Andrey Melnichenko with economic earnings worth \$20 billion and Alisher Usmanov with a fortune of \$19.5 billion (Bloomberg HT, 2022). Apart from these names, other important oligarchs known to be on good terms with President Putin are Igor Sechin, Oleg Deripaska and Nikolay Tokarev. All three are known to be close friends of President Putin (Euronews, 2022). These oligarchs have been subjected to EU, UK, and American sanctions since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian War (Independent Turkish, 2023a).

Western countries' decisions to confiscate assets or impose sanctions due to the Russia-Ukraine War led Russian oligarchs to take an anti-war stance even though they were on good terms with President Putin. However, in the process, eight oligarchs known for their anti-war stance lost their lives in suspicious deaths. The deaths of Alexander Tyulyakov, Mikhail Watford, Vasily Melnikov and Sergei Protosenya are some of these suspicious deaths (Medyascope, 2022a).

In his nearly two decades in power, President Putin has controlled not only the oligarchs but also the press. If one looks at the situation of opposition journalists in Russia since the 2000s, Anna Stepanovna Politkovskaya is the first name that comes to mind. Politkovskaya, a reporter for the Novaya Newspaper, who called the Chechen War, Russia's most important domestic problem during Vladimir Putin's first years in office, a "dirty war" and drew attention to human rights violations, was murdered in 2006. In 2014, two people related to this murder were sentenced to life imprisonment (BBC News, 2014). Former police officer Sergey Khadjikurbanov, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his involvement in the murder, was pardoned by President Putin in 2023 through a presidential decree and sent to Ukraine to fight in the war (Independent Turkish, 2023b; Euronews, 2023). In 2016, opposition journalist Arkady Babchenko, who had fled Russia and sought refuge in Ukraine after being subjected to hate speech for an article he wrote about the downed Russian plane, was murdered in Kiev (BBC News, 2018). In 2020, Yegor Shukov, known for his opposition to President Putin and his vocal demand to become president, was attacked and seriously injured by two men in Moscow (Hürriyet, 2020). Another Russian dissident and lawyer Alexei Navalny was poisoned in August 2020 and arrested in 2021. Navalny, who has been accused of corruption, is being held on political charges and was sentenced to 19 years in prison in 2023 (BBC News, 2023). In 2023, opposition journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza, who supported the embargoes imposed on Russia by Western states over the Ukraine War and argued that Russia had committed war crimes in this war, was tried for treason and sentenced to 25 years in prison (Sözcü, 2023).

After the outbreak of the Ukraine War, opposition newspapers criticizing Russia's policy were forced to flee abroad or were accused of being "foreign agents". Two opposition journalists who fled abroad and took refuge in Turkey were Valeriya Ratnikova and Konstantin Fomin (Medyascope, 2022b). The Russian Federal



Agency for Supervision of Information Technologies and Mass Communications labeled them as "foreign agents" and banned them from broadcasting after they interviewed Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky. There are other opposition journalists like them. Ivan Kollakov, Tihon Dzyadko, Mikhail Zigar and Vladimir Solovyev are some of these journalists (Cura, 2022). Apart from these names, Russian opposition journalist and Nobel Prize-winning author Dmitri Muratov was also labeled as a foreign agent by Russia (Gazete Oksijen, 2023).

While consolidating his political power, President Putin not only cracked down on the oligarchs and suppressed opposition journalists, but also put an end to the activities of some non-governmental organizations and prevented the development of opposition parties. Especially until 2011, President Putin stopped opposition parties from gaining power in the eyes of the public and becoming a focus. Although this situation caused street incidents in the country from time to time, President Putin started to be labeled as the "New Tsar of Russia" because of the attitudes he adopted during this period (Isayeva and Günlü, 2019: 81).

Whether Russia holds State Duma elections or presidential elections, the Western press has pointed out that these elections are not free and fair. For example, for the 2021 State Duma elections, the Financial Times commented that "the election was a foregone conclusion, it was a victory for President Putin and his United Russia Party, and there was no real opposition in the country, so there was no contest". Similarly, Foreign Policy commented that President Putin had blocked the opposition's access to the media (Independent Turkish, 2021). In the same year, there was criticism of the political regime from within Russia, with sociologist Vladislav Inozemtsev commenting: "Our elections are like a puppet theater, many independent candidates are not allowed to compete". Former MP Dmitry Gudkov drew attention to Alexei Navalny's imprisonment and the political ban on him and his team. Gudkov also emphasized that the political bans of Ilya Yashin and Lev Schlossberg in these elections cast a shadow over the country's democracy. Another opposition politician Violetta Grudina claimed that she was quarantined under the pretext of covid and prevented from entering the elections. Golos, an independent observer organization based in the country, claimed that "Russian authorities are preventing the candidate they do not want from entering the election" (BBC News, 2021). Therefore, politics in Russia has been problematic for class structures, dissident journalists, independent media outlets, civil society organizations and opposition parties since the era of President Putin. As if the lack of internalization of democracy was not enough, the constitutional amendments that strengthened the president's hand led to an increase in domestic and foreign criticism of Russia.

POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND INSTITUTIONS IN RUSSIA

The Russian Federation, which was established in 1991 after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, contains different ethnic elements. The newly established federation has remained the heir to the Soviet Union in some respects. According to the 1993 constitution, the country has a semi-presidential system. Administratively, the country consists of 22 republics, 9 Kray, 3 cities with a federal structure; Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Crimea and 5 autonomous regions (Kemaloğlu, 2016: 2). However, some countries, especially Turkey, do not recognize the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and do not accept this administrative structure of Russia.

To analyze the political structure of the Russian Federation, it is first necessary to look at the institutions defined by the constitution. Enacted on December 12, 1993 by referendum, the constitution is largely



based on the Western constitutional tradition and democratic human rights values. Accordingly, the principle of the inviolability of the fundamental principles of the constitution and constitutional provisions for the protection of human rights was recognized. With the 1993 Constitution, a monist approach to international law was adopted and the Russian legal order was integrated into international law. The Constitution was also made binding with the establishment of the Constitutional Court. The new constitution gave a new meaning to the word sovereignty and rejected the Soviet legal heritage (Kalinichenko and Kochenov, 2021: 341). The Constitution shows how state mechanisms were established.

Position, Duties and Powers of the Head of State in the Russian Political System

According to Article 80 of Chapter 4 of the 1993 Constitution, entitled "The President of the Russian Federation", the head of state is at the top of the political structure in the country. The Head of State holds the executive power. Article 81 lists the conditions for becoming president. Accordingly, the President must have resided in Russia for at least ten years, be over 35 years of age, be a citizen of Russia and be elected by the people for a four-year term. However, with the 2008 amendments, the term of office of the president was increased to six years and the elected president can serve a maximum of two consecutive terms (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.). After serving two terms, the president can take a break for one term and then be re-elected. In fact, Vladimir Putin served two terms as president before taking a one-term break in 2008, during which time he served as prime minister. Elected in 2000 and 2004, Putin did not run for the presidency in 2008. In 2012, Putin participated in the elections again and was re-elected by receiving most of the votes (Ağır, 2015: 32). The most recent presidential election in Russia was held on March 18, 2018, and Putin, who received 76% of the votes, was elected president for the fourth time (Cavlak & Doğan, 2019: 31). Thus, Vladimir Putin has been in power for the longest time since the establishment of the Russian Federation.

The President of Russia enjoys immunity under the constitution. The President has no political responsibilities. However, in the event of a crime related to the President's office, he is held accountable to the legislature. For example, if the president is guilty of treason, the head of state can be held responsible according to Article 93 of the constitution. In the system, only the Duma can claim treason, and this is the only authority the Duma has against the head of state (Babaoğlu & Çobanoğlu, 2017: 295).

Position, Duties and Powers of the Government of the Federation in the Russian Political System

The Government of the Russian Federation consists of the prime minister, ministers, and deputy prime ministers. Presidents and vice-presidents of the federated states may also participate in the functions. The head of government of the Russian Federation is elected by the head of state and submitted to the Duma for approval (Eroğlu Durkal & Karahöyük, 2017: 68).

The head of government of the Russian Federation submits a proposal for ministerial and deputy prime ministerial posts to the head of state within a one-week period (Ağır, 2015: 33). Chapter 6 of the 1993 Constitution is titled Government of the Russian Federation and contains information on the government. Article 113 of the Constitution defines the duties of the Head of Government. Accordingly, the Head of Government determines the activities of the Government in accordance with the Constitution, federal laws and decrees issued by the Head of State (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.).



Article 114 of the Constitution lists the duties and powers of the Government of the Federation. Accordingly, the government shall prepare, implement, and submit the federal budget to the Duma. The government is also empowered to direct the realization of fiscal, credit and monetary policies. The Government of the Federation is also vested with other important powers within the state, such as state security, foreign policy, the rights and freedoms of citizens, property and the maintenance of public order (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

Duties and Powers of the Federal Assembly

In federal structures, there are legislatures with a unicameral or bicameral legislature (Ağır, 2015: 29). The Russian Federation has a bicameral legislature. The bicameral Federal Assembly, which had the same name in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, constitutes the legislative body of the Russian Federation (Türkölmez, 2017: 25). Chapter 5 of the 1993 Constitution is titled Federal Assembly. According to Article 95, the legislature in the country has a bicameral structure; the upper house is the Federation Council, and the lower house is the State Duma. The lower wing, the State Duma, used to be a parliament consisting of a total of 450 deputies elected by universal suffrage for a term of 4 years, but as of 2008, the term of office of the deputies was extended from 4 to 5 years. Thus, according to Article 96, the term of office of elected deputies is 5 years. The Federation Council is composed of two representatives each from the legislative and executive branches of 85 federative units (Eroğlu Durkal & Karahöyük, 2017: 70, Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

Article 102 of the Constitution sets out the powers of the Federation Council. Accordingly, some of the critical powers of the Council are as follows: approval of border changes, approval of the decree on the declaration of martial law and state of emergency, authorization of the use of the armed forces outside the borders of the Federation, determination of presidential elections, removal from office and appointment of members of the top judicial bodies (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.). Article 103 of the Constitution sets out the powers of the State Duma. Some of the powers of the Duma are as follows: Approving the president for the appointment of the head of government, passing a vote of confidence in the government, appointing, and dismissing the head of the central bank, declaring a general amnesty and, most importantly, impeaching the president (Government of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

2020 CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM: MORE DEMOCRACY OR AUTOCRACY?

On January 15, 2020, President Putin delivered his annual address to the parliament and presented the package of constitutional amendments to the parliament. President Putin proposed measures to solve urgent problems of society (Demydova, 2020: 148). The amendment package was approved by the Duma and the Federation Council, and the referendum process began. The 2020 Russian Constitutional Referendum was originally planned to be held in April, but the referendum was postponed due to the coronavirus epidemic that affected the world, and the referendum started to be held in Kamchatka and Chukotka regions as of June 25. To keep the distance between voters due to the coronavirus, voting time was given until July 1. Thus, a one-week election period was set. This was a constitutional referendum that envisaged changes in many areas and came to the fore with its articles that included more than 200 amendments (Güler, 2020a: 1).

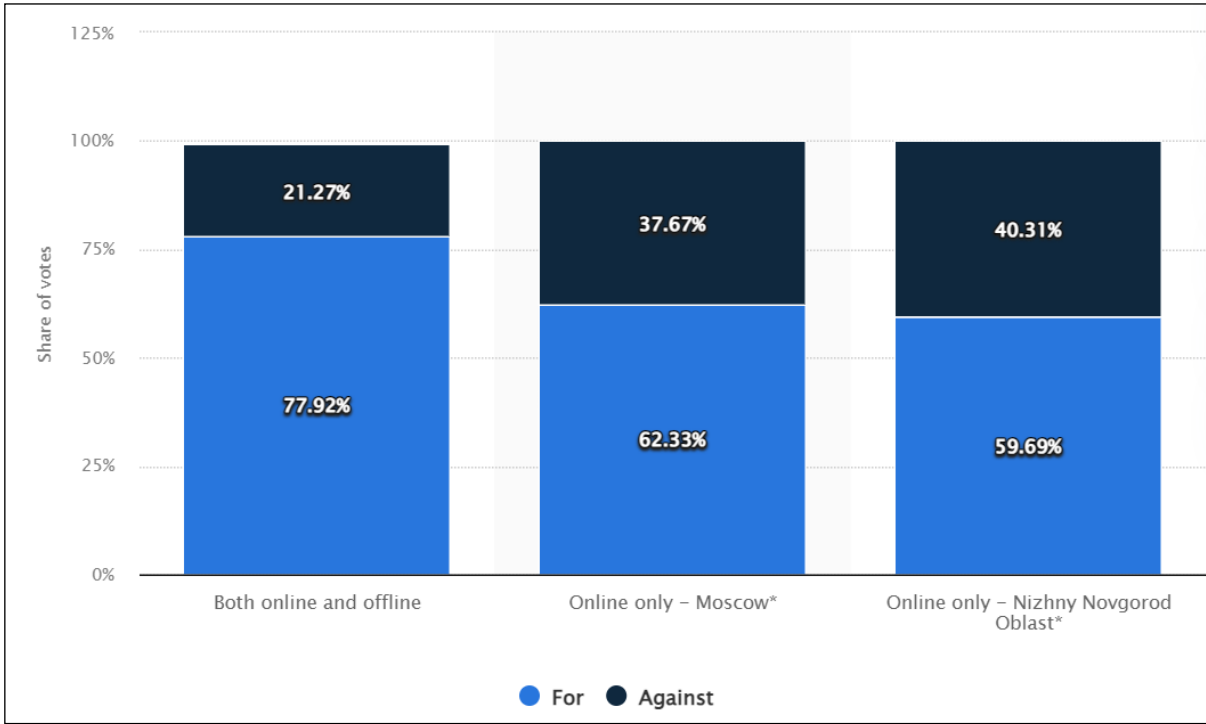
The 2020 constitutional amendments do not actually contradict the foundations of the constitutional system found in the first two chapters of the 1993 Constitution (Kalinichenko and Kochenov, 2021: 342). In

fact, President Putin has said that they were intended to improve the balance of power and bring the constitution in line with the changes and developments in the country since 1993. About a third of the 137-article constitution was amended. Apart from the much-debated issue of the president's term of office, some additional powers were given to the parliament to clarify the structure and content of institutions (European Parliament, 2020). Changes were envisaged such as securing social support measures, ensuring the credibility of the Constitution in international law, introducing new rules for the presidency, securing the status of the State Council, introducing new requirements for civil servants, judges, and deputies, and increasing the duties of the Federal Assembly (Güler, 2020b: 1). A total of 42 articles were amended, mainly in the areas of the federal structure, the President of the Russian Federation, the Federal Assembly, the Government of the Russian Federation, judicial power, and local government (Tuncel, 2020: 2). The Constitution regulates the Federal Structure between Articles 65 and 79 in Chapter 3, the President of the Russian Federation between Articles 80 and 93 in Chapter 4, the Federal Assembly between Articles 94 and 109 in Chapter 5, the Government of the Russian Federation between Articles 110 and 117 in Chapter 6, the judicial power between Articles 118 and 129 in Chapter 7, and local government between Articles 130 and 133 in Chapter 8. Amendments and additions were made to 10 articles in the Federal Structure (Gedik & Serdaliyeva, 2022: 787).

Some of the amended articles were very prominent in the public opinion and became the focus of criticism. The first of these was undoubtedly the extension of the presidential term until 2036. If the referendum is accepted, Vladimir Putin will be able to stay in politics until 2036, thus protecting his political future and career. Elected in 2012 and again six years later in 2018, Putin would have been able to run in the 2030 elections at the earliest, taking a one-term break due to the expiry of his term in the 2024 elections, as there was a maximum of two consecutive presidential terms. However, this rule was abolished by the new constitutional referendum and Vladimir Putin was able to run again in the 2024 elections. If he is elected in the 2030 elections, Putin has the possibility of becoming president for two more consecutive terms with a total presidential term of 12 years until 2036 (Güler, 2020a: 3). But there have been other important changes. For example, government officials were banned from acquiring foreign citizenship or opening bank accounts in other countries. Furthermore, the principle that the minimum wage should not fall below the poverty line was adopted (European Parliament, 2020).

The 2020 referendum on constitutional amendments, which took place between June 25 and July 1, resulted in the participation of nearly 68% of the 109 million registered voters, or about 2/3 of the Russian population, with 78% voting yes and 21% voting no. In fact, according to Russian law, there was no obligation to hold a referendum as the amendments had already been approved by the parliament in March 2020, but this was done to provide legal legitimacy to the new constitution (Statista, 2022). Chart 1 shows the results of the voting, both online and in the normal process due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Chart 1: 2020 Constitutional Amendment Referendum Results



Source: (Statista, 2024a)

As shown in Chart 1, voting in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod was also conducted online, and in Nizhny Novgorod the number of people voting no to the amendments was as high as 40% (Statista, 2024a).

DEMOCRACY CONCERNS: THE IMPACT OF THE 2020 REFERENDUM ON THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The constitutional amendment, which was legitimized with a yes vote in a referendum, brought several innovations. President Putin foreshadowed this change when he said in January 2020 that "there should be more balance between the separation of powers". Parliament has been given new powers, but the President has been made even more powerful. Prior to the constitutional amendment, the President could serve a maximum of two consecutive terms as President and was eligible to stand for re-election after a one-term break. With the 2020 referendum, this criterion was abolished, and the president can stand for re-election for a third term even if he has served two terms as president. Vladimir Putin, who has been the critical decision-maker of the Russian political system since 2000, apart from a one-term stint as prime minister in between, has been given the chance to run for re-election in 2024. In addition, the President has also gained additional powers over the government. According to the 1993 Constitution, the President only had the right to appoint the government, but with the amendment he has the right to dismiss the prime minister. The President also gained the power to dismiss the judges of the Constitutional Court and other senior judges. In addition to being politically untouchable for life, the President also gained the right to be a member of the Federation Council for life (European Parliament, 2020).

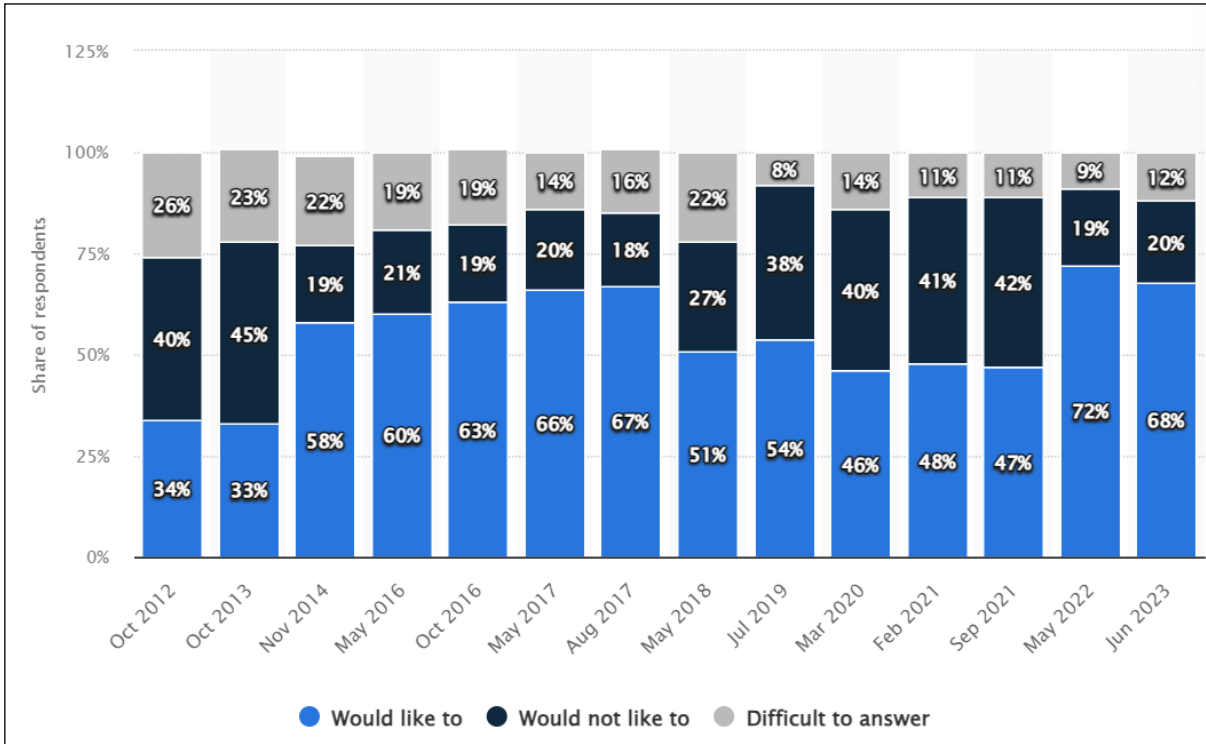
Article 68 of the Constitution was amended to include the statement that the state language of the Federation is the Russian language. In 1993, when the constitution was drafted, the republics were given



the right to preserve and develop their own languages due to the presence of non-Russian ethnic groups in the country. However, the last amendment emphasized the Russian language. Russian identity was brought to the forefront with this constitutional amendment (Güler, 2020b: 4). Another amendment was to increase the power of the Head of State. The President has been given the right to annul decisions taken by the Government. The President is vested with power vis-à-vis the Federation Council, the Duma, and the Constitutional Court. Article 110 was amended by adding the phrase "general leadership of the President of the Russian Federation". Article 111 has been amended to provide that the Duma must first approve the appointment of the head of government and then the President appoints him. In case of disagreement, the president has the right to dissolve the Duma or call new elections. Article 113 was revised by stipulating that the Federation would be personally responsible to the President for organizing the affairs of the government and fulfilling the assigned duties in accordance with the instructions of the president (Tuncel, 2020: 4-5).

The international press and society saw these constitutional amendments as Putin's preparation for the 2024 elections, but in fact, when the intermediate lines of the amendments are analyzed, it is seen that more remarkable steps have been taken. With the amendments, Russia has legitimized a more interventionist policy towards the nations in the territories of the Soviet Union. Apart from this, the amended constitution also increases state control over Russian political elites. Dual citizenship, residing in foreign countries or opening bank accounts abroad will be considered a crime and will lead to impeachment. In addition, the requirement to live in Russia for 25 years uninterruptedly to become the President of the country has been introduced, thus preventing opposition political elites living in other countries. Another important change was the acceptance of the argument that the Russian constitution is superior to Russia's obligations arising from its previous membership of international organizations. In other words, Russia now puts its own legal norms before international law. Another prominent aspect is the adoption of the principle that the Russian Federation is the protector of the rights of Russians living abroad and the protection of their cultural identity. By using the term "Russian cultural identity" here, it paves the way for Russia to pursue an interventionist policy towards the former Soviet geography where Russians live (Klimkin, Ivanov and Umland, 2020). The 2020 amendments not only open the door for President Putin to a 12-year term in power starting from 2024, but also give him new powers that could lead to more dangerous consequences. The survey of Russian citizens, which has been conducted every year since 2012, with the question "Do you want to see President Putin as president again in the next elections?", yielded the results shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Russian Citizens' Voting Results for Vladimir Putin as President in 2012-2023



Source: (Statista, 2024b)

As seen in Chart 2, Russian citizens voted for Vladimir Putin the lowest in 2012 and 2013. Between 2008 and 2012, Vladimir Putin served as prime minister and Dmitri Medvedev as president, as the Russian Constitution does not allow for three consecutive presidential terms. However, Putin won the elections held on March 4, 2012 and became president again. Chart 2 shows that President Putin received 46%, 48% and 47% of the votes in 2020-2021, the period of the coronavirus pandemic. In the most recent public opinion poll in June 2023, President Putin received 68% positive votes, 20% negative votes and 12% said it was difficult to answer this question. In Russia, the second largest power in the international system after the United States, the events leading up to the 2020 constitutional amendments and the 2024 elections, which will offer Putin the opportunity to become president for the fifth time, have attracted the attention of both the Western press and US-based media outlets and civil society organizations.

US MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' APPROACH TO PRESIDENT PUTIN'S 2020 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

There are undoubtedly a significant number of media outlets and civil society organizations in the United States. However, due to the limitations of this study, internationally recognized media outlets that are followed from different parts of the world and have a significant circulation, as well as civil society organizations with a high level of interaction with the US political system and bureaucrats, were included in the scope of the study. Since the language used by writers working in publishing houses to express their opinions is also important, the media organs examined in the study can be analyzed one by one.



The first of the media organizations included in the study is the Associated Press. In an article published in the Associated Press in 2023 by Jim Heintz, it was commented that President Putin entered a struggle with the oligarchs in the country as soon as he came to power and that this extremely rich Russian class learned to be loyal in the process. Heintz believes that this is why Russian oligarchs remained silent when President Putin started the war in Ukraine. Therefore, Heintz argues that Russian oligarchs are still rich but have less power in the system (Heintz, 2023a). In another article in November, Heintz criticized the first presidential election after the 2020 constitutional amendments that paved the way for President Putin in 2024. Heintz interpreted the Russian political system as hermetic and pointed out that there are no primaries in the country and political parties present their own candidates to the voters. When discussing who could be the new president of Russia in case the 71-year-old Putin does not or cannot run again, Heintz heavily criticized the Russian system (Heintz, 2023b). On November 15, 2023, the agency reported that President Putin had again made a legal change and introduced media restrictions ahead of the March 2024 elections, which will give him another six years. According to the amendments, only registered media organizations will be allowed to cover the election commission meetings. Independent journalists will not be allowed to attend these meetings. Russia, which has already banned social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram, is also trying to control the flow of information, and the Associated Press directly tried to draw attention to this (Associated Press, 2023). On December 7, 2023, an article published in the agency, this time by Dasha Litvinova, mentioned the announcement of the date for the elections in Russia as March 17 and focused on the 2020 Constitutional amendments and the President's term extension. Litvinova argues that President Putin will almost certainly win the 2024 elections due to his authoritarianism, the fact that his critics are either in prison or abroad, and the lack of independent media outlets in the country. Commenting that even the cost of the Ukrainian War and Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion will not prevent President Putin from winning, Litvinova points out that there is a demand for a "Russia without Putin" but this opposition movement has not found a ground for itself (Litvinova, 2023).

Andrew Higgins, a writer for The New York Times, mentioned a comment by Greg Yugin, a political theorist at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, in his article. Yugin comments on the referendum as follows: "This is well-acted theater. The system is supposed to provide popular support even when there is none.". The article also quotes Golos, an independent election monitoring organization, as calling the referendum "a rigged process". Higgins also pointed out that with the amendment, Vladimir Putin could remain president until the age of 83 (Higgins, 2020).

Another important US-based publication, Foreign Policy, commented on the constitutional changes in an article published on August 6, 2020 by Sergey Radchenko and Baurzhan Rakhmetov, stating that "Putin is ruling Russia like a Central Asian dictator". In this article, it is emphasized that while other commentators who criticize what is happening in Russia have mostly touched upon issues such as increasing social pensions and banning same-sex marriage in the country, it should be noted that a much more important issue in this process is the fact that Putin has almost restarted his term in office in Russia. The article also noted that if Putin holds on to political power until 2036, he will become the longest-serving Russian politician in modern Russian history, surpassing Joseph Stalin. Radchenko and Rakhmetov believe that the constitution has been trampled on in Russia and raise the question of who would have dissuaded Putin from staying in power even without constitutional changes. For them Putin is a dictator, and dictators either organize sham elections, or they maintain their position by declaring themselves president for life

(Radchenko and Rakhmetov, 2020). Chris Miller is another Foreign Policy writer who thinks President Putin is a dictator. In his article titled "Succession and Punishment", Miller described Putin as a leader who has not solved the riddle of Russian politics. Miller commented that it is actually very risky for leaders to stay in power for a long time in Russia because many Russian Tsars have lost their lives by making powerful enemies in the process. Miller even cited the example of the murder of those who aspired to power during the Soviet Union as an example, stating that this was not only a reality of the Tsarist era. Miller also called Putin a dictator and pointed out that dictators adopt being president for life as their main policy (Miller, 2020). In addition to Miller, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, writing in Foreign Policy, characterized Putin as an autocrat and emphasized that he is pursuing a similar game plan as previous Russian leaders. Kendall-Taylor emphasizes that with these constitutional amendments, Putin will redistribute power in the Russian political system by changing the powers of the presidency and creating new positions from which he can retain and seize power. This is how he will transition to the next phase of his career (Kendall-Taylor, 2020). Foreign Policy magazine criticized not only the 2020 Constitutional Referendum but also the presidential elections in 2024 in the run-up to the elections. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former head of Yukos Oil Company, and Aliona Hlivco, former member of the Ukrainian Parliament, wrote in Foreign Policy that these elections will not be democratic and that the death of Alexei Navalny, a prominent Russian dissident, is not the first example of the death of Putin's opponents. According to them in a political atmosphere where dissidents like Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Kara-Murza have been exiled, imprisoned, poisoned or killed, President Putin would have won the elections anyway (Hlivco and Khodorkovsky, 2024). In addition to Hlivco and Khodorkovsky Christina Lu also thinks that Russian presidential process is a "predetermined presidential contest" (2024). Indeed, according to the first announcements during the three-day election process in Russia, Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections with 87% of the vote (Burrows, Litvinova and Heintz, 2024)¹.

In an article written by Olga Tanas and Henry Meyer for Time magazine which was published on June 22, 2020, commented that the search for a successor for the post-Putin era in Russia has been rendered irrelevant by these constitutional amendments. The article also quotes Leonid Davydov, a political analyst for the Foundation for Civil Society Development in Russia, as saying that "Putin's main goal is to avoid becoming a "lame duck" in the final years of his current mandate" (Tanas and Meyer, 2020). Another Time columnist, Simon Shuster, described the constitutional amendments as a "bloodless revolution". He also interpreted the resignation of the government after Putin first expressed his intention to amend the constitution not as an act of protest, but as an attempt to pave the way for the changes President Putin wanted to make. He also interpreted the resignation of the government after Putin first expressed his intention to amend the constitution not as an act of protest, but as an attempt to pave the way for the

¹ Looking at the first official statements on the electoral process in Russia, for example, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: "Your re-election is a full demonstration of the support of the Russian people for you. I believe under your leadership; Russia will certainly be able to achieve greater achievements in national development and construction." Apart from these positive congratulations from China, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell took a negative approach to the issue as follows: "Elections in Russia have not been free and fair and were based on repression and intimidation." When we take a look at US reaction about the Russian election White House National Security Council Spokesperson said that "the elections are obviously not free nor fair given how Mr. Putin has imprisoned political opponents and prevented others from running against him". Germany's Foreign Ministry made a statement as follows: "The pseudo-election in Russia is neither free nor fair, the result will surprise nobody." So not only US based media or political decision makers but also the European Leaders are also labeling Russia as undemocratic and Putin as autocrat (Reuters, 2024).



changes President Putin wanted to make. According to Shuster, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who supported President Putin from the beginning of his political career, was the victim of this process. Shuster also points to the gradual concentration of political power in the hands of a single person in Russia over the last two decades (Shuster, 2020). Ian Bremmer, Time's editor-in-chief, has also written on the subject, pointing out that the amendments not only pave the way to political power for Putin, but also give more power to the State Council, which is responsible for making recommendations. "We still don't know what Putin's final play is," Bremmer commented on the process. Bremmer's analysis for Russia is as follows: "No country has tried harder to give off the appearance of being a genuine democracy in the last 20 years than Russia" (Bremmer, 2020a). In another article, Bremmer commented that Putin has made himself the center of politics, that his attitudes towards the West are also effective in keeping him on the throne, that the voting in the constitutional referendum was not held in a free and fair environment, and that populism is becoming increasingly entrenched in Russia (Bremmer, 2020b).

An article by Bradford Betz on Fox News highlighted another dimension of the constitutional amendments and quoted President Putin's religiously referenced statement defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Betz also mentioned that President Putin made the amendments under the rhetoric of strengthening democracy, but Russian opposition sees this as a move by Putin to retain power. President Putin's use of the phrase "belief in God" in his statements regarding these changes is another point that Betz draws attention to in his article (Betz, 2020a). In another article, Betz wrote about the protests against constitutional amendments in Russia, in which nearly 22,000 people participated. Betz mentions that the participants sent a message to Putin with banners reading "no to eternal Putin" and "no to the usurpation of power". Some protesters even carried banners commemorating the murdered opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, and Betz also mentions how Nemtsov was murdered in his article (Betz, 2020b). In an atmosphere of analyzing the impact of constitutional changes in Russia, another Fox News writer, Hollie McKay, wrote in March 2020 about President Putin's scenarios of annexing Belarus to Russia, which was seen as Europe's last dictatorship and acted as if that system was still in place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, another issue discussed in the American media at the time was the possibility of Putin annexing Belarus to Russia in order to remain president. This is why McKay also discussed this issue in his article (McKay, 2020). Lucia Suarez Sang, on the other hand, drew attention to the fact that the amendments not only paved the way for Putin to power, but also gave priority to Russian domestic law over international law, banned same-sex marriage and emphasized the belief in God (Sang, 2020).

Looking at how the Human Rights Foundation, a New York-based civil society center outside the US media outlets, interpreted the 2020 constitutional amendments in Russia, first, in an article published on March 18, 2020, it was commented that the Constitutional Court was already under the control of President Putin and that Putin could remain President until the age of 83. The article also emphasized that pro-democracy groups in the country saw the 2020 amendments as an "anti-constitutional coup" and opposed this anti-democratic move. The article also included the following sentences by Garry Kasparov: "For 20 years, elections in Russia have been neither free nor fair. Behind the puppet Constitutional Court's statement that the amendment does not automatically extend Putin's rule to 36 years is the desire to hide the fact that Putin is a dictator who controls the judiciary." This Human Rights Foundation article characterizes President Putin as a dictator (Human Rights Foundation, 2020).



In a report published by the Atlantic Council, another US-based think tank founded in 1961, it was pointed out that with the amendments made, Russia has put into a legal structure its goal of pursuing an interventionist policy in other former Soviet countries after Ukraine. Moldova and Georgia are therefore likely to be affected by the developments in Russia. In the article, it is mentioned that the amendments aim to increase nationalism in Russia by pursuing populist policies, and for this purpose, articles such as the prohibition of same-sex marriages and the acceptance of only the version of history deemed appropriate by the Russian administration are included. It is concluded that Russia is becoming more authoritarian. There is also an interpretation that President Putin has been in power unofficially for a long time. As such, the fact that the amendments will increase the executive branch's veto powers over the parliament through the Constitutional Court is also seen as worrying. Another striking point emphasized in the article is that with these amendments, Russia has stated that Russian law will henceforth prevail, and the country will not be obliged to implement the articles of the treaty in relation to decisions that it has accepted through international treaties to which it is a party but which it considers to be contrary to the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Moreover, Article 67 of the new constitution states that "the return of Russian territory to foreign powers is forbidden", thus legitimizing Russia's annexation of Crimea (Klimkin, Ivanov and Umland, 2020).

Another US-based research organization, the Wilson Center, has established the Kennan Institute to study Russia and Eurasia, which analyzed the 2020 changes in Russia. For example, a 25-minute video titled "Is Putin's Constitution good or bad news for Russia?" was produced and analyzed by the institute's experts. The Wilson Center experts debated whether this was a legitimate exercise in terms of democracy and concluded that it was not. The fact that the referendum was spread over a week instead of being held in one day, that the ballot boxes were delivered to homes or workplaces instead of going to the designated place to vote, and finally, that there were accusations of voter fraud, all put the democratic and legitimate nature of the constitutional referendum into question. The video also included an academic's claim that more than 20 million votes cast were in fact fraudulent votes that were not valid (Wilson Center, 2021a). Another video released by the organization is titled "The Putin Mandate? Assessing the Numbers Behind Russia's Constitutional Vote". In this one-hour video, it is emphasized that since the referendum lasted for a week, it could not be followed by independent observers. It is concluded that the voting process was not carried out in a healthy manner, especially since the voting took place outside the polling centers and was not recorded on video. In fact, it is emphasized that only non-governmental organizations approved by the state are allowed to monitor the process on video, and only independent media outlets can monitor the process more accurately, but they do not go to the regions outside Moscow. Therefore, it is concluded that the numbers that resulted from the vote should not be seen as a political victory. In addition, the video tries to prove the allegations of vote fraud and manipulation across the country in this referendum through numbers (Wilson Center, 2021b).

In addition to video broadcasts, the Wilson Center has also published reviews by various authors. For example, Sergey Parkhomenko wrote a blog post on how perceptions are created with numbers. In Russia, 67.97% of the electorate participated in the referendum. Of those who participated, 21.27% voted no in the referendum, while 77.92% voted yes. Therefore, the 2020 referendum was in fact validated with 52.96% yes votes and Russia considered this figure as a "political victory". This article analyzes data from nearly 100,000 polling stations and argues that voter fraud was committed. It is emphasized that a group

of mathematical experts led by Sergey Shpilkin calculated that voter turnout was 44% and that about 65% of those who participated voted yes. Another claim made in the article is that only 29% of all Russian voters voted in favor and that voter fraud made it appear as if there were an extra 26 million positive votes (Parkhomenko, 2020). In addition to Parkhomenko's article, William Pomeranz also wrote an evaluation article on the subject. Pomeranz described the referendum as "symbolic" and commented that the amendments undermined the principle of separation of powers and dealt a blow to democracy by prioritizing social rights over individual rights. Moreover, Pomeranz states that with the emphasis on Russian as the state language, ethnic groups, which constitute more than 20% of the population, will begin to feel alienated from the system and that this new discourse is a departure from the principle of inclusiveness in the 1993 Constitution (2020)².

The article by James Jay Carafano in the Washington-based Heritage Foundation think-tank compared President Putin and President Xi of the People's Republic of China, labelling both as opportunistic regimes. Indeed, the rapprochement between Russia and China was seen as the "birth of a new evil empire" (Carafano, 2023). Bruce Klingner even added North Korea to Russia and China, calling these three states a "triple threat that cannot be ignored". According to him, all three countries have "rogue state" status. Klingner believes that these three countries pose a threat to the international financial system, regional stability and cyber security (Klingner, 2024). Therefore, The Heritage Foundation is one of the US NGOs criticizing Putin's Russia. Although the Heritage Foundation does not respond directly to the constitutional changes in Russia, it is important in that it criticizes Russia for being authoritarian under Putin and portrays the country, along with China, as a danger zone for US foreign policy, which is why it is included in this study.

Freedom House is another Washington-based NGO that promotes democracy and human rights. Freedom House describes Russia as an authoritarian state where President Putin holds power, the judiciary is obedient, the media is controlled, elections are rigged and pliant opposition parties are allowed into the system. The decision by the country's Supreme Court to increase pressure on LGBT+ people in 2023 by declaring the 'International LGBT People's Movement' an extremist organisation and banning its activities was also included in the organisation's report on Russia. The report also noted that constitutional amendments in 2020 paved the way for President Putin to rule until 2036, but other presidents who would come after him were not given the right to serve two consecutive terms. In this process, President Putin allowed his own campaign to have a privileged place in the media and was therefore a leader who abused his power, there were irregularities in the electoral process and vote counting, the president's financial source in the electoral process was not transparent and there were no real opposition parties in Russia. One of the issues highlighted in the report is that there is a "lack of real competition" in the country. As a result, Freedom House's report describes Russia as a country that is not free in the areas of political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2024).

Since 1910, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C., has been working on politics and international cooperation. An article by Ekatarina Schulmann for the Carnegie Endowment for Peace discusses the question of whether there are really functioning institutions in the Russian political

² In addition to these articles, the Wilson Center also has blog posts criticizing the 2020 Constitutional Amendments and pointing out that Russia is moving away from democracy. (https://www.wilsoncenter.org/insight-analysis?_page=1&keywords=&_limit=10&topics=416®ions=199&programs=108)



system. The question of whether Russia has moved from an authoritarian to a totalitarian regime is another important issue addressed in the article. According to Schulmann, there is a fear in Russia that if President Putin were to leave, chaos would ensue. Schulmann, who comments that President Putin is "better than the known devil" to stay in power, disagrees with the comparisons made between Putin and the Tsar. In her view, the Russian Federation does not resemble a traditional monarchy (Schulmann, 2023). In his article on Russian state ideology, Andrei Kolesnikov argues that there is a hybrid totalitarianism in Russia, a hybrid between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. According to Kolesnikov, Russia has a nationalist-imperialist ideology (Kolesnikov, 2023). Writing in the wake of the 2024 presidential elections in Russia, Kolesnikov describes Russia as 'a semi-totalitarian regime in which the people are complicit'. Kolesnikov comments that President Putin's policies and actions in recent years have been characterized by passive conformism and fear (Kolesnikov, 2024). Like the Heritage Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a major US organisation, did not focus on constitutional changes in Russian domestic politics, but on Russia's slide towards totalitarianism. For these organisations, which are in a position to steer US foreign policy, the direction of Russian politics is important. For this reason, this NGO is also included in this study.

CONCLUSION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union is undoubtedly a critical threshold in Russian history. As one of the two great powers in the international system from the end of the Second World War until around 1990, it was not easy for the Russians to digest defeat. Moreover, between 1990 and 2000, the diplomatic language of the United States, which saw its position as the dominant power in terms of crushing the Russians, hurt the national pride of Russian society. So, when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000 and began to rebuild the country, Russian society supported him and saw him as a leader who would take Russia forward. However, as the years went by, President Putin began to take steps to consolidate his power.

Aiming to strengthen centralized authority, the president first extended his term in office through constitutional amendments in 2008, and then continued to rule the country as prime minister from 2008 to 2012, when he handed the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev. When President Putin was re-elected as president in 2012, he began to increase the dose of authoritarianism. The sine qua non of Western-style liberal democracies is that there are regular, verifiable and transparent elections; that there is an environment of political freedom that allows space for the formation of opposition, taking into account that minorities may one day become the majority; that an atmosphere is created in which non-governmental organizations can participate in the system; and that media organizations have freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

The post-2000 elections in Russia, the political atmosphere in the country, the situation of opposition parties and civil society organizations, and in particular the 2020 constitutional referendum, are highly problematic when assessed against these criteria. US-based media and civil society organizations have emphasized that the 2020 referendum was anti-democratic, especially in terms of the way it was conducted, the votes it received, and the changes it introduced. The fact that President Putin will remain president until 2036 in a country where he has been a key decision-maker since 2000 has added to the debate that Russia is not a democratic country.



The study looked at a sample of internationally recognized US-based news organizations, including the Associated Press, The New York Times, Foreign Policy, Time and Fox News. These media outlets were generally critical of the process in Russia, viewing the referendum on constitutional changes and the structure into which the Russian political system was being transformed as anti-democratic. Although President Putin said he made these changes to improve the country's democracy, it was emphasized that his aim was to remain in power until 2036 and Putin was labelled an autocrat/dictator. These channels also criticized the fact that during the constitutional referendum the public had to evaluate many different issues with a single vote. For example, the inclusion of the phrase "belief in God" in the constitution and the addition of an article banning same-sex marriage. Another issue raised by the organizations is the lack of transparency in the voting process, which could lead to fraud. If one examines the articles and reports published by the Human Rights Foundation, the Atlantic Council, the Wilson Center, the Heritage Foundation, Freedom House and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, one finds that they share a common view that both the 2020 constitutional amendments in Russia and Russia's increasing authoritarianism under the leadership of President Putin are dragging the country towards totalitarianism, and thus have an attitude that overlaps with the way the US media perceives and analyses Russia.

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