

**Electoral Certainty and Policy Uncertainty in Authoritarian Regimes:
Russia as a Test Case**

Ha Tran

Hamilton College

htran@hamilton.edu

Acknowledgements:

The author is grateful to Professor Sharon Rivera for her guidance, both professional and personal support, and invaluable feedback; to Max Gersch, Alex Nemeth, and Huzefah Umer for support and feedback on the proposal presentation of this research project. The author is grateful to the Levitt Center for providing an amazing opportunity to everyone in our research group to participate in the Summer Research Project, despite the circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

Electoral Certainty and Policy Uncertainty in Authoritarian Regimes: Russian Elites providing a Test Case

Introduction

Among political science scholars, there has always been an assumption that uncertainty is a prevalently essential factor to impact the stability and continuity of many authoritarian regimes if not all authoritarian dynasties. As Rivera confirmed, “even for elites holding office in fully consolidated regimes, uncertainty about electoral outcomes is low but not nil” (Rivera 4). The frequent appearance of different levels of uncertainty among authoritarian countries worldwide, ranging from complete certainty to complete uncertainty, is a noticeable evidence that uncertainty plays a key role in the political governance system of such nations. Electoral outcomes and public policies are the two specific areas that demonstrate the most extreme uncertainty (or certainty) levels because these two sectors directly affect the incumbency of current authoritarian leaders, which significantly impacts national political stability and the ability of that authoritarian regime to maintain durability and continuity.

While a significant amount of existing literature attempts to confirm the assumption that uncertainty exists and persists in authoritarian-governed societies, rarely has any research investigated and tested how political uncertainty unravels in detailed political contexts. Specifically, minimal research has been done on the specific levels of uncertainty applied to electoral outcome and public policies. As Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg have stated, “authoritarian incumbents routinely use democratic emulation as a strategy to extend their tenure in power” (Bernhard et al. 465). This means many authoritarian politicians are or have been attempting to institutionalize electoral certainty, or that political certainty in authoritarian regimes is increasing over time. Logically, with such abilities to manipulate institutions for

self-benefiting purposes, politicians are likely to have overwhelming power in the policy-making process. Because of such overwhelming power over policies, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that policy outcomes would be uncertain as they are dependent on specific politicians and their benefits.

In this paper, I will test two hypotheses using the data on perceptions of Russian elites in the aforementioned matters. First, I explore the established relationship between authoritarianism and uncertainty, especially from a comparative perspective with case-studies from authoritarian countries around the world. Second, I explore the case of both electoral and policy (*un*)certainty in Russia to explain why it is reasonable to use Russia as an empirical case to test my hypotheses. Followed by the literature review section, I will present the data analysis on uncertainty in electoral and policy outcomes, especially by looking at predictive perceptions rather than past results (i.e. perceptions of political succession and stability in the future). My conclusion will demonstrate whether the data confirms my hypotheses and how my study contributes to the current literature resources on this topic.

Literature Review

Authoritarianism and uncertainty

Scholars in the field have long debated the idea of authoritarianism. In “Authoritarian Regimes,” Gabriela Vaillant gives a thorough definition of authoritarianism: “authoritarianism can be understood both as a political regime and an ideological construct [...] As a political regime, authoritarianism can be defined as a form of government that monopolizes authority over the state without guaranteeing political pluralism or defense of civil liberties and with little or no accountability to the population. In order to enforce exclusive claim over power, authoritarian regimes revert to unconstitutional or illegitimate means such as the use of force, censorship, or

infusion of fear...” (Vaillant 1). Meanwhile, Marlies Garsius defines “authoritarian practices as patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice [...] authoritarian practices primarily constitute a threat to democratic processes, while illiberal practices are primarily a human rights problem” (Garsius 517). In sum, even when defined as a political regime, a social construct, or a perspective practice, authoritarianism has the same characteristics: undemocratic, suppressive, and hierarchical.

Uncertainty, or specifically political uncertainty, in authoritarian regimes stem from such characteristics. Political uncertainty can imply multiple factors involving but not limited to: local politics (electoral results, campaigning, etc.), public policy-making process (policy issuance, policy revisions, and detailed implementations), or political future of a country. In the book “The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism,” Andreas Schedler studied two specific types of authoritarian political uncertainty: “institutional uncertainty” and “informational uncertainty” (Schedler 2). Both of these contribute to both “adaptive responses” and “creative responses” from authoritarian leaders that often are manipulations of the democratic rule, subverting to the basic characteristics of authoritarianism as mentioned above (Schedler 22). With the existing in-depth literature on the relationship of uncertainty and authoritarianism, it is logical that we conclude there exists a significant level of uncertainty within each authoritarian regime. While the theoretical framework is firmly set, it is the empirical investigation that is missing from the current resources to demonstrate the appearance of uncertainty in two detailed and most important sectors of politics: electoral and policy outcomes.

Comparative literature on uncertainty in authoritarian regimes

On the other hand, many scholars have conducted research on unique case-studies of electoral outcome and policy revisions in specific authoritarian countries. Political researchers have compiled cases of authoritarian regimes all over the world including: North Korea, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Russia, Cuba, Vietnam, etc. Almost all of these countries have witnessed “absurd electoral results” (Katz, *The Washington Post*). As reported in the same article, Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev won a fifth term in 2015, taking about 98 percent of the vote in an election with a turnout around 95 percent. The Egyptian president appointed his own military successor in 2014. North-Korean Kim Jong Un got 100 percent of the vote in 2014 (Katz, *The Washington Post*). In the case of Vietnam, the political system creates a condition for electoral certainty because the political system scouts for people to be on the ballot and leaves the uncertainty within this guaranteed ballot, allowing a certain level of democracy at the grass-root level by letting the people vote for representatives at the very low levels (Lewis, *TIME*). These examples surely ascertain a pattern of electoral certainty in authoritarian regimes.

One of the most popular ways for authoritarian incumbents to hold onto power is to manipulate the governance system and local institutions (Bernhard et al. 467). In authoritarian regimes, policy is often top-down managed or controlled because the authoritarian political system has the overwhelming power in deciding whether a policy would be issued, amended, or altered. Authoritarian politicians often utilize a “menu of manipulation” (Schedler 2002) to rig existing institution in order to suit their purposes. This helps create “an uneven playing field” in not only electoral outcome in authoritarian regimes but also in the manipulation and distribution of power among authoritarian incumbents (Levitsky and Way 8). Yet, no empirical evidence has been shown to demonstrate how authoritarian leaders are changing institutions to suit their purposes, and in which process increasing policy uncertainty. Here, the uncertainty is caused

because policy decisions are, again, dependent on only certain influential individuals with centralizing power over the rest of the administrative system.

Uncertainty in Russia

Russia provides the perfect case study for an empirical study because (1) its electoral track record for the past two decades has been strikingly autocratic and (2) empirical data are available for empirical analysis. Ever since his first official election on March 26, 2000, Vladimir Putin has been both the president and the most influential authoritarian politician in Russia. There have been multiple times at which Putin has manipulated the existing institutions (including the Russian Constitution, legislatures, and other official orders) in order to keep hold of his position and his overwhelming power. Most noticeably, in July 2020, Vladimir Putin's Constitutional Reform proposal was passed overwhelmingly and Putin will be able to hold office for two more terms. This leaves many questions unanswered about the level of political uncertainty in this country, which makes it a perfect test case for our study. More importantly, authoritarian regimes often do not allow for political-information transparency due to their efforts in reducing "informational uncertainty" (Schedler 38). Therefore, the Survey of Russian Elites provide the perfect dataset to test out hypotheses that cannot be tested in other authoritarian regimes.

Data Sources

This research paper analyzes statistics from the Survey of Russian Elites, collected in the period of 2016 – 2020 (Rivera and Zimmerman 2016 – 2020). The main purpose of studying the data is to determine whether there exist electoral certainty and policy-outcome uncertainty in authoritarian regimes by looking at elite perceptions of the Russian political context and future as well as elites' impacts on Russian foreign policies. The dataset provides information on elite

perceptions of various elements related to Russian politics and specifically, Russian foreign policy (as this was the initial purpose of the survey). The data is observed on the individual level (individual Russian elites). The dataset is quantitative. There are 245 observations and 314 variables on record. There was no data cleaning necessary. I have run multiple frequency tables as well as cross-tabulation to conclude whether there is uncertainty in the two specific sectors mentioned above, as well as several cross-tabulation to suggest reasonable explanations to such uncertainties. The data confirms both of my hypotheses and suggest that whether an elite belongs to a certain group would affect their perception on political uncertainty (both in electoral results and public policy). The next section will explain more thoroughly why I came to my conclusion.

Certainty in Electoral Outcome

In 2020, Russian elites were asked whether they think that Russian political stability has increased over the last two decades. According to **Figure 1**, the majority of Russian elites (around 62%) believes that Russian political stability has increased over the years, started when Putin took power. The political stability is likely to be caused by the fact that over the last two decades, electoral outcome has not changed: Vladimir Putin has consistently been the most influential person to Russian politics. In exploring whether elites think that electoral certainty is the cause of political stability both in the past and in the future (which means that there exists significant electoral certainty in authoritarian regimes and such certainty is increasing over time), I explore multiple questions in the 2020 Survey of Russian Elites and compare the results to the 2016 survey if there is available data.

According to **Figure 2**, over time, more and more Russian elites believe that the most appropriate political system for Russia is Western-type democracy or the current political system (around 40% of elites in 2016, and 44% in 2020). And since elites perceive that such a

democracy is the best option for the political future of Russia, they have logical doubts over political forces or politically influential individuals who can likely prevent the development of a new, proper Russian democracy. **Figure 3** illustrates vividly such worry by showing that elites are very negative about a democratic future for Russian politics. In 2016, there was already 59% of elites who believed that it was either unlikely or very unlikely that another party would come to power. In 2020, this number rises to 81%, meaning that among elites exists an even stronger belief that no other Russian political party independent of United Russia will be able to take control of the state. This means, in the next decade, electoral results will not witness uncertainty or if there is, the uncertainty will be very minimal; the electoral outcome will be almost perfectly predictable and controlled so that United Russia will remain in power. The certainty in electoral outcome is not limited to only party-level but has been brought to an individual level, examined by Vladimir Putin's case.

Figure 4 suggests that in 2016, Russian elites expected Putin's influences to diminish by 2024 as stated in the Russian Constitution. This should be the expected case but for the passing of the Constitution Reform proposal by Putin in 2020. The event is one of the signal that electoral certainty has now been institutionalized. The amendment allows Putin to be in office for two more consecutive six-year terms, meaning that for the next decade, the Presidential electoral outcome in Russia will not observe any uncertainty. As of right now, Russian elites are still scattered in predictive opinions about the next Russian political generation. Perhaps the situation that will most likely happen, according to 38% of the elites in **Figure 4**, is that somewhere between the years 2025 and 2030, Putin will leave his "post" as the most influential person in Russia and another politician (likely of his succession and will be within the same party) will take over this "position". This brings to attention a significantly alarming reality of electoral

certainty that is now institutionalized, which accords to existing literature of the field. Yet, an interesting finding is that in 2016, the majority of elites (61% of respondents) expects that Putin will sustain his post as President by predicting that it is unlikely for another person to replace him. Meanwhile, as the Constitutional Reform Proposal was revealed to the public in 2020, an increased percentage of 47% of Russian elites predict that in the next decade, someone else will replace Putin as President as shown in **Figure 5**. This means that even though the people have voted for the Constitutional Reform, they expect that the electoral certainty will be put to an end in the next decade and that these two consecutive terms will be Putin's last.

The data that I have analyzed above demonstrate that Russian elites have quite a clear perception that (1) there exists electoral certainty in the case of Russia and (2) electoral certainty is taking the form of either political succession or electoral-certainty institutionalization.

Statistics in **Figure 6** strongly supports that Russian politics will witness political succession at least in the generations of Putin and after Putin. According to Figure 6 in which elites were asked if there is a threat of political succession in Russia, over 62% of elites rate the danger of succession at level 3 or higher. This means, there exist at least a medium-level danger and at times utmost danger of political succession in Russia. This empirical evidence about the future of Russian politics assures the aforementioned argument that electoral certainty is showing in the form of political succession. For this particular question, I added a Chi-square Test with an attempt to observe whether there is a statistical significant relationship between being a party-member and the individual belief that there is political succession. According to **Table 1**, most of the people who are not party-members think that there is a danger of political succession and most party-members think that there is little to no danger of political succession. The relationship is statistically significant, meaning that most independent elites think that there is a

danger of Russia turning into a full autocratic authoritarian, while in-party elites believe that the current system is closer to a democratic one.

Figure 7, on the other hand, illustrate that when asked what the main goal for the 2020 Constitutional Reform is, the option that most elites (37%) opt for is that the main goal is “Putin retaining power after his current presidency” (Survey of Russian Elites). Even though this is not concrete evidence, the fact that a majority of Russian elites confirm this option as their perception of the main goal of the 2020 Constitutional Reform, it is worth considering that there is a sign of electoral-certainty institutionalization.

Looking into the future of Russia, especially with Putin surely in office for the next ten years, the reasonable inquiry for elites is what happens after the Putin presidency. For now, from the 2020 survey, Russian elites still hold very different opinions about how Putin will distribute his power after leaving his post. The most likely option according to Russian elites right now (with 22.4% respondents believing that Putin will follow this agenda) is that Putin will transfer all of his power to a trustful successor. This option is also the most logical according to the findings that I have made throughout this report. The existence of electoral certainty when combined with Putin’s ability to appoint a successor would eventually create an autocratic Russia.

Uncertainty in Policy Outcome

When authoritarian leaders can guarantee electoral outcomes, it would not be difficult for them to manipulate policies to benefit their own purposes. The Survey of Russian Elites explore policies related to foreign affairs, which gives us an opportunity to test out whether such policies are decided in an uncertain manner. The hypothesis that I attempt to test out is that policy outcome would be fully dependent on who the incumbent responsible for that policy area is.

According to **Figure 9**, in 2016, 62% of elites perceived that elites have no effect overall on foreign policies. This figure drops to 56% in 2020, yet this is still the majority opinion. In 2020, around 37% of elites think that as a whole, they have some influences over foreign policies. In **Figure 10**, elites were asked whether they think that they have personal influences on Russian foreign policies. The majority of elites do not think they have personal impact on foreign policies in Russia, but it might be a result of the choice in sampling of the survey as elites chosen might not work in fields related to foreign policies. Yet, this might be also a sign that the power over policy-issuing and policy-alternating is centralized in the hand of the most influential individual in Russia: the president, Vladimir Putin.

According to **Figure 11**, in 2016, 74% of Russian elites had already perceived that the President had the strongest power in influencing foreign policies. This proportion leveled up to 98% of elites believing that the President has the utmost power over foreign policies in 2020. The next two groups which Russian elites perceived to have extreme influences over foreign policies are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, which logically makes sense because these two ministries are directly in charge of foreign affairs. Interestingly, in 2020, the survey found out that 69% of elites think that the FSB has utmost power over foreign policies, and 58% of Russian elites think that the Prime Minister has such power in issuing or altering foreign policies. Even though the evidence is not yet concrete, my findings from the survey suggest that the policy-making process is dependent upon very specific individuals (in Russia, the President and the Prime Minister have such power and Putin had held both of those positions in the past) and specific ministries or legislative branch directly involved in the policy-issue. And since policy decisions are eventually dependent on only certain legislative

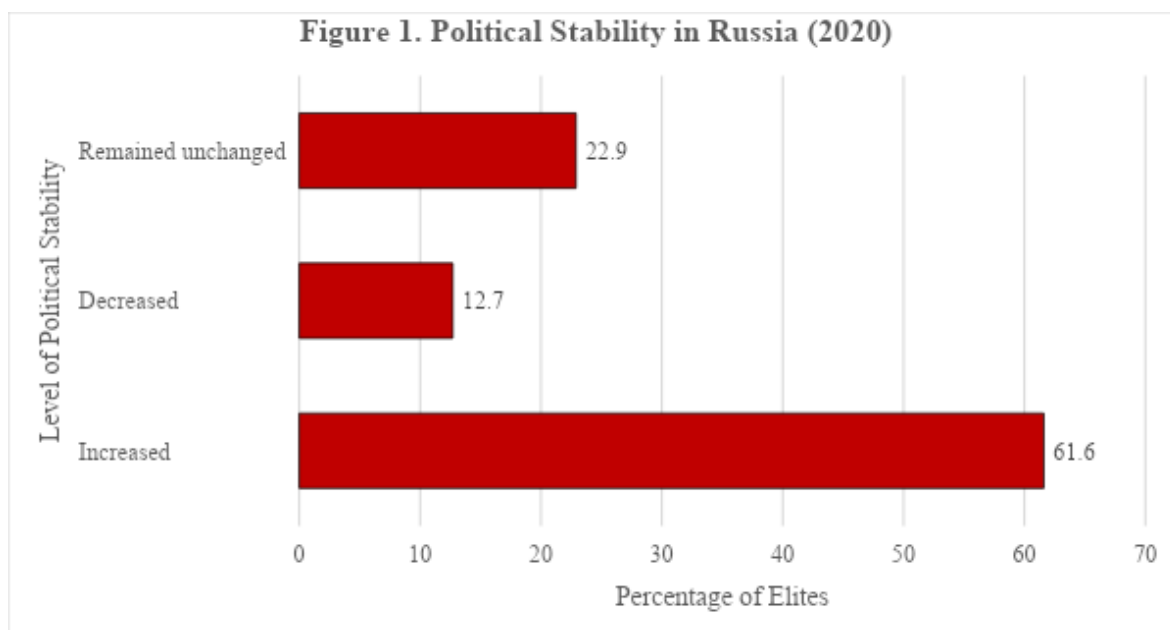
elites, it is only logical that the policy decisions are uncertain and contingent to the benefits of incumbents working in related fields.

Concluding Discussions

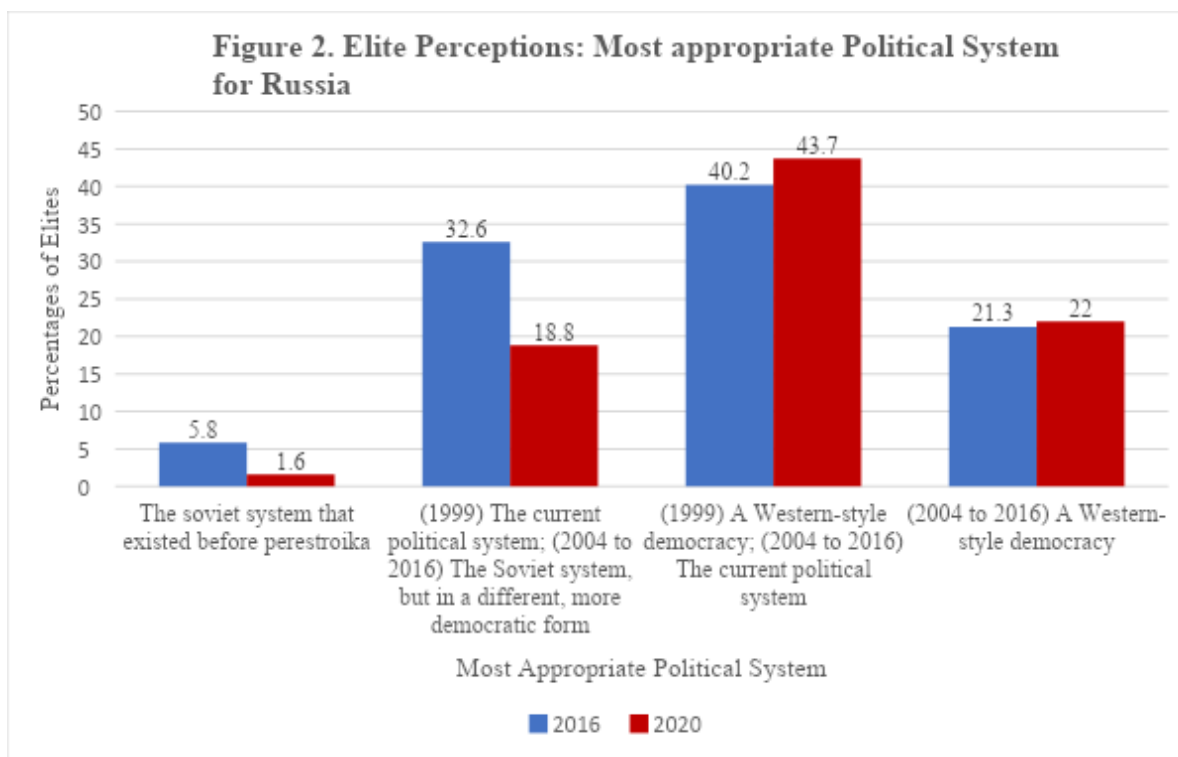
The research process on uncertainty in authoritarian regimes has pointed out that existing literature is not focusing political succession as a sign of political uncertainty and that there is little evidence to show the level of uncertainty in policy-related issues in such nations. My findings have confirmed the hypothesis that there exist uncertainty in authoritarian regimes and they exist in either the form of political succession or electoral-guaranteeing institutions. In fact, such findings suggest that the electoral process itself is creating doubt and confusion that result in electoral uncertainty. Such uncertainty might eventually lead to the destabilization of Russian politics and Russia, despite Putin's effort in maintaining stability. The report has also shown that in Russia, there shows to be uncertainty in policy-related decisions because policies are decided by only certain top-level authoritarian politicians. With such answers from the Survey of Russian Elites, researchers in the field would be inspired to go to the next level in their empirical work to create a concrete case in testing the aforementioned hypotheses about uncertainty in authoritarian regimes.

Work cited

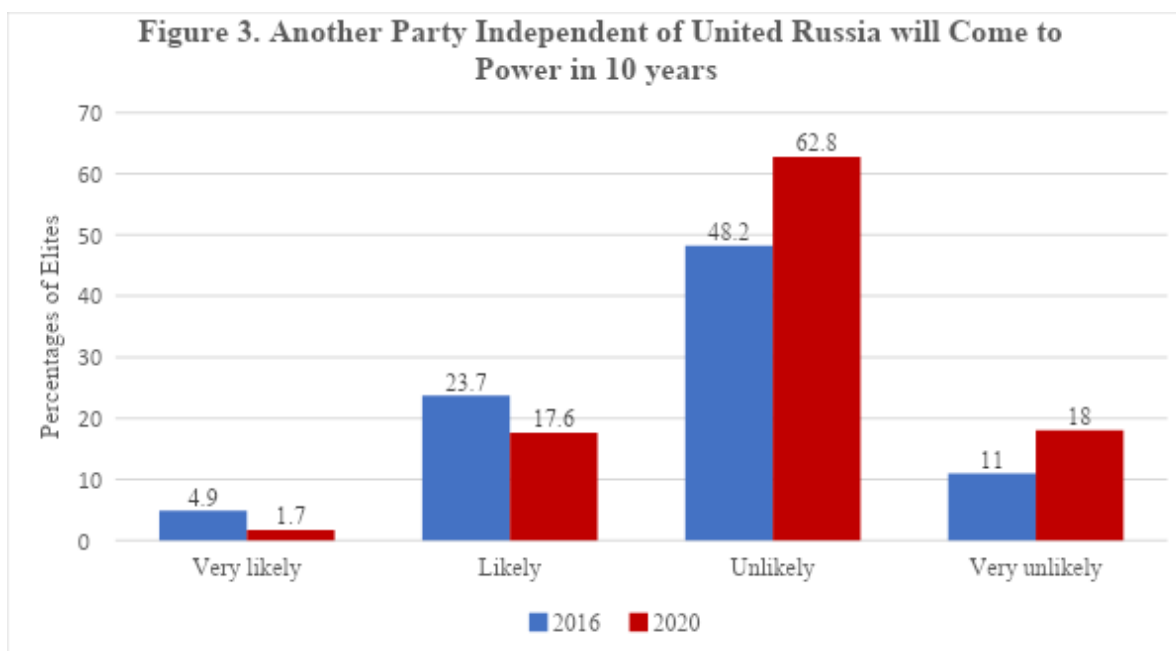
- Bernhard, Michael, et al. "Institutionalizing Electoral Uncertainty and Authoritarian Regime Survival." *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2019, pp. 465–487., doi:10.1111/1475-6765.12355.
- Lewis, Simon. "Vietnam: Communist Party Decides Election Candidates." *Time*, Time, 23 May 2016, time.com/4344416/vietnam-elections-independent-communist/.
- Rivera, Sharon W. "The Decline of Elite Uncertainty during Authoritarian Consolidation: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin."
- Schedler, Andreas. "The Menu of Manipulation." Documents.com, documents.com/d-the-menu-of-manipulation.pdf.
- Schedler, Andreas. "The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism." 2013, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199680320.001.0001.
- Vaillant, Gabriela Gonzalez. "Authoritarian Regimes." *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, 2012, doi:10.1002/9780470670590.wbeog038.



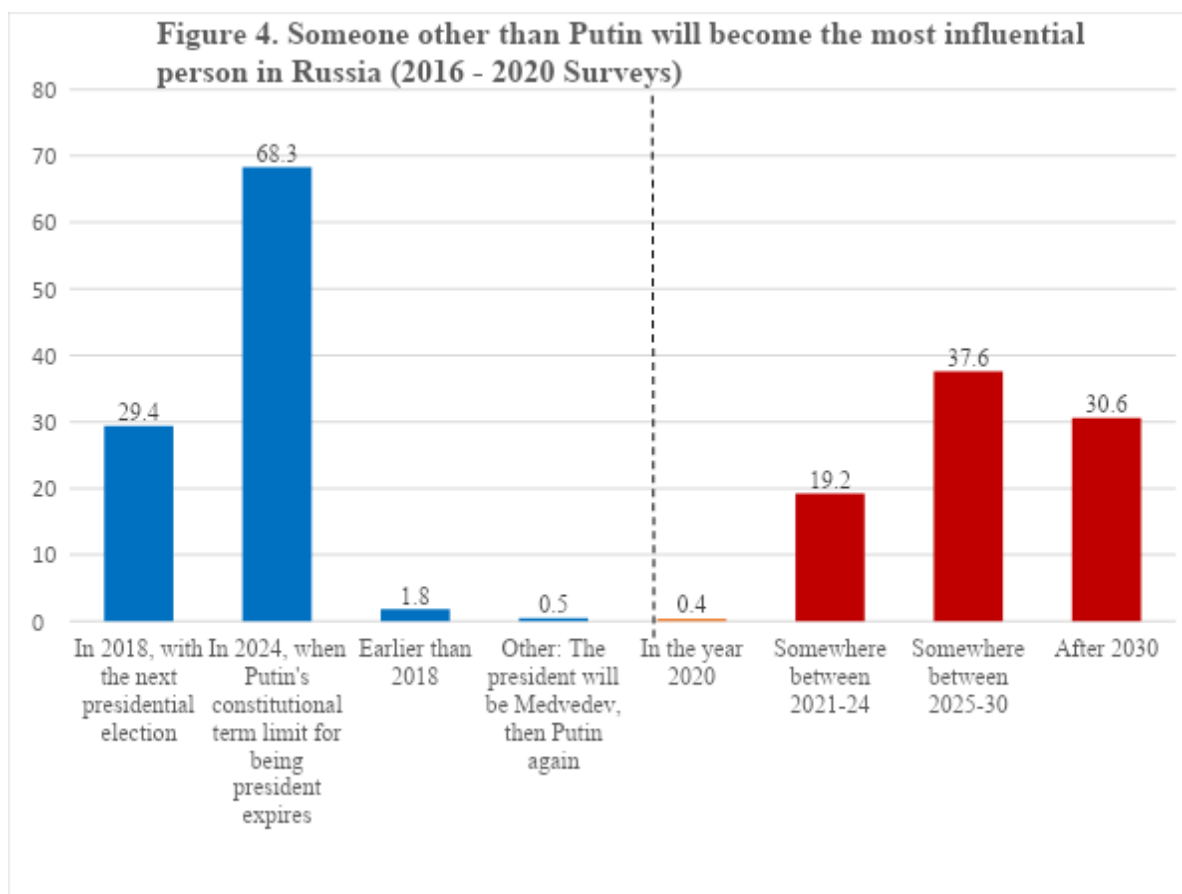
Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.



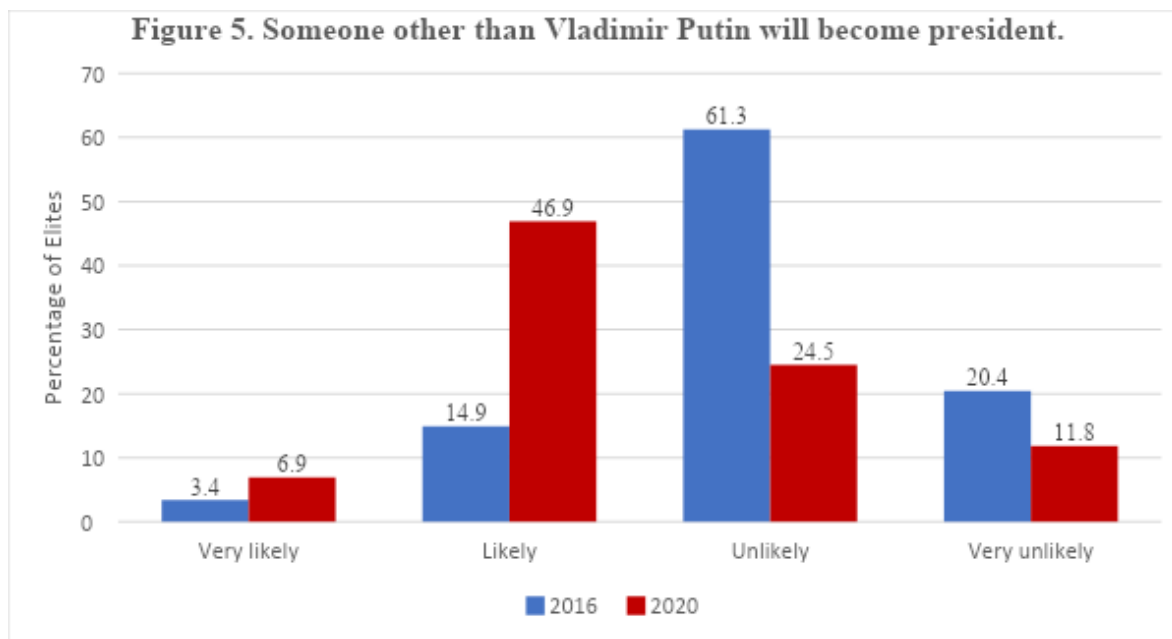
Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.



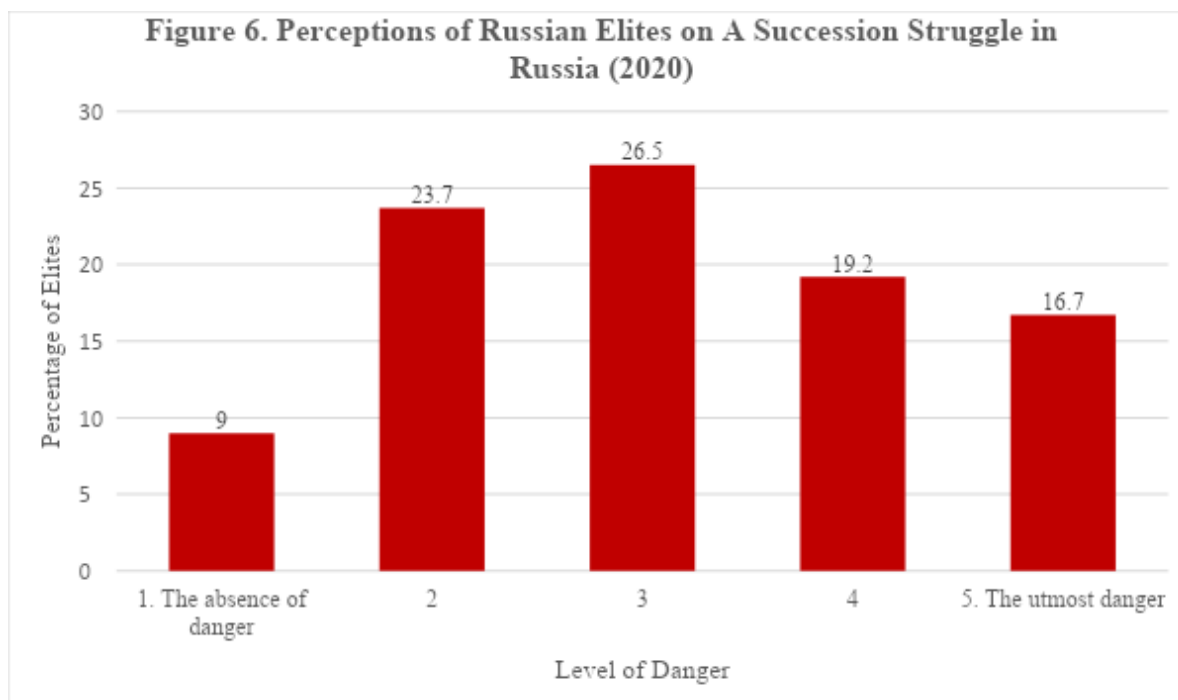
Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.



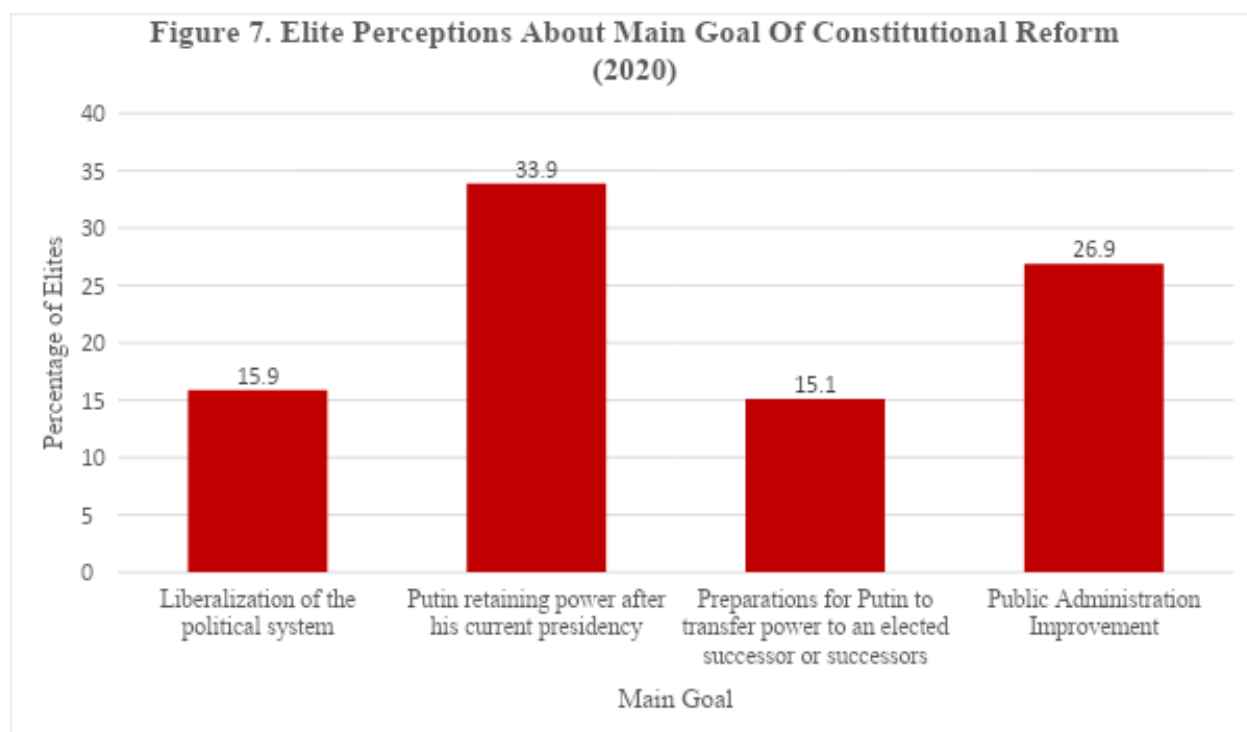
Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.



Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

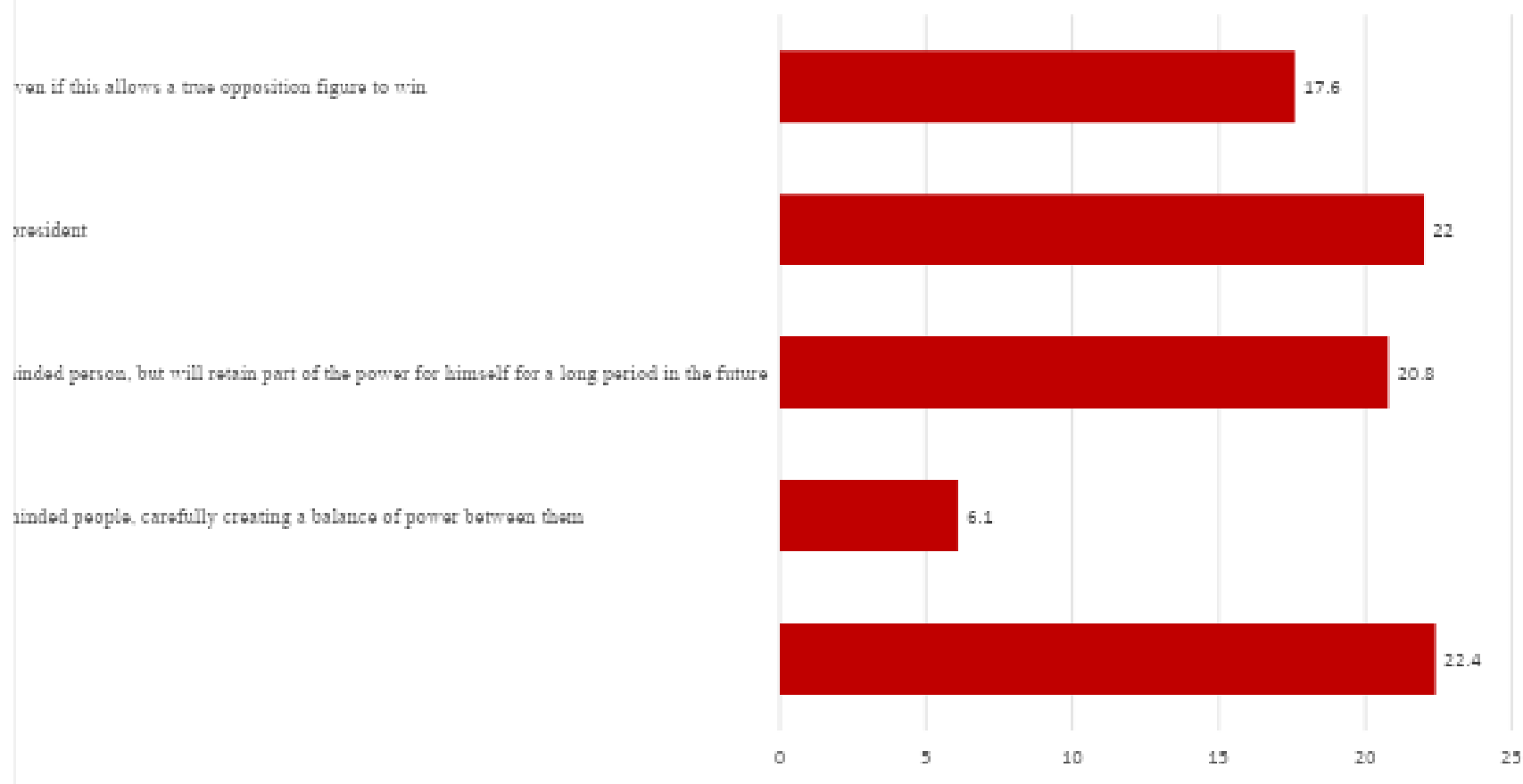


Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

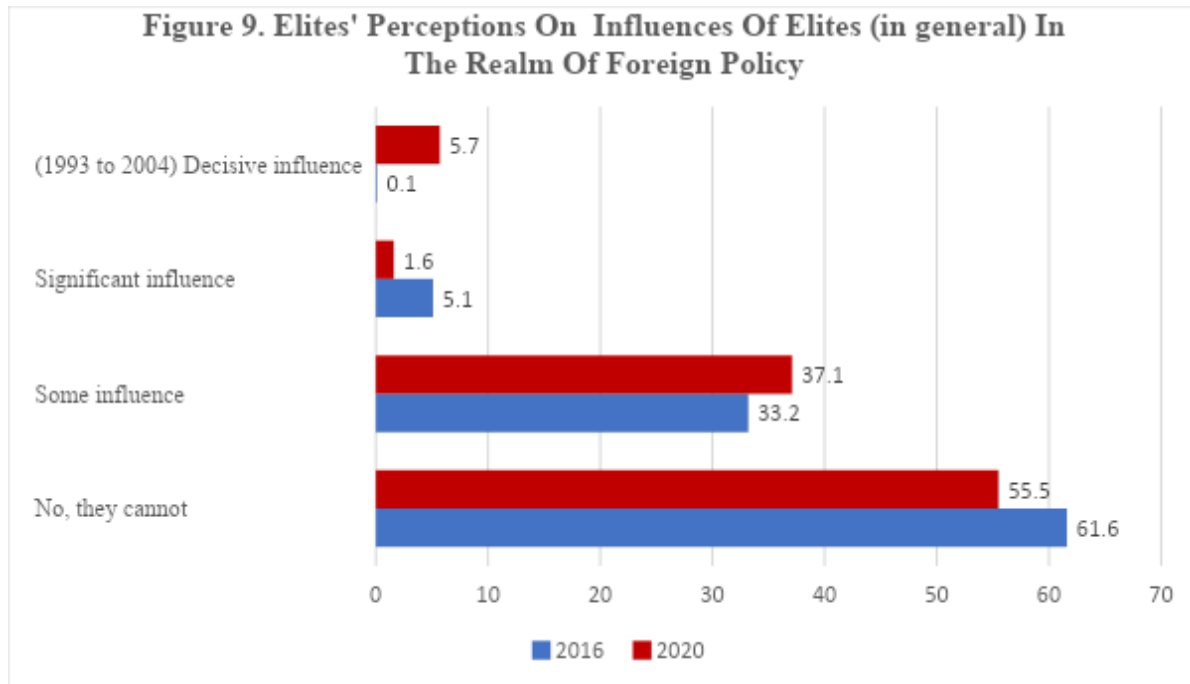


Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

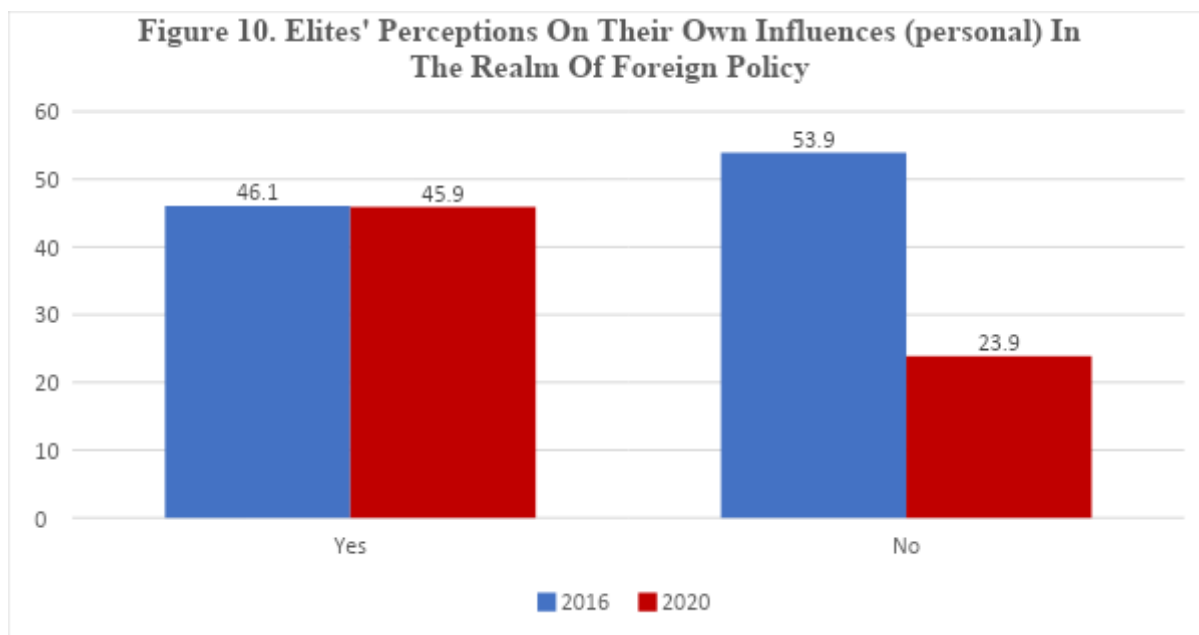
Figure 8. Elite Perception: Vladimir Putin power-distributing plan after leaving presidency (2020)



Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

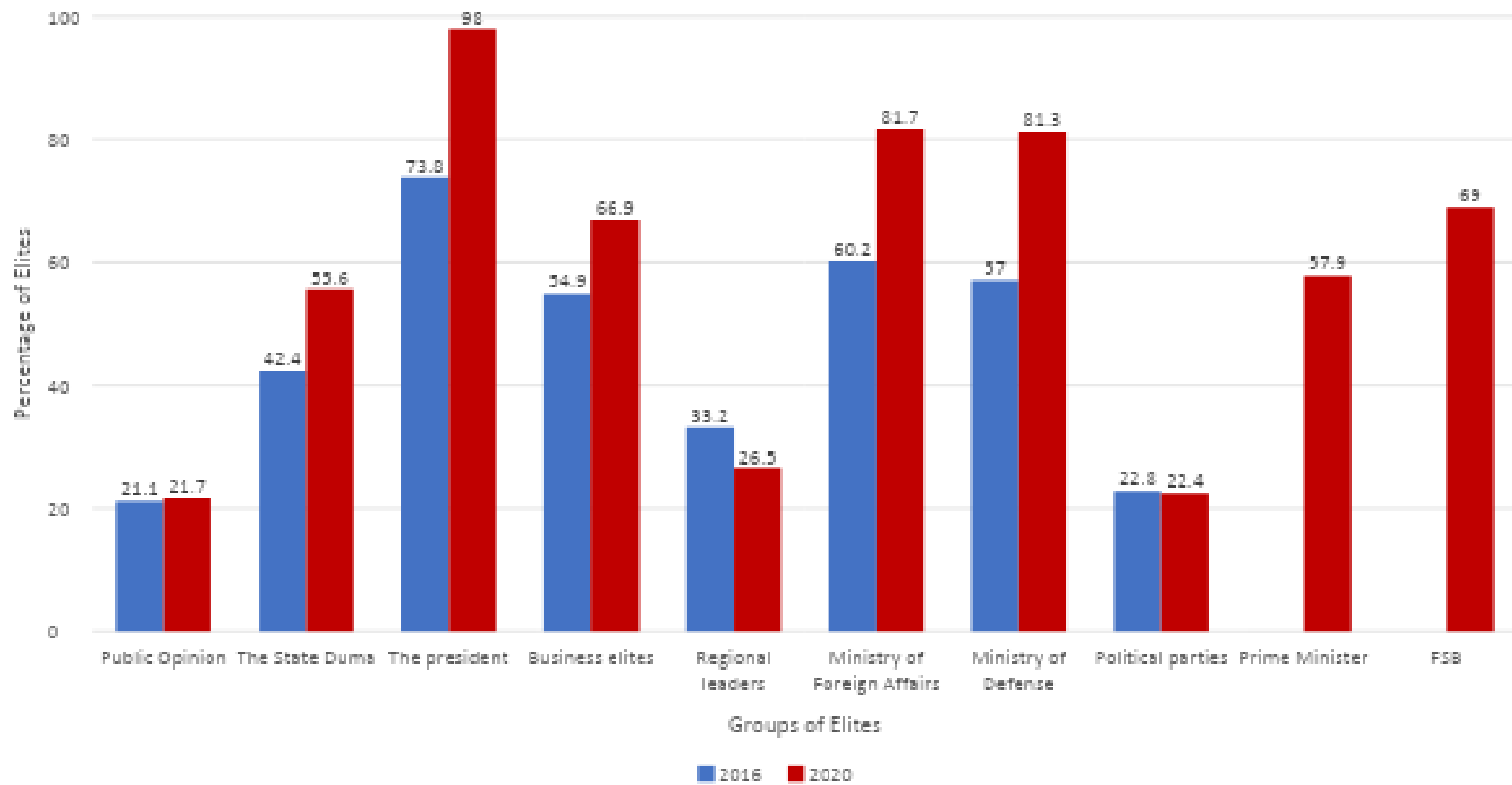


Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.



Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

Figure 11. An Elite Group Has Strong Influences Over Russian Foreign Policy



Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020.

Table 1. Differences in Elite Perceptions of a Danger of Political Succession Between Party and Non-party Members

		1. No danger	2	3	4	5. Greatest danger	Difficult to answer (DO NOT READ)	Refused	Total
D5. Are you a member of a political party or movement?	Yes	10	29	26	11	3	1	0	80
	No	12	25	31	34	37	8	3	150
	Difficult to Answer	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Refused	0	4	7	2	1	0	0	14
Total		22	58	65	47	41	9	3	245

Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2016, 2020