

Introduction

Among competing concepts of democracy and authoritarianism, Russia's regime change between 1990 and 2020 can be assessed and ascertained through applying data from the Varieties of Democracy Dataset to Robert Dahl's 1998 theoretical framework for determining regime type. Through this methodology, there is strong evidence that Russia saw a transition from inclusive hegemony to an autocracy. This finding is significant because it reconciles different understandings of democratic and authoritarian indicators and provides an empirical basis for defining Russian regime transformations.

Theory

Examining the regime transition in Russia between 1990 and 2020 is a process informed by the essentially contested nature of democracy, and the blurred line between democracy and authoritarianism. There is no universally agreed upon definition of what democracy constitutes or how it should ultimately be practiced. Additionally, indicators for democracy and authoritarianism are rarely absolute; repressive factors associated with authoritarianism (i.e. restricted political participation and media censorship) are often present in popularly accepted democracies, and factors associated with democracy (i.e. elections) may be symbolically practiced by authoritarian regimes.

Due to this ambiguity, it is necessary to examine regime changes in Russia through a theoretical structure that balances indicators of democracy and authoritarianism and offers nuanced, "hybrid" regimes. Robert Dahl, in his 1998 book "On Democracy," proposes a two-dimensional framework for understanding national regime types based on concepts of "inclusion" and "competition." According to Dahl, inclusion refers to the degree to which

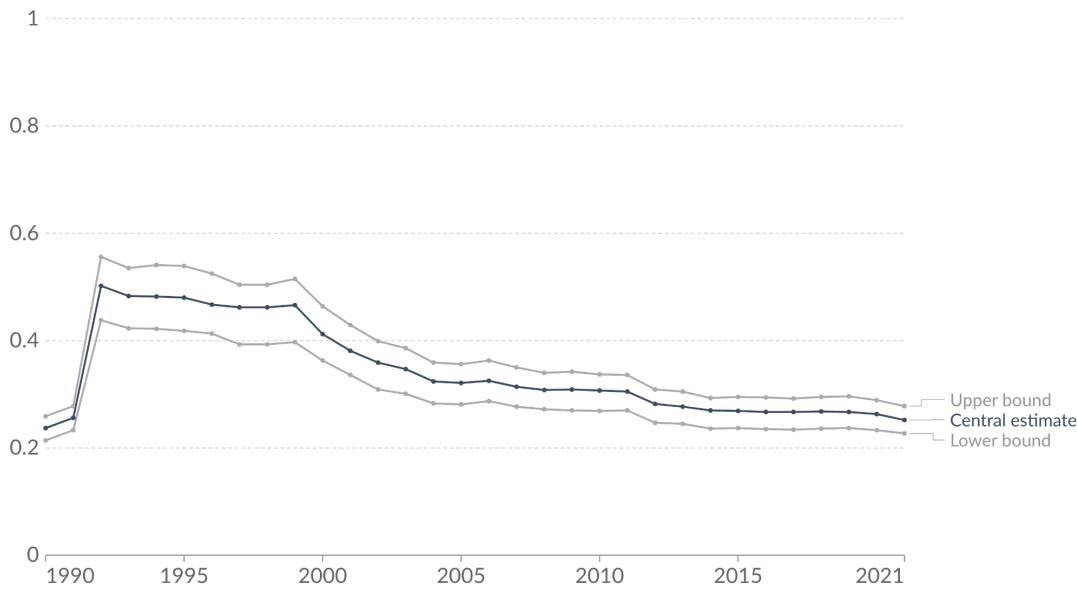
individuals are enabled to participate in the political process. Competition refers to the extent to which different interest groups have equal opportunity to contest for political power. Through assessing levels and characteristics of inclusion and competition, four regime types emerge: competitive oligarchy, polarchy, autocracy, and inclusive hegemony (Dahl 2000). Dahl's framework is a useful reconciliation of competing concepts of democracy and authoritarianism. Rather than relying on a single indicator or characteristic, such as the presence or absence of free and fair elections or civil liberties, Dahl's consideration of inclusion and competition allows for a more holistic and multi-faceted determination of regime type. This approach allows for greater nuance and flexibility in analyzing Russia's changing political system, and provides a more accurate understanding of its variant democratic and authoritarian qualities.

To examine the levels of inclusion and competition in Russia between 1990 and 2020, and apply these findings to Dahl's framework, I assess specific variables from The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. The V-Dem dataset is a comprehensive collection of political data worldwide, compiled by Swedish political scientists and researchers from the University of Gothenburg. The V-Dem dataset scales and combines abstract variables, such as the strength of a nation's civil society, from 0 to 1. *0* represents the minimum possible value for a variable (ie. no civil society) and *1* denotes the maximum possible value for a variable (ie. a robust and flourishing civil society). Using V-Dem data on nearly five hundred indicators, Global Change Data Lab, a nonprofit political research engine, offers a synthesized, empirical analysis of the level of democracy for over 202 nations throughout the world (Global Change Data Lab 2022). Illustrated below (Figure 1) is V-Dem's findings for electoral democracy in Russia between 1990 and 2021.

Electoral democracy, Russia, 1990 to 2021

Our World
in Data

Based on the expert assessments and index by V-Dem. It captures to which extent political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic).



Source: OWID based on V-Dem (v13)

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Figure 1: Global Data Lab's Quantitative Assessment of Democracy in Russia, 1990-2020

Although Global Data Lab quantifies the level of democracy across nations using V-Dem data, it does not denote a particular "type of regime" – nations are reported as experiencing a range from low democracy and high democracy. To determine exact regime types in line with Dahl's theoretical framework, I created variables for "inclusion" and "competition" using Russian V-Dem indicator data using R Studio (code in Appendix). The indicators selected for "inclusion" are freedom of association and freedom of speech. The indicators chosen for "competition" are the presence of free and fair (clean) elections and the election of officials into diverse positions that "check and balance." This structure allows for a specific determination of regime type in line with Dahl's framework, while maintaining empirical approaches and avoiding value judgements in evaluating regime types. These variables and indicators I formed, as well as their V-Dem indicators, are denoted in Figure 2. To contextualize Russian findings, I

created identical variables and indicators for the United States (a quintessential polarchy) and North Korea (a quintessential autocracy) for comparison purposes.



Figure 2: Creating indicators for variables of “inclusion” and “competition” based on V-Dem data.

Analysis

Measuring Inclusion: Freedom of Expression and Association

1) Freedom of Expression:

In analyzing the freedom of expression in Russia between 1990 and 2020, one can note a drastic decrease in the level of free expression permitted. In 1992, there was a relatively high level of freedom of expression in Russia at 0.8, likely due to the political upheaval that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Benn 1996). However, freedom of expression in 2020 is less than half of what it was in the early 1990s. A score of 0.3 in 2020 indicates that there are significant restrictions on the ability of individuals to express themselves freely. The current administration of Russia has been criticized for restricting freedom of expression in various ways, such as government control of mainstream media outlets, internet censorship laws, and harassment and jailing of activists and opposition figures (Human Rights Watch 2020).

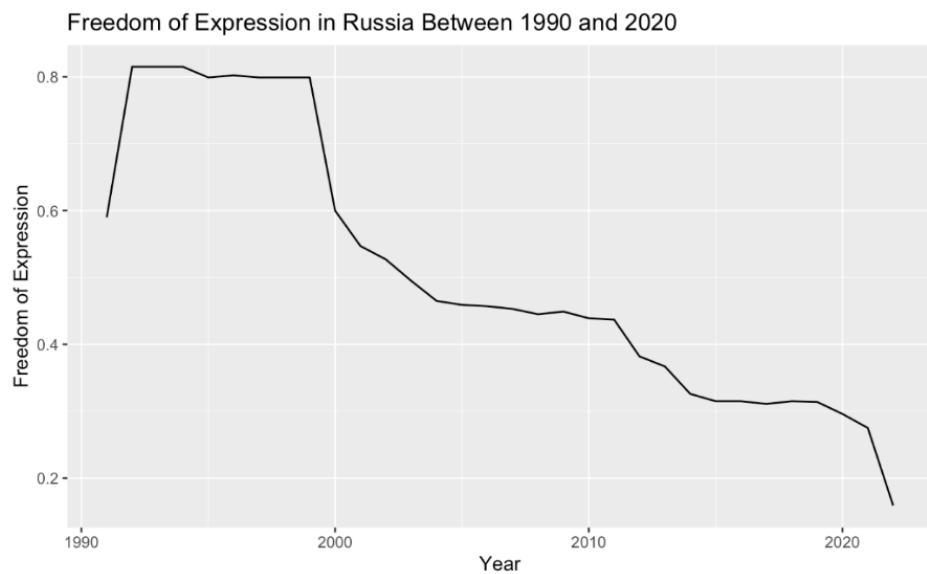


Figure 3: Freedom of Expression in Russia between 1990 and 2020

One can additionally note the extreme decrease in free expression in Russia between 1990 and 2020 through comparing these findings to the US and North Korea. In the early 1990s,

free expression in Russia reached levels not far distant from the United States, a nation widely recognized for its protection and celebration of free speech – supporting that there was a high freedom of expression during this time in Russia. However, in 2020, the levels of free speech in Russia dip to a low – far closer to levels seen in North Korea rather than the United States. North Korea is oppositely known for its strict censorship and control of information, from print media to education (Human Rights Watch 2020).

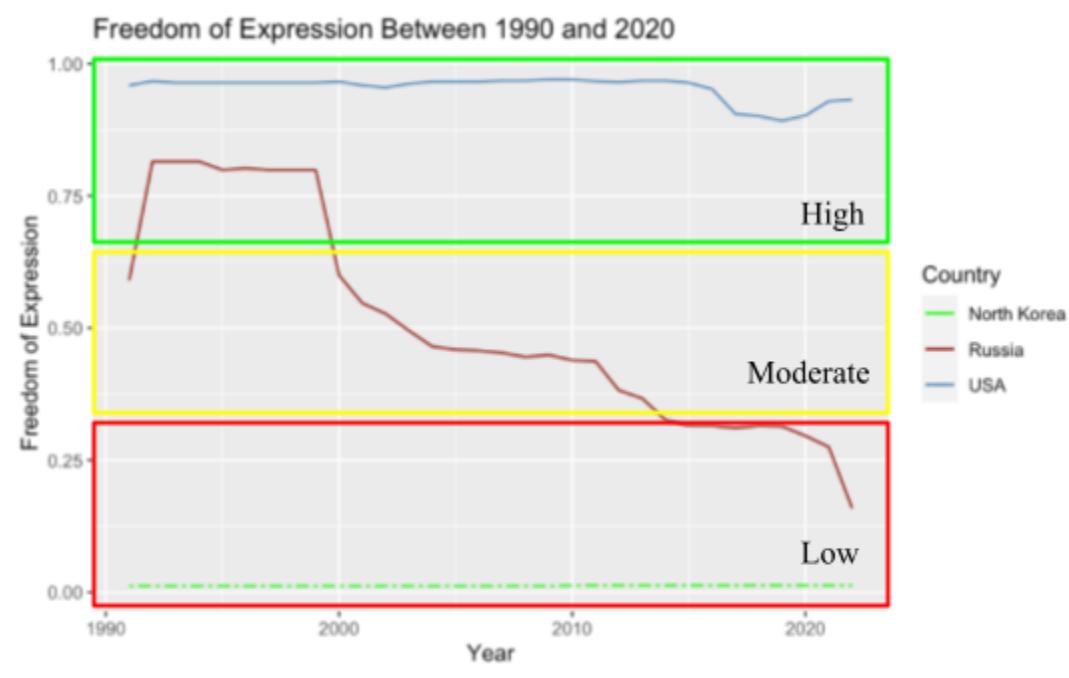


Figure 4: Comparative Perspective of Freedom of Expression in Russia between 1990 and 2020

Applying these findings to Dahl's framework, one can note the high levels of free expression in Russia during the 1990s support *high inclusion* and a regime type of inclusive hegemony (Figure 5), and the low levels in 2020 support *low inclusion* and a regime type of autocracy (Figure 6).

Competitive oligarchy	Polarity
<i>High competition</i>	<i>High competition</i>
- Presence of cronyism	- Free and fair elections
- Small group holds majority of power	- Checks & balances
<i>Low inclusion</i>	<i>High inclusion</i>
- Limited assembly	- Freedom of assembly
- Limited expression	- Freedom of expression
Autocracy:	Inclusive Hegemony
<i>Low competition</i>	<i>Low competition</i>
- No free or fair elections	- Collaboration-oriented
- Single individual/group has absolute power	- Dominant group willing to negotiate with other groups
<i>Low inclusion</i>	<i>High inclusion</i>
- No opposition allowed	- Relatively open political system
- Strict control of the media	- Allows for some degree of opposition and dissent

↑ Competition

Inclusion →

Figure 5: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Freedom of Expression in Russia (1990)

Competitive oligarchy	Polarity
<i>High competition</i>	<i>High competition</i>
- Presence of cronyism	- Free and fair elections
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↑ Competition

Inclusion →

Figure 6: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Freedom of Expression in Russia (2020)

2) Freedom of Association:

The findings for the "freedom of association" variable for Russia, which saw peaks during the 1990s and diminished greatly by 2020, demonstrates a significant decline in the ability of individuals and groups to form and join associations freely. A score of 0.6 in 1999 suggests that at that time, there was a moderate level of freedom of association in Russia, allowing individuals and groups some ability to come together and organize around shared interests and goals. However, since then, the level of freedom of association has decreased significantly to a score of 0.35 in 2020. This indicates that the ability of individuals and groups to form associations, although never great, continues to be increasingly restricted in Russia. This decline is a harbinger for an undermined civil society and democratic processes; restrictions on freedom of association limit the ability of individuals to participate in political processes and to hold those in power accountable.

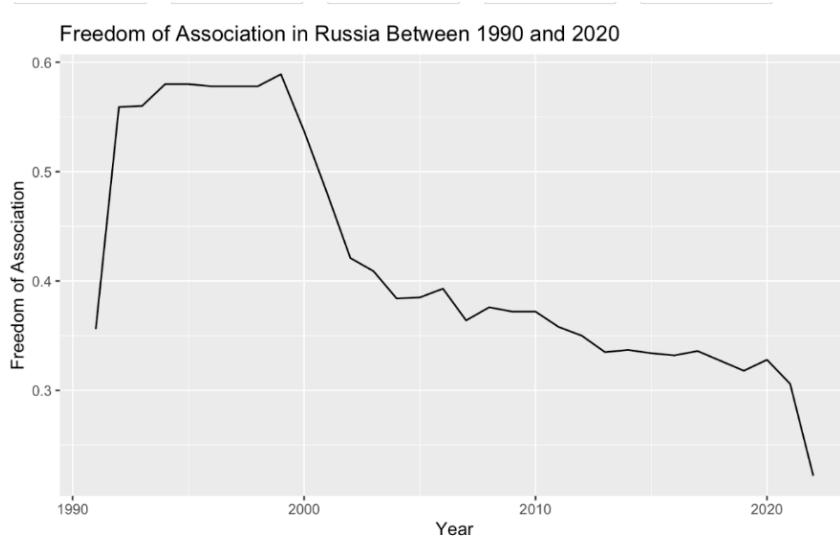


Figure 7: Freedom of Association in Russia between 1990 and 2020

Comparing the findings for freedom of association in Russia to that of the U.S. and North Korea, it is evident that free association has not been readily promoted in Russia. Russia's peak levels of freedom of association are still only about half of that of the United States. Again, Russia's levels of free association approach that of North Korea, which requires all organizations to be approved by the state and prohibits any group that is deemed to be a threat to the regime (Human Rights Watch 2018).

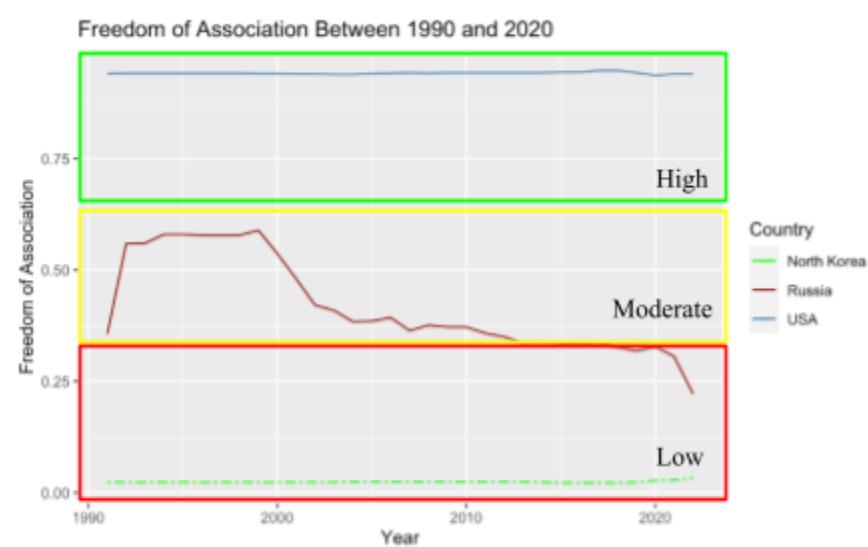


Figure 8: Comparative Perspective of Freedom of Association in Russia between 1990 and 2020

Applying these findings to Dahl's framework, one can note the moderate levels of free association in Russia during the 1990s support *high inclusion* and a regime type of inclusive hegemony (Figure 9), and the low levels in 2020 support *low inclusion* and a regime type of autocracy (Figure 10).

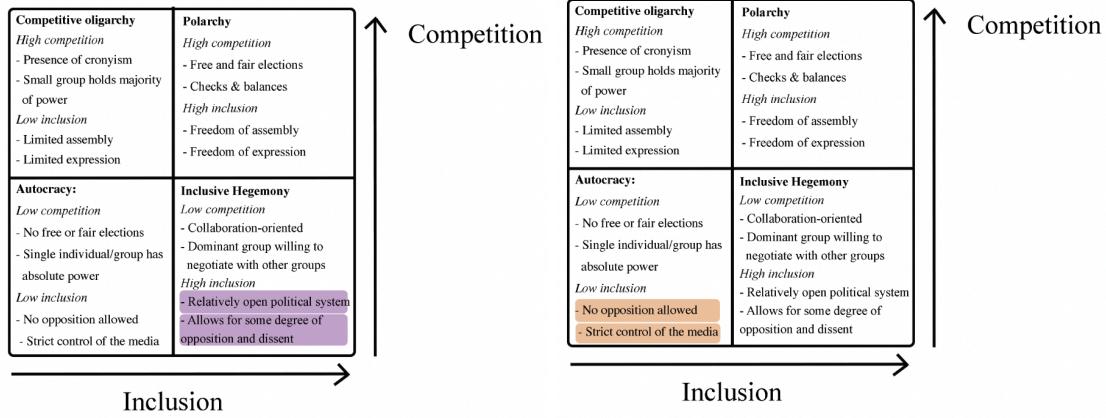


Figure 9: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Freedom of Association in Russia (1990)

Figure 10: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Freedom of Association in Russia (2020)

Measuring Competition: Clean Elections and Nature of Elected Officials

1) “Cleanliness” of Elections

Findings for clean elections in Russia reflect a decline in the fairness and transparency of electoral processes in the country between 1990 and 2020. The peak value of 0.6 in 1992 decreased to 0.35 by 2020. A score of 0.6 suggests relatively fair and transparent elections in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, since then, the score has steadily decreased, indicating that electoral processes have become less legitimate over time.

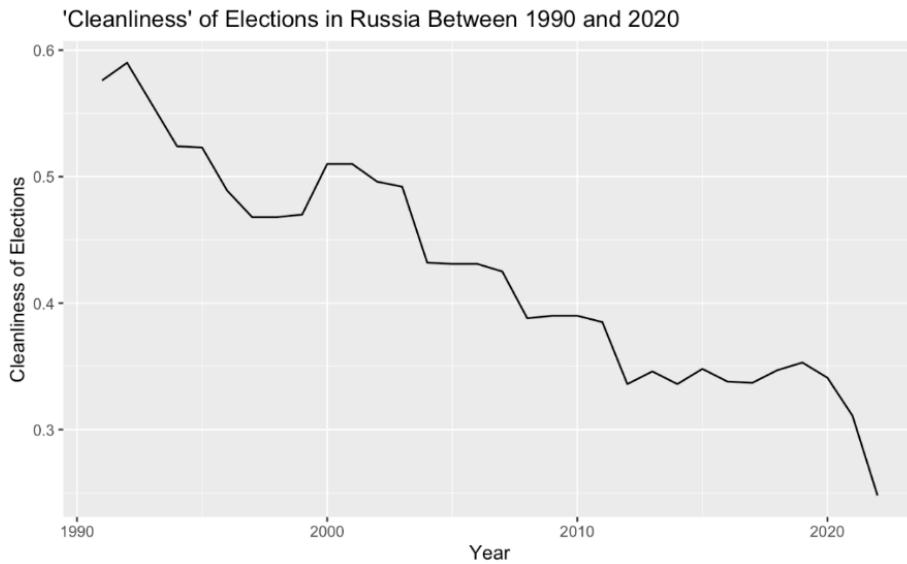


Figure 11: Cleanliness of Elections in Russia between 1990 and 2020

When comparing these findings to the U.S. and North Korea, issues in Russia's electoral process become more evident. The U.S. electoral process, structured by strict regulations and guidelines to ensure every eligible citizen has the opportunity to vote and that their votes are counted accurately, is competitive and open to public scrutiny (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Protection Agency). The cleanliness of elections in Russia has been approaching the low levels seen in North Korea, in which the electoral process is shrouded in secrecy with only one legitimate political party whom all candidates must be approved by before running for office (Human Rights Watch 2018).

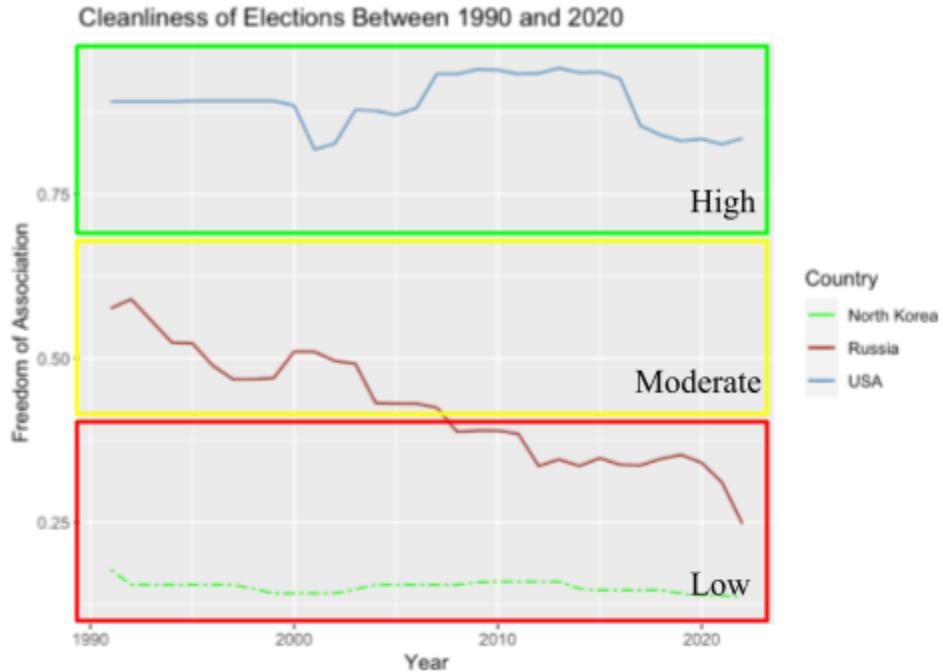


Figure 12: Comparative Perspective of Cleanliness of Elections in Russia between 1990 and 2020

Applying these findings to Dahl's framework, one can note the moderate cleanliness of elections in Russia during the 1990s support *high competition* and a regime type of inclusive hegemony (Figure 13), and the low levels in 2020 support *low competition* and a regime type of autocracy (Figure 14).

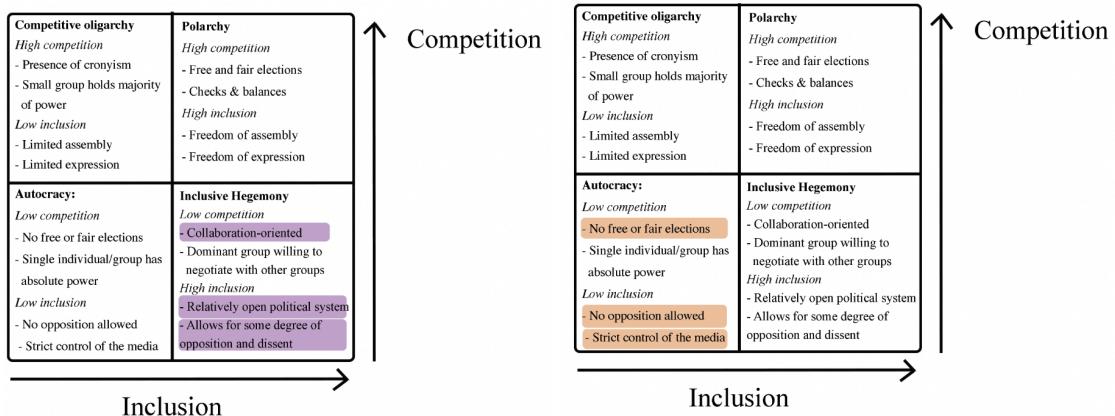


Figure 13: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Cleanliness of Elections in Russia (1990)

Figure 14: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Cleanliness of Elections in Russia (2020)

2) Nature of Officials

The "elected officials" variable value in the V-Dem dataset is based on expert assessments of the extent to which officials are able to operate independently from other actors and the degree to which they are elected popularly (rather than appointed). Unlike previously mentioned variables, the "elected officials" variable value of 1 does not imply that Russia has perfectly elected officials, as the variable ranges from -3 (significant constraints for government officials' functional independence) to 3 (few constraints for government officials' functional independence). A drastic dip can be noted in 1993; this decrease in the perceived independence and autonomy of elected officials can be explained by a constitutional crisis occurring in Russia during this time. A conflict between the Parliament and President over drafting a new constitution resulted in a military attack on the Parliament building, which caused the deaths of over 150 people and a consolidation of power by the President (Sokolov & Kirilenko 2013).

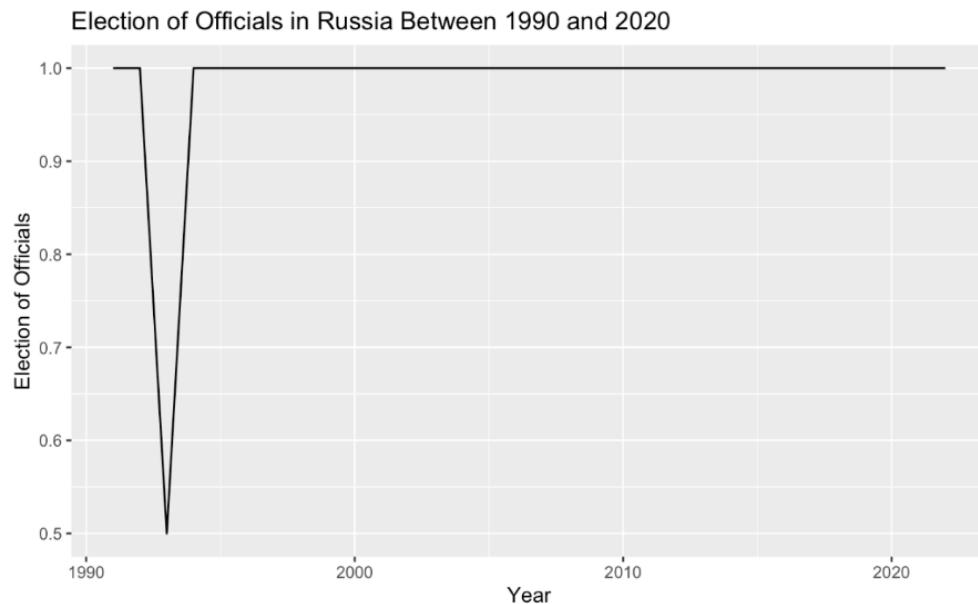


Figure 15: Election of Officials in Russia between 1990 and 2020

Perhaps surprisingly, this variable value of 1 is comparable with that of the United States, as a variety of official positions in Russia are popularly elected and barred from influence by external actors and institutions on paper. Like the United States, Russian officials function in executive, legislative, and judicial structures that formally “check and balance” one another.

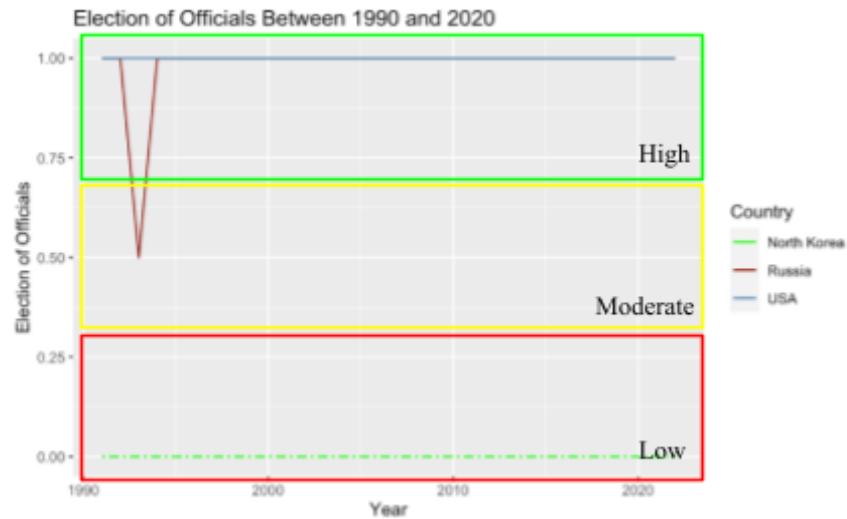


Figure 16: Comparative Perspective of Election of Officials in Russia between 1990 and 2020

The application of these findings to Dahl's framework result in an outlier conclusion. The independence, popular election, and separation of power of Russian officials in both the 1990s and 2020 support *high competition* and a regime type of polyarchy (Figure 17 and 18).

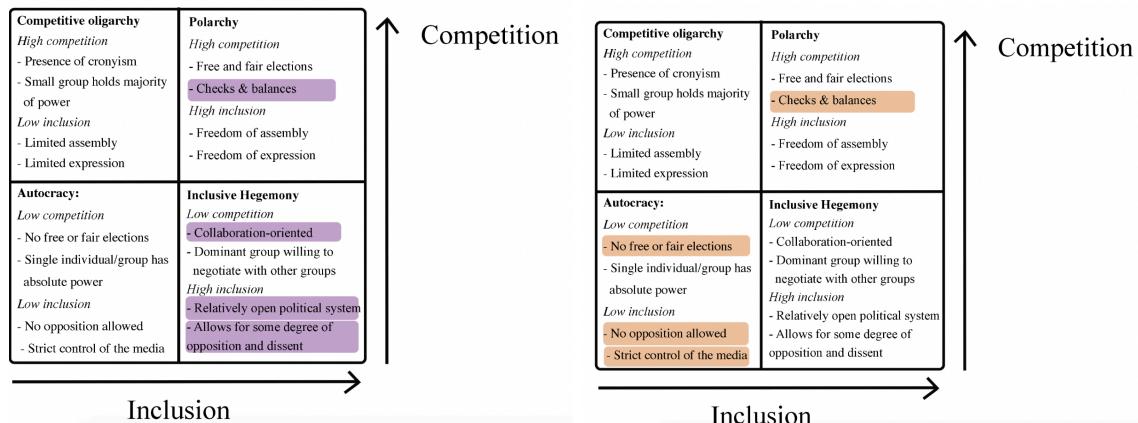


Figure 17: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Elected Officials in Russia (1990)

Figure 18: Application of Findings to Dahl's Framework - Elected Officials in Russia (2020)

However, Dahl offers a way to reconcile this inconsistency. The mere existence of popularly elected, autonomous officials, and systems of checks and balances on paper is not sufficient for polyarchy. A regime must legitimately institutionalize these elements and provide an accountable government. According to Dahl, the necessary elements to do so include free and fair elections, the protection of free speech, and the right to form autonomous organizations (Dahl 2000). As previous findings indicate that these three requirements were not wholly satisfied in Russia in 1990 (due to low competitive elements), and not at all satisfied in Russia's restrictive 2020 regime (due to low inclusion and competitive elements), these outlier conclusions can be rejected. Relevant findings continue to support that Russia's regime in 1990 was an inclusive hegemony (Figure 19), while Russia's regime in 2020 was an autocracy (Figure 20).

Competitive oligarchy <i>High competition</i> - Presence of cronyism - Small group holds majority of power <i>Low inclusion</i> - Limited assembly - Limited expression	Polarity <i>High competition</i> - Free and fair elections - Checks & balances <i>High inclusion</i> - Freedom of assembly - Freedom of expression
Autocracy: <i>Low competition</i> - No free or fair elections - Single individual/group has absolute power <i>Low inclusion</i> - No opposition allowed - Strict control of the media	Inclusive Hegemony <i>Low competition</i> - Collaboration-oriented - Dominant group willing to negotiate with other groups <i>High inclusion</i> - Relatively open political system - Allows for some degree of opposition and dissent

Figure 19: Finding - Regime Type in Russia (1990)

Competitive oligarchy <i>High competition</i> - Presence of cronyism - Small group holds majority of power <i>Low inclusion</i> - Limited assembly - Limited expression	Polarity <i>High competition</i> - Free and fair elections - Checks & balances <i>High inclusion</i> - Freedom of assembly - Freedom of expression
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Figure 20: Finding - Regime Type in Russia (2020)

Conclusion

Using data from Varieties of Democracy Dataset to measure variables of “competition” and “inclusion” in line with Robert Dahl’s framework for determining regime type, empirical evidence supports that Russia saw regime transition from an inclusive hegemony to autocracy

between 1990 and 2020. An analysis of V-Dem data on Russian freedom of speech, freedom of association, cleanliness of elections, and nature of officials indicates that Russia's regime has become less inclusive and competitive, indicating Russia's transition towards autocracy.

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