

## NEW MODELS OF POWER CONCENTRATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines new models of political power concentration in the 21st century through a comparative analysis of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Using a structured, focused comparison and qualitative process tracing, the study analyses how formally democratic institutions are gradually transformed into instruments of executive dominance. The findings demonstrate that both regimes represent deliberately constructed forms of electoral and presidential autocracy rather than merely “imperfect democracies” or cases of democratic backsliding. In both cases, the erosion of political pluralism, judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society occurs through incremental and legally codified mechanisms. At the same time, the article identifies important differences in regime logic: while the Russian model is based on centralized control and depoliticization, the Turkish model relies more heavily on electoral mobilization and plebiscitary legitimacy.*

**Keywords:** political power concentration, electoral autocracy, hybrid regimes, Russia, Turkey

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### INTRODUCTION

The article builds on the literature on hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism, particularly the framework developed by Levitsky and Way, which conceptualizes regimes that formally maintain democratic institutions while systematically undermining their substantive functioning. In addition, the concept of “autocratic legalism” (Scheppele) provides an important analytical lens, highlighting how legal and constitutional instruments are used to consolidate executive power from within the system.

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Conceptually, the article distinguishes between several overlapping but analytically different regime types. Diamond's notion of pseudo-democracy is useful for capturing regimes in which elections exist but do not produce genuine democratic accountability. Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism highlights the persistence of formal democratic institutions under conditions of systematic incumbent abuse. Schedler's concept of electoral authoritarianism shifts attention to the manipulation of the electoral arena itself, while Merkel's defective democracy identifies cases in which individual democratic partial regimes—such as civil rights, horizontal accountability, or effective power to govern—are impaired. Sartori's category of a hegemonic-party system is particularly relevant for analysing ruling parties that organize participation and loyalty while preventing meaningful alternation in power.

On this basis, the article does not treat Russia and Turkey simply as flawed democracies. Instead, it examines them as regimes in which elections, courts, parliaments, parties, and constitutional rules are retained but refunctionalized: their role is no longer primarily to limit executive power, but to stabilize and reproduce it. This conceptual choice also avoids reducing regime change to the electoral dimension alone, since the analysis includes party-system engineering, control of the judiciary, media ownership and regulation, civil society restrictions, and informal power networks.

The central aim of this study is to conceptualize new models of political power concentration in the 21st century using the examples of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey during the period of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. The point of departure is the assumption that both regimes can no longer be adequately understood within the dichotomy of "democracy versus dictatorship" and that the more appropriate lens is that of hybrid or electoral-authoritarian regimes, in which formally preserved electoral procedures and institutions of representative democracy coexist with the systematic erosion of political pluralism, level playing field, and separation of powers.

In the case of Russia, the consolidation of an electoral autocracy followed Vladimir Putin's rise to power, characterised by the centralisation of

executive authority, the restructuring of federal relations and the subordination of regional self-government, as well as the gradual dismantling of independent oversight institutions, including parliament, the judiciary, and the media. The key instruments of this transformation have included extra-constitutional power centres (security services, oligarchic networks, *siloviki*), legislative engineering at both federal and regional levels, the use of “technical parties”, and tightly controlled electoral infrastructure, which together have produced a highly centralised system of presidential dominance.

Turkey’s post-millennial trajectory represents a different yet functionally related path: an initially reformist, pro-European and post-Islamist agenda of the AKP gradually evolved into a project of presidential autocracy in which regime legitimacy rests on a combination of electoral victories, clientelist networks, and permanent mobilisation against internal and external enemies (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2016). The progressive “emptying out” of democratic institutions manifested itself above all in the politicisation of the judiciary, interventions against the media and civil society, and a series of constitutional reforms (2010, 2017) that strengthened the executive at the expense of parliament and independent checks and balances.

A view on Russia and Turkey thus makes it possible to capture two distinct yet convergent models of power concentration: the Russian model, grounded in the fusion of the state, the security apparatus, and economic elites, and the Turkish model, which combines a majoritarian understanding of democracy with a personalised presidential system and intense party control over public institutions (Hale, 2015).

The ambition of the article is to contribute to current debates on hybrid regimes and new forms of autocratic modernisation by showing, on the basis of an analysis of institutional reforms, legislative changes and power practices in Russia and Turkey, how a liberal-democratic framework can be dismantled through incremental, often legally codified steps without openly abolishing elections or the constitution. At the same time, the text argues that, in the cases under study, we are no longer dealing merely with the degeneration of formerly democratic regimes, (Bermeo, 2016) but with

deliberately constructed alternative models of rule that deploy the tools of the 21st century (Scheppelle, 2018).

This study employs a structured, focused comparative approach to examine the transformation of political systems in Russia and Turkey in the 21st century. The selection of cases follows a “most-different systems design”: despite distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical trajectories, both countries exhibit convergent outcomes in terms of power concentration and institutional transformation.

The analysis is based on qualitative process tracing of institutional, legal, and political developments, with particular attention to constitutional amendments, legislative reforms, and executive practices. The empirical material draws on secondary academic literature, policy reports, and publicly available legal and political documents.

The comparison is therefore structured around six dimensions: executive centralization, party-system control, judicial subordination, media control, constraints on civil society, and mechanisms of legitimation. These dimensions make it possible to compare different historical trajectories without assuming that Russia and Turkey follow the same sequence of authoritarian consolidation.

The article’s main methodological limitation is that it relies on qualitative, interpretive comparison rather than quantitative measurement. Its purpose is not to rank the two regimes on a democracy index, but to reconstruct the institutional mechanisms through which power concentration becomes durable. This also explains the focus on decisive constitutional and political turning points rather than on a comprehensive chronology of all events.

## **1 RUSSIA AFTER 2000: THE CONSOLIDATION OF ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation formally committed itself to democratic transition and market reforms. In practice, however, what emerged was an unstable, decentralized, and ungovernable political system. The Yeltsin era (1991–1999) was characterized by weak state capacity; the central government

was unable to assert its authority over peripheral regions (e.g., Chechnya, the Far East), and both the administration and legislative branches were highly fragmented. Although the constitutional framework functioned formally, real power was exercised by the executive apparatus and „grey zones”—the Federal Security Service (FSB), oligarchs, and the military elite—which structurally obstructed democratic consolidation.

The constitutional settlement that followed the domestic political crisis of autumn 1993 is crucial for understanding this trajectory. The 1993 Constitution created a strongly presidential system in which the president could govern through decrees with the force of law and exercise substantial influence over the government, regional elites, and the legislative agenda. This institutional design weakened the development of autonomous political parties and made the party spectrum dependent on the executive centre rather than on programmatic social cleavages.

During the Yeltsin presidency, the State Duma was often ideologically polarized between the Communist left and the ultranationalist LDPR, while pro-presidential projects such as Our Home—Russia remained too weak to discipline parliament. At the same time, an informal centre of power emerged around the presidential administration. In the late Yeltsin period, this administration was associated with the so-called “family” and figures such as Boris Berezovsky, demonstrating that the formal constitutional architecture was already accompanied by informal networks of influence.

In May 2000, following his inauguration as president, Vladimir Putin established seven federal districts, each overseen by a presidential envoy. These districts lacked constitutional status and were designed to reinforce the central government's control over the regions. The tasks of the presidential envoys included overseeing the implementation of federal laws, monitoring the activities of regional governors, and enforcing central government policies at local levels.

During the early 2000s, the gradual elimination and reintegration of autonomous districts into their corresponding regions or territories began—a process legitimized through referenda. This development was driven primarily by two factors: most autonomous districts lacked the institutional capacity to sustain themselves independently.

Constitutionally, it was problematic that some federal subjects operated embedded within the territory of another.

As a result, a significant portion of regional autonomies was dissolved, and the central government's influence over peripheral areas was further strengthened.

The Federation Council—the upper chamber of the Russian parliament—originally comprised regional governors and legislators. After 2000, significant reforms were introduced: governors lost their automatic membership, and were replaced by appointed representatives, who were typically loyal to the central government (Koehn, 2011). In the wake of the 2004 Beslan hostage crisis, President Putin initiated the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections. Instead, governors were to be nominated by the president and approved by the regional legislatures. (This system of presidential nomination remained in effect until 2012, when direct elections were reinstated.)

Putin dismantled regional autonomy through several legal and institutional measures: he ordered a comprehensive review of regional laws and constitutions. Ensured that the Russian legal system and Constitution would take precedence in all regions. Removed ethnically-based treaties from political practice (e.g., the power-sharing agreement with Tatarstan after 2002). Forced legal harmonization among the federation's constituent entities by eliminating asymmetrical arrangements.

In sum, Putin restructured both the Federation Council and the governorships to ensure the full subordination of regional governance to the central executive authority.

This process is commonly described as the construction of a “vertical of power”: a hierarchical chain of command linking the presidency, federal districts, governors, regional administrations, security structures, and economic actors. The concept captures not only administrative centralization but also the political logic of loyalty, in which access to resources and institutional survival depend on subordination to the Kremlin.

Following Putin's assumption of office, the de facto and de jure expansion of executive powers commenced. Although the appointment of the

government and ministers formally requires the approval of the State Duma, in practice, this process constitutes a presidential prerogative. National security, foreign policy, and legislative priorities are defined by the presidential administration.

The president may govern by decree (*ukaz*), which often carries quasi-legislative force and does not require parliamentary approval. The 2020 constitutional amendments deepened this trend: the president was granted the authority to propose the dismissal of judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts and initiate appointments of the Prosecutor General and regional prosecutors in the Federation Council, thereby acquiring near-total control over institutional checks and balances.

In 2008, due to constitutional term limits, Putin formally stepped down and Dmitry Medvedev assumed the presidency, while Putin himself became Prime Minister. This maneuver is commonly referred to in political science as “tandemism” or “delegated governance”.

Although Medvedev formally held the presidential office, the actual decision-making center of the regime remained the executive apparatus led by Putin. The Kremlin’s decision-making structures continued to operate under Putin’s direction. The security elite (*siloviki*) and strategic economic actors still regarded Putin as the true leader. Strategic legislation (e.g., in law enforcement reforms) and foreign policy decisions remained under his purview.

In 2012, Putin returned to the presidency, now with a six-year term—made possible by the 2008 constitutional amendment. This marked a clear indication that constitutional structures had become subordinate to the logic of political survival.

After the 2003 parliamentary elections, United Russia—Putin’s direct political power base—gained an absolute majority in the Duma. Since then, the party has institutionalized its parliamentary dominance in every electoral cycle (2007, 2011, 2016, 2021), coordinating legislative votes along lines of loyalty and typically following presidential decrees and government initiatives. Parliamentary actors are not structured around political pluralism but rather around loyalty and centralized legitimacy.

United Russia thus became a classic pro-presidential “party of power”. Its function has not been to articulate an autonomous ideology, but to organize parliamentary discipline, distribute patronage, and translate presidential preferences into legislation. From a Sartorian perspective, this development resembles a hegemonic-party arrangement: opposition parties may exist, but the mechanics of competition are structured in such a way that the ruling party’s dominance is not genuinely contestable.

The nature of legislative practice has shifted significantly over the past decade. The State Duma no longer functions as a forum for debate, but rather as an executive-like body that automatically approves presidential or governmental proposals. Legislative turnaround times have been drastically reduced, and the number of debates has sharply declined—some bills are passed within hours.

A large proportion of legislative initiatives originate from the presidential administration or the government. Despite the appearance of political pluralism, the Russian party system has effectively transformed into a one-party dominant regime, utilizing the following mechanisms: the creation of “technical parties” (to be discussed in a later subsection). Registration barriers, such as signature quotas and administrative hurdles to prevent opposition parties from running. Political disqualifications, as the Central Election Commission frequently refuses to register opposition candidates—most notably Alexei Navalny and his associates. Political trials and exile, including the imprisonment of opposition leaders, labeling them as “foreign agents,” and forcing them into exile.

The opposition present in parliament (e.g., the Communist Party, LDPR) functions as satellite actors, without offering meaningful legislative resistance. This is commonly referred to in the literature as selective pluralism.

Even in the early 2000s, the judicial corps began to be gradually subordinated to presidential oversight in matters of discipline and appointment. The 2020 constitutional amendments marked a turning point, (Russell, 2020) allowing the president to propose the dismissal of judges from the Constitutional and Supreme Courts on the grounds of “unfitness”—a criterion that is not clearly defined. Moreover, on the recommendation of



the President of the Supreme Court, the president may now dismiss federal judges and participate in the appointment of prosecutors by submitting nominations to the Federation Council.

These reforms dismantled the institutional guarantees of judicial independence—particularly in politically sensitive or regime-critical cases. In the 1990s, the Constitutional Court had on several occasions acted as a check on abuse of power (e.g., during the Yeltsin-era parliamentary crisis), but under Putin, the Court evolved into a loyalty-based institution, no longer posing a real constraint on executive authority.

By the late 2000s, the Court had effectively legitimized all major legislative proposals, including the abolition of gubernatorial elections, laws targeting NGOs, and the implementation of the „foreign agent” label. Justices are selected and removed based on presidential nominations—a power further strengthened by the 2020 reforms.

The Constitutional Court no longer functions as an initiating or limiting institution but instead operates reactively and affirmatively.

## **2 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ELECTORAL COMPETITION**

Opposition candidates in Russia face extraordinary administrative and political hurdles when attempting to participate in elections. In the most recent case, Boris Nadezhdin was required to collect 100,000 valid signatures, of which 9,000 were invalidated. The most significant obstacles include:

- Signature quotas: In many elections, political parties and independent candidates must submit disproportionately high numbers of verified signatures, the assessment of which is often subjective and politically motivated.
- “Extremism” or “foreign agent” designation: Any organization or individual labeled in this manner can be automatically excluded from participation.
- Judicial disqualifications: Opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny have been barred from running due to politically motivated or fabricated criminal proceedings.

In addition, so-called technical parties—organizations that formally present themselves as part of the opposition but in fact receive covert support from the Kremlin—play a key role in fragmenting the vote, dividing the opposition, and simulating electoral pluralism. Notable examples include New People, Green Party, and Motherland.

The entire electoral infrastructure—including election commissions, media platforms, and public institutions—is kept under tight state control. During campaign periods, opposition candidates are routinely silenced or discredited, while the government's narrative is amplified. Efforts to suppress „smart voting” strategies—initiatives aimed at coordinated opposition voting—are part of this broader framework.

### **3 THE CENTRALIZATION OF THE MEDIA SPHERE**

From the early 2000s onward, a state-dominated media conglomerate system gradually emerged, controlling television, radio, and online news dissemination across Russia. Key actors include:

- VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company): The largest state-run media entity in Russia, overseeing channels such as Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, and numerous regional broadcasters. It operates entirely under state supervision.
- Gazprom-Media: While formally a private entity, it functions as a subsidiary of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. It owns NTV, previously Echo Moskvy, and NTV Plus.

Together, these two holdings dominate 80–90% of news and political content—particularly among rural audiences (Guriev, Treisman, 2022).

But how was the dismantling of independent media accomplished in practice?

At the upper levels, through strategic acquisitions—notably the 2001 takeover of NTV by Gazprom-Media and the replacement of the Lenta.ru editorial team in 2014. However, criminal pressure and legal repression were also employed, as seen in the restrictions placed on Meduza (2019), TV Rain (2021), and Novaya Gazeta (2022). The “foreign agent” label

became a key tool, severely limiting the financial viability of targeted media outlets by deterring advertisers and supporters.

Rather than overt censorship, the Russian state implemented a system of structural repression through regulatory mechanisms.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, media policy underwent a total transformation: disinformation and propaganda became official state doctrine, and the information space was treated as a battlefield governed by military logic. The term “special military operation” became mandatory; the use of “invasion” or “war” was criminalized.

In March 2022, the so-called “disinformation law” was passed, allowing prison sentences of up to 15 years for disseminating information that contradicts the official narrative. Over 300 media outlets had their licenses revoked or were blocked—including BBC Russian, Deutsche Welle, Current Time, and Radio Free Europe. The digital sphere was also restructured: Roskomnadzor, the federal telecommunications agency, began censoring social media, internet content, and even blocking VPN services. In deploying hybrid tools such as disinformation campaigns, Russia targets the inherent weaknesses of open and democratic systems, playing a zero-sum game – it does not strengthen by building its brand, it strengthens by weakening other actors (Dubóczy, Dvorský, 2025).

#### **4 CRACKDOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY**

The 2012 “foreign agent” law required all organizations that:

- accept foreign funding, and
- engage in “political activity” (a term left deliberately vague)

To register in the official foreign agents registry. This designation entails discrimination, social stigma, and legal sanctions. In 2020, the status was extended to individuals, and by 2022, to media organizations as well.

Entities labeled as foreign agents were: obligated to label all publications with a “foreign agent” warning; required to submit quarterly financial reports to authorities; subject to arbitrary suspension by the state.

In 2015, legislation came into effect enabling the state to declare any foreign or international organization “undesirable” if deemed a threat to

Russia's constitutional order, national defense, or security. This resulted in the complete prohibition of operations within Russia and potential criminal liability for domestic collaborators, including NGOs, media outlets, and individuals.

The policy explicitly targeted NGOs connected to the United States, the European Union, and international donors—such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundations.

Beyond legal measures, the state exerted administrative and financial pressure on the NGO sector. Tactics included: withdrawal of state subsidies; continuous tax inspections; freezing of bank accounts; imposing strict registration requirements.

The most severely affected were organizations involved in human rights, electoral reform, women's rights, and LGBTQ advocacy—notably Memorial, Agora, and Bellona.

At the same time, the Kremlin did not merely repress civil society; it also constructed a top-down substitute for it. The Civic Chamber, created in 2004, institutionalized a managed form of public consultation, while pro-regime youth projects such as Nashi mobilized loyalist activism and countered liberal or opposition movements in the streets and media sphere. The Russian Orthodox Church increasingly functioned as a symbolic and political ally of the Kremlin, providing a civilizational language of tradition, sovereignty, and national unity that complemented the regime's anti-liberal discourse.

## **5 THE FUSION OF THE ECONOMIC SPHERE AND THE STATE**

In 2000, President Vladimir Putin held a closed-door meeting with Russia's most influential oligarchs (including Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky). At this meeting, Putin made it clear that only those who refrained from interfering in politics would be allowed to retain their wealth. As a result, the business elite ceased to influence state decision-making through wealth; instead, it became a financier and servant of the regime (Laruelle, 2010).

The Yukos affair marked a turning point in Putin's economic policy. Yukos, one of Russia's largest oil companies, was owned by the MENATEP

group under Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The issue arose when Khodorkovsky openly supported opposition parties. In 2003, he was arrested, his assets were liquidated, and Yukos was ultimately absorbed by the state-owned Rosneft. In 2014, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague awarded \$50 billion in damages to the former shareholders, but Russia refused to comply. Subsequently, it amended its constitution to establish the primacy of Russian domestic law over international law, codifying its rejection of supranational legal rulings.

One of the earliest major constitutional changes occurred in 2008, when the presidential term was extended from four to six years. Although Dmitry Medvedev was formally president at the time, this amendment was widely understood as laying the groundwork for Putin's return to the presidency.

A more dramatic change came in 2020, when—upon the proposal of Valentina Tereshkova—the Russian parliament passed legislation in an expedited process to reset presidential term limits. This enabled Putin to remain in power until 2036, by which time he will be 84 years old.

The 2020 amendments also formally enshrined the supremacy of the Russian Constitution over international treaties and court decisions, reinforcing the principle that national law overrides any foreign legal obligations or rulings.

The same constitutional package also changed the composition and political role of the Federation Council. It introduced the category of senators of the Russian Federation appointed by the president, including the possibility of lifetime senators, and opened the way for former presidents to become senators for life. These changes strengthened the upper chamber's dependence on the presidential centre and further blurred the boundary between constitutional office and regime preservation.

Putin's system is not a "backsliding" democracy, but rather an authoritarian regime deliberately constructed as an alternative model of modernization. It fuses post-Soviet techniques of power consolidation with 21st-century tools of informational control. The long-term stability of this system does not rely on economic performance, but on institutionalized repression, structural apathy, and centralized resource distribution.

The ideological vocabulary of this system is captured by the notion of “sovereign democracy”, associated with Vladislav Surkov and often discussed alongside the concepts of “managed” or “controlled” democracy. Its core claim is that Russia constitutes a distinct civilizational space whose political order cannot be judged by Western liberal-democratic standards. The concept therefore legitimizes executive concentration by presenting pluralism, external criticism, and liberal constitutionalism as alien or hostile to the Russian world (Russkij mir).

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian case moved even further from the grey zone of hybridism toward open autocracy. The criminalization of the word “war”, the repression of non-conformist historical and cultural narratives, and the elimination or exile of major opposition voices indicate that electoral authoritarianism has become increasingly fused with militarized dictatorship. The murders or attempted murders of critics and opposition figures—such as Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Alexander Litvinenko, Sergei Skripal, Boris Nemtsov, and Alexei Navalny—also show that repression operates not only through law, but through violence and fear.

## **6 POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN TURKEY AFTER THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM – THE FIRST DECADE OF THE AKP**

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) was founded in August 2001 by political figures such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Bülent Arınç, who had previously been active in the Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party and the Virtue (Fazilet) Party. Following the banning of the Fazilet Party, this new generation of political leadership distanced itself from overt Islamism and adopted a post-Islamist, moderately conservative-democratic agenda. The AKP presented itself as a pro-European, reform-oriented party advocating “moderate Islamic democracy” and promising economic stability. Just one year after its establishment, the AKP secured victory in the 2002 general elections.

The backdrop to this success was a deep financial crisis in 2001, which caused runaway inflation and a dramatic rise in unemployment, leading to a widespread collapse of public confidence. The political elite—particularly

the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, DSP)—suffered a severe loss of legitimacy. At the time, the electoral threshold was 10%, meaning that only two parties gained seats in Parliament: the AKP and the Republican People's Party (CHP), despite other parties collectively receiving over 45% of the vote. As a result, the AKP achieved an absolute parliamentary majority with only 34% of the vote, granting it an unprecedented opportunity to govern unilaterally.

The first reform package was enacted in February 2002: the death penalty was abolished, except for crimes related to terrorism, and amendments to the Penal Code strengthened protections against torture. The second reform package, introduced in March 2002, relaxed restrictions on freedom of assembly—legalizing peaceful demonstrations—and expanded press freedoms, including the publication of Kurdish-language materials. The third reform package, introduced in August 2002, fully abolished the death penalty, including in cases of terrorism. Kurdish was permitted in both media and education, and Turkey ratified international human rights conventions, such as the UN Convention Against Torture.

In May 2004, constitutional amendments were initiated to bring the National Security Council (MGK) under civilian control, reducing the military's influence in politics. In July 2004, an additional reform package tightened sanctions against torture and inhuman treatment. These reforms were primarily aimed at facilitating Turkey's accession to the European Union. Although Turkey had been on the list of candidate countries since 1999, it has consistently fallen short of fully meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Accession negotiations officially began on October 3, 2005, during which Turkey pledged to continue reforms in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democracy.

As previously mentioned, the transformation of the MGK into a civilian body marked the first step in reducing the military's political role. This process continued in 2007 with the forced retirement—and in some cases coercion—of high-ranking military officers suspected of plotting a coup. In 2009, the Ergenekon trials were launched, during which hundreds of soldiers, journalists, and academics were accused of planning a coup. These trials amounted to one of the largest purges in modern Turkish history.

After 2007, during its second term, the AKP initiated institutional and legislative restructuring of the judiciary, particularly by altering the composition of judicial and prosecutorial councils. Here, the party encountered resistance from the secular state apparatus, especially the military and judiciary. The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) and the Constitutional Court frequently blocked AKP-led reform efforts, particularly in areas related to religion, education, and public service dress codes. The judiciary was openly critical of the ruling party, and in 2008 the Chief Public Prosecutor even launched dissolution proceedings against the AKP on grounds of violating secularism.

These events culminated in the 2010 constitutional referendum, which had been preceded by a three-year communication campaign. The referendum marked a turning point in Turkey's political and legal system. One of its central elements was the restructuring of the HSYK, increasing the number of full members from 7 to 22, along with 12 alternate members. The executive branch gained greater influence over judicial appointments, enabling the AKP to change the composition of the judiciary. New powers were also granted to the HSYK, including authority over judicial appointments, promotions, and disciplinary actions. The number of Constitutional Court members was raised from 11 to 17, and for the first time individual complaints were allowed if fundamental rights were violated. Military personnel also became subject to civilian courts in certain criminal cases (Bâli, 2010).

In its early years, the AKP formed a strategic alliance with the Hizmet movement, a modernist-Islamist network led by Fethullah Gülen. Members or sympathizers of the movement gained positions within the police, judiciary, and prosecution services after 2007. They played a key role in weakening the military elite through the Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) trials, as well as other alleged coup plots—some of which were based on dubious or fabricated evidence. According to economist Dani Rodrik, Gülenists orchestrated many of these events, facilitating the rise of sympathizers to high-ranking positions. By the end of 2013, however, the alliance collapsed, turning into a full-scale conflict. Erdoğan began closing



Gülen-affiliated schools and businesses and initiated their removal from state institutions.

Turkey has a long history of coup attempts in the 20th century, and Erdoğan—perhaps not without reason—became increasingly obsessed with the possibility of being overthrown. This fear materialized on July 15, 2016, when factions within the military—allegedly aligned with the Gülen movement—attempted a coup. The chronology of the failed coup is as follows:

- July 15, 2016, 10:00 PM: Military units block the Bosphorus bridges; helicopters and fighter jets fly low over Ankara and Istanbul.
- 11:00 PM: The coup plotters announce they have seized control and impose a curfew.
- 1:30 AM (July 16): Erdoğan calls on citizens to take to the streets.
- Early morning: Parliament is bombed; civilians and police clash with coup forces.
- Morning: The government announces the coup has been successfully suppressed, leaving hundreds dead and thousands injured.

Fethullah Gülen denied any involvement of his network in the 2016 coup attempt. Nonetheless, by the morning following the attack, more than 2,800 military personnel, including generals, were detained, and 2,745 judges were dismissed. The failed coup provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to declare a state of emergency, initially set for three months but repeatedly extended. This legal framework enabled the government to rule by decree and curtail fundamental rights.

A sweeping purge soon began, not only through arrests but also through mass dismissals in the public sector, affecting teachers, soldiers, and judges alike. According to the Freedom of the Press – Turkey Country Report by Freedom House (2017), hundreds of media outlets—primarily those critical of the government, but also Kurdish media—were shut down, including TV stations, radio broadcasters, newspapers, and publishing houses. These closures were enacted by decree under the state of emergency and justified by alleged ties to the Gülen movement. Notable examples include:

- Zaman newspaper: Accused of affiliation with the Gülen network, it had one of the highest circulations in Turkey and was placed under state control in 2016.
- Samanyolu TV and Bugün TV: Both were completely shut down due to their presumed connections with the movement.
- Cihan News Agency: Closed in July 2016, as it was identified as the Gülenist news agency.

The education sector was also severely affected: nearly 4,000 academics were suspended, and 15 universities were closed altogether (e.g., Fatih University, Mevlana University) under the pretext that they had trained the Gülenist elite.

Civil society organizations (NGOs) also suffered significant setbacks: 1,229 foundations and associations, as well as 19 trade unions, were dissolved without judicial proceedings. In November, another 375 associations and civil organizations were shut down under accusations of ties to terrorism, and their assets were confiscated by the government. Among these were organizations advocating for women's and children's rights, as well as medical and legal associations and charities.

The 2016 coup attempt represents a critical turning point in Turkish governance. However, to fully understand the context, one must look back to 2013, when a major corruption scandal erupted in Turkey. Although different in nature, it marked another critical shift in the country's political dynamics, with lasting consequences (Diamond, 2022).

The events unfolded rapidly, over the course of just a few days:

- December 17, 2013: Istanbul's financial crimes unit detained 47 individuals, including high-ranking officials and businessmen. Charges included bribery, money laundering, fraud, and gold smuggling. Among them was the CEO of Halkbank, Süleyman Aslan, in whose home \$4.5 million was found hidden in shoeboxes. Also implicated was Reza Zarrab, an Iranian businessman accused of evading U.S. sanctions. Authorities seized \$17.5 million, identified as bribe money.

- December 21, 2013: A court ordered the arrest of 14 individuals, including Barış Güler, Kaan Çağlayan, and Oğuz Bayraktar—all sons of government ministers. The charges mirrored the earlier ones: bribery, money laundering, and fraud.
- December 23–24, 2013: Hakan Yüksekdağ, head of the Ankara Police Department's organized crime unit, was found dead in his car. Official reports cited suicide, though the family disputed this. The situation became even more suspicious when Abdi Altınok, deputy governor of Isparta Province, also committed suicide shortly thereafter.
- December 25, 2013: Muammer Güler (Minister of the Interior), Zafer Çağlayan (Minister of Economy), and Erdoğan Bayraktar (Minister of Environment and Urbanization) resigned after their sons were implicated. Bayraktar stated that his resignation was not voluntary, and publicly called on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to step down as well.
- December 26, 2013: A second wave of investigations was reportedly in preparation. Allegedly, this round would have implicated Erdoğan's sons, prompting the government to reassign the lead prosecutor and several police officials, thereby halting further arrests.
- December 31, 2013: Hasan Hami Yıldırım, an AKP Member of Parliament, resigned.

These investigations could have marked a turning point for Turkey, providing a unique opportunity to eliminate corruption once and for all. Instead, they only confirmed that the AKP government sought to cover up its own criminal activities and its links to corrupt networks.

Even during the 2010 constitutional amendments, the AKP had already begun to undermine the secular constitution based on the separation of powers. This tendency culminated in 2017, when another referendum was held on April 16, resulting in the adoption of a presidential system with a 51.9% majority. The key changes included: the abolition of the prime minister's office, with executive power concentrated in the hands of the

president. The president was granted authority to issue executive decrees and dissolve parliament. The requirement for presidential political neutrality was eliminated, allowing the president to maintain party membership. The number of parliamentary seats increased from 550 to 600, and the minimum age for candidacy was lowered to 18.

Following these changes, on July 9, 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took the presidential oath, officially marking the start of the new system. Several justifications were given for this shift: increased governmental efficiency:

- The new system allowed for quicker decision-making and stronger executive authority, which—according to its proponents—was essential during times of crisis.
- Political stability: The reform aimed to reduce political instability and ensure the continuity of governance.
- Restoration of pre-coup order: After the 2016 attempted coup, Erdoğan emphasized the need to preserve the state of emergency and reinforce authority to prevent similar future events.

However, this system granted significant political advantages to Erdoğan and enabled the realization of his personal political ambitions:

- Concentration of executive power: The president gained full authority to appoint and dismiss ministers and vice presidents, and to issue decrees. This allowed Erdoğan to bypass collective decision-making and install loyal party cadres in key positions, transforming the executive branch into a single command chain.
- Influence over the legislative branch: The president could dissolve parliament at will, making it de facto dependent on presidential will. The legislative branch's autonomy diminished, gradually delegitimizing opposition initiatives.
- Control over the judiciary: Given the president's influence over the appointment of judges and prosecutors, judicial independence declined, fostering a climate of self-censorship and precedent-driven political alignment.
- Consolidation of power: The new system enabled Erdoğan to maintain long-term political dominance.

The new framework centralized executive functions. Although the Grand National Assembly of Turkey formally remained a part of the political system, it was functionally marginalized.

Turkey's current domestic political dynamics are shaped by the erosion of governmental authority, the breakdown of institutional checks and balances, and the economic and political instability generated by a volatile fiscal and regulatory environment. Regime stability faces mounting challenges, particularly following the arrest of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, an event that deepened political and societal divisions. The arrest served not only as a means of neutralizing rival political forces, but also as a preventive deterrent against emerging democratic alternatives.

The imprisonment of Ekrem İmamoğlu is therefore not only another episode of selective judicial pressure, but a potential regime threshold. İmamoğlu's political significance derives from his capacity to unite opposition constituencies and from the symbolic importance of Istanbul, where Erdoğan's own national career began. By removing a credible presidential challenger through the courts, the regime reduces the remaining competitive element of competitive authoritarianism and moves closer to a consolidated presidential dictatorship in which alternation in power is no longer realistically available.

Nationwide mass protests erupted in response, directly reflecting the arbitrary exercise of state power and the crisis of political pluralism. These demonstrations were accompanied by police brutality, preemptive arrests, and social media censorship (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018).

The devaluation of the Turkish lira and the destabilization of financial markets further indicated that investors began perceiving political risk as a form of structural uncertainty. Civil society space has narrowed considerably; the right to protest is systematically restricted, and state reprisals pose a constant threat to dissent.

The trajectory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule clearly illustrates that Turkey's political system has, over the past two decades, shifted from a liberal-democratic framework toward a centralized presidential autocracy. This occurred despite the fact that Erdoğan's early reforms had once paved

the way toward potential European Union accession. Over time, however, the principles of political pluralism, separation of powers, and institutional autonomy have eroded. In their place, the regime's construction has centered on executive dominance, the monopolization of mechanisms of social control, and the development of loyalty-based networks around the nucleus of power.

This authoritarian transformation has also been accompanied by a powerful nationalist and civilizational narrative. Erdoğan's appeal to a "Great Turkey" links domestic legitimacy to foreign-policy activism, military assertiveness, and the recovery of Ottoman-Islamic historical pride. In the literature on Turkish politics and international relations, this ideological orientation is often described as Neo-Ottomanism. It helps mobilize nationalist sentiment, justify exceptional leadership, and present external conflicts as evidence that only a strong presidential centre can defend the nation.

## **7 COMPARATIVE PATTERNS OF POWER CONCENTRATION**

A direct comparison of the Russian and Turkish cases reveals both structural similarities and important differences in the mechanisms of power consolidation.

In both systems, executive power has expanded significantly, though through different trajectories. In Russia, this process was driven by the reconstruction of the state and the establishment of a centralized "vertical of power," whereas in Turkey it emerged through the gradual transformation of a parliamentary system into a personalized presidential regime.

Judicial institutions in both countries have been systematically subordinated to political authority. In Russia, this occurred through the gradual erosion of judicial independence and increased presidential influence over appointments and dismissals. In Turkey, constitutional reforms—particularly after 2010—enabled the executive to reshape the composition of judicial bodies.

The media environment in both cases is characterized by structural control rather than overt censorship alone. While Russia relies heavily on

state-controlled media conglomerates, Turkey combines regulatory pressure and legal interventions to limit pluralism.

Civil society has also been constrained through legal and administrative mechanisms. Russia’s “foreign agent” legislation and Turkey’s post-2016 emergency decrees illustrate how legal frameworks are used to restrict independent actors.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that contemporary forms of authoritarianism do not eliminate democratic institutions but rather transform them into instruments of controlled political competition and executive dominance.

The comparison also clarifies an important asymmetry. Russia’s regime logic rests increasingly on depoliticization, fear, and the administrative production of consent, especially after the war against Ukraine. Turkey’s regime logic, by contrast, still relies more visibly on electoral mobilization, polarization, and plebiscitary claims to majority will. Yet both models converge in their core institutional outcome: the conversion of formally democratic institutions into instruments of executive survival.

**Table 1:** Comparative Dimensions of Power Concentration in Russia and Turkey.

Dimension	Russia	Turkey
Executive Power	Centralized presidential system; “vertical of power”; extensive decree authority	Presidentialization of a former parliamentary system; personalized executive authority
Legislature	Dominated by ruling party (United Russia); limited deliberation	Increasingly subordinated to executive; weakened parliamentary oversight

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>Turkey</b>
Judiciary	Gradual erosion of independence; presidential influence over appointments and dismissals	Restructured through constitutional reforms; executive influence over judicial councils
Media	State-dominated media conglomerates; structural control	Regulatory pressure, ownership restructuring, and legal repression
Civil Society	“Foreign agent” laws; administrative and financial pressure	Post-2016 purges; emergency decrees; restrictions on NGOs
Elections	Controlled competition; technical parties; administrative barriers	Competitive but increasingly unfair; strong incumbency advantage
Legitimation	Depoliticization; managed participation	Electoral mobilization; plebiscitary legitimacy

Source: Authors’ work.

## CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that the political systems of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey under the dominance of the AKP represent two specific yet convergent models of power concentration which can no longer be described as “imperfect democracies”, but rather as deliberately constructed forms of electoral and presidential autocracy. In both cases, we observe a gradual transformation of the constitutional framework, whereby formal democratic procedures remain in place but



their substance is systematically hollowed out through legal engineering, selective repression, and highly asymmetric access to the resources of political competition.

The Russian model rests on the fusion of the state, the security apparatus and economic elites, with its stability relying on the combination of centralised executive authority, loyal regional structures and a controlled party system in which the dominance of the ruling party effectively precludes genuine alternation in power. The Turkish model, by contrast, illustrates how an initially reformist and pro-European political force can reshape a parliamentary system into a personalised presidential autocracy, grounded in plebiscitary legitimation, far-reaching interventions into the judiciary, media and civil society, and a discourse of permanent crisis that serves to justify exceptional powers of the executive.

The key feature of these regimes is not sudden rupture, but incremental dismantling of liberal-democratic norms through formally legal instruments – constitutional amendments, changes to electoral law, reorganisation of judicial councils, and the introduction of selective categories such as “foreign agent” or “extremist”. Although the Russian and Turkish cases differ in historical context, geopolitical orientation and elite structures, both confirm a broader tendency to transform institutions of checks and balances into tools for legitimising executive decisions, thereby narrowing the space for political contestation, civic participation and effective opposition.

The findings of the article support interpretations that treat hybrid regimes not as a “transitional phase” between democracy and authoritarianism, but as relatively stable and adaptable forms of rule capable of using elections, media and the legal order as instruments for reproducing power. The Russian and Turkish cases thus serve as a warning to liberal democracies that the erosion of democratic institutions does not occur primarily through overt coups, but through the long-term rewriting of the rules of the game from within, with political elites willing to subordinate the constitutional order to the logic of their own survival playing a decisive role.

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