

***The New Rules of the Game:
Comparative Perspectives of Delegative Democracy in Menem and Putin's
Presidencies***

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I. Introduction

The concept of democracy has long lost its absolute meaning, having been constantly adjusted according to historical events and socio-political relativism. There are few who contest the existence of degrees of democracy, and many have attempted to label the various regimes that deviate from the popular representative type but still meet the basic requirements of free and fair elections. After Guillermo O'Donnell's 1994 seminal work on delegative democracy, the literature on democratic transition and consolidation was fundamentally altered. Applying the "new player in town" to a number of case studies, O'Donnell managed to classify and characterize a number of government systems which seemed democratic and yet failed on the route to complete democratic consolidation. Many countries in Latin America have proven to fit within O'Donnell's theoretical framework, and yet, a cross-regional comparison along the lines of delegative democracy has not yet been presented, especially for the so-called "third-wave" democracies according to Samuel Huntington's definition¹. Juxtaposing Carlos Menem's and Vladimir Putin's presidencies in Argentina and Russia, I will show that the original concept of delegative democracy has evolved, and deserves a new definition that successfully places the concept within a multi-region context. Indeed, a rethinking of the term is a critical necessity, in order to conserve the distinction between the representative, or liberal², democracy and other more centralized systems of governance. Therefore, the paper will first address the theory behind delegative democracy, evaluating the development of the concept after O'Donnell's work. Following this, I will focus on the cases of Argentina and Russia separately, outlining how each

¹ Huntington classifies "third wave" democracies as those that underwent transition the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s (the first two "waves" were before World War I and post-World War II respectively).

² For the purpose of this paper, representative, or liberal, democracies will be defined as those that exhibit both horizontal and vertical accountability. This is what O'Donnell considers a consolidated democracy. Thus, I will be using his interpretation of the term.

reflects the literature. Finally, I will bring the two cases together, expanding on the existing theoretical framework and presenting a new definition of delegative democracy.

II. A New Player in Town: O'Donnell and Beyond

Guillermo O'Donnell's 1994 work "Delegative Democracy" set a new theoretical framework for analyzing "third-wave" democracies. Within the context of transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe, these exhibit unique features that set them apart from previous cases and call for a specific theoretical framework. Thus, O'Donnell presents a new term that clearly illustrates the difference between the democratic and authoritarian political systems, filling in a gap generated by a wide array of country cases that deviate from both of the previously established concepts. Even though the term emerged as a response to the unique post-transition features of some Latin American countries, O'Donnell does not specify that it relates solely to one region, which implies that it is assumed to possess universal validity.

At the outset, O'Donnell argues that delegative democracies emerge when two conditions are fulfilled. First, a state is in a serious politico-economic crisis, and previous attempts for reform have been fundamentally unsuccessful, thus greatly weakening the existing political system. Secondly, the country does not have a recent experience in representative governance and is coming out of a period of a strong centralized rule, most often authoritarian in nature. This means that if the country has experienced representative democracy before the transition, the previously suppressed institutions are ready to take over and shape the structure of a consolidated democracy. Indeed, many cases in Latin America fulfill either or both of these conditions, among them most notably Brazil, Argentina, and Peru.

Next, O'Donnell discusses the nature of the election and the type of leader that gains power. The elections are presented as a seminal moment in the development of the country, a

critical moment of change with the potential to construct a new politico-economic system that would resolve the problems of the past. This leads to the ascendancy to power of a political outsider with no affiliation with failed parties, an individual presenting himself and his team as the saviors of the nation. He (much more than she) is necessarily charismatic, assertive, and oftentimes polarizing. Because he has renounced the entire previous political order and the “factionalism and conflicts associated with parties”, “his political base must be a movement” that overcomes these past liabilities of the country’s system of governance (O’Donnell, 60). Second, the elected leader assumes a messianic mission to save the country and uses highly passionate and populist rhetoric. This is closely related to his ability to galvanize and channel people’s anger and disappointment with the existing political reality.

Further, O’Donnell describes the consequences of the elections, in terms of policies, governance, representation, and other requirements that delegated power entails. The first premise of delegative democracies is that the winner on the election is “entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office” (O’Donnell, 59). As mentioned above, the president promises sweeping changes in the political and economic order, and the wide authority that the majority vote in the elections has bestowed upon him is enough to justify any policy that he implements. This supports O’Donnell’s assertion that “DD is strongly majoritarian. It consists of constituting, through clean elections, a majority that empowers someone to become, for a given number of years, the embodiment and interpreter of the high interests of the nation” (O’Donnell, 60). In this context, the author claims that the system “is more democratic, but less liberal, than representative democracy” (O’Donnell, 60).

Because the president’s mandate of power is virtually unlimited, other institutions such as the legislative and judiciary are considered nuisances in the decision-making process, and over

time, their importance diminishes as they are constantly circumvented. Hence, while the president is accountable to the voters (vertical accountability), he completely ignores other institutions that could check his authority (thus eliminating any horizontal accountability). This is one of the fundamental differences that O'Donnell sees between delegative and representative democracies and his major dissatisfaction with the former.

In fact, O'Donnell furthers his criticism of delegative democracy in a later essay called "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies", where he warns of the potential that a majoritarian regime holds to become authoritarian: "Democracy without liberalism and republicanism would become majority tyranny" (O'Donnell, 115). The two critical moderating factors preventing this outcome are, in his view, republicanism and liberalism, which foster representation and institutional checks and balances. The author ends the paper with a list of specific recommendations for enhancing horizontal accountability. Overall, this shows O'Donnell's adamant view in support of representative democracy underpinned by strong mechanisms for vertical as well as horizontal accountability.

In a later paper titled "Illusions about Consolidation", O'Donnell brings this idea even further, recognizing the fact that a number of "third-wave" democracies are still not completely consolidated more than ten years after their transition. The author emphasizes the influence that established notions of democracy have had on the analysis of the concept itself. He states, "we must begin by freeing ourselves from some illusions. [...] students of democratization are still swayed by the mood of the times that many countries have more or less recently passed through. We believe that democracy, even in the rather modest guise of polyarchy, is vastly preferable to the assortment of authoritarian regimes that it replaced" (O'Donnell, 45). In the final analysis, this shows that O'Donnell goes even further in his dissatisfaction with the partial democratization of some regimes, paradoxically even questioning the value of transition in cases when it does not

lead to a better quality of life. This is the point that O'Donnell's own analysis of the concept of delegative democracy reaches.

A more recent mediation on the issue is presented by Francisco Panizza, who focuses on the interplay between economics and politics and its reflection on the post-transition political systems in Latin America. Panizza argues that O'Donnell's "model fails to explain why some presidents have been more successful than others in promoting economic reform, and it underestimates the importance of the politico-institutional settings in which these reforms take place." Here Panizza claims that O'Donnell has underestimated the strength of the existing institutions in post-transition countries, suggesting that they are always in a subordinate position to the strong executive. Moreover, Panizza opposes O'Donnell's skepticism about the potential for economic reform to lead to political change. It is clear that O'Donnell prioritizes the political aspect of transitions and believes that this is a necessary prerequisite for the economic reform of the state. This is a fundamental assumption that justifies his focus on accountability and institutional parity but fails to address the immediate need to alleviate the economic calamities often associated with political transition.

A similar discussion of the importance of economic conditions in the transition process is presented by Haggard and Kaufman in "The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions". The authors expand on O'Donnell's theory by establishing economics as the sole deterministic force behind the emergence of delegative democracy. A phenomenon observed in a number of cases in Latin America has been that severe economic crises have led to the emergence of strong centralized states with leaders in firm control of the tools of government. The authors claim that high inflation in particular has led to "institutional dilemmas", requiring harsh "stabilization packages" whose implementation calls for autocratic rule (Haggard and Kaufman, 1997).

It is evident that the literature on delegative democracy after 1994 has provided some valuable contributions to the evolution of the concept. The focus on the complex role of economic circumstances as well as the institutional strength of transition democracies is a useful starting point for evaluating O'Donnell's theory. Thus, I will use the evolution of the delegative democracy framework³ to examine and juxtapose the cases of Menem and Putin's presidencies. However, in discussing the two, I will also extract the common and unique features that they exhibit, looking at the ways in which these could inform and enrich the theory of delegative democracy. In this way, I expect to first use the existing literature and analyze two specific country cases and then employ that in a final synthesis of improvements and evaluations of O'Donnell's theory.

III. The Long Road to Consolidation: A Familiar Latin American Landscape?

Carlos Menem's presidency in Argentina between 1989 and 1998 has been widely regarded as a typical case of delegative democracy that adheres to O'Donnell's classification. Menem was elected on a strong populist platform, which stemmed from the Peronist party broad appeal among the working class of the country.⁴ Moreover, in terms of the presence of a serious politico-economic crisis, the Argentine case supports O'Donnell's theory. The messianic nature of Menem and his administration was also a factor in the elections, and his swift implementation of neoliberalism falls within the expected behavior of a strong leader governing as he sees fit. Menem also emerged as a PJ maverick, an outsider disconnected from the failed administrations of the past. Furthermore, the wide executive power he wielded translated into control over the

³ This encompasses both O'Donnell's framework, as well as the aforementioned later contributions.

⁴ However, while he used the party's historical strengths, Menem did not become their prisoner as far as policy goes. He instead consolidated power in order to implement the economic reforms that the country direly needed.

executive branch and a weakening of any horizontal accountability. Thus, it seems that Argentina under Menem perfectly fits into O'Donnell's definition of delegative democracy.

Nevertheless, a closer look at Menem's personality and the consequences of his presidency renders a different conclusion. In fact, one could argue that Menem's top-down politics fostered a revitalization of civil society, which eventually consolidated Argentine democracy. In "The Nature of the New Argentine Democracy: the Delegative Democracy Argument Revisited", Enrique Peruzzotti explains the ways in which Menem's rule in fact deviates from the established theoretical framework. First, the author argues that "concentrating executive power and administrative technocracy contributed to restore the steering capacities of the administration" (Peruzzotti, 144). Moreover, he claims that Menem in fact contributed to the democratic consolidation of the state by restoring efficiency to the policy-making process, "thus solving the effectiveness crisis that had strained Argentine democracy" (Peruzzotti, 141). This is supported by Steven Levitsky's argument that in alleviating the economic crisis through radical economic reforms, Menem created the necessary conditions for addressing the lack of accountability and representation in the system, which eventually revitalized civil society and led to the full consolidation of Argentine democracy after 1998. Thus, it becomes clear that once the grave economic situation was alleviated, the Menem's postcrisis delegative style of governance was challenged by both civil society, as well as other institutions.⁵

However, this process would have been impossible without first addressing the most immediate economic concerns that existed in 1989. Here Peruzzotti agrees with Haggard and Kaufman in underlining the importance of economic reform before political change takes place.

⁵ This is precisely what Levitsky argues in "The 'Normalization' of Argentine Politics". He states that Menem's "government fared poorly on most postcrisis issues (especially corruption), its image began to erode as the atmosphere of crisis subsided" (Levitsky, 62). This shows that by using delegative democracy to address the economic crisis, Menem was preparing the long-run erosion of his popularity and the delegative mandate as a whole.

In 1989, he argues, “demands for constitutionalisation and political accountability were postponed in the face of a more immediate need at re-establishing normal economic conditions” (Peruzzotti, 146). Javier Corrales in “Do Economic Crises Contribute to Economic Reform?” furthers this point, focusing on the role of hyperinflation and the sense of urgency that they create: “hyperinflation makes everyone, without exception, demand stability” (Corrales, 627). Moreover, the author claims that hyperinflation creates patriotism, a desire to save the nation and create change. Needless to say, in 1989, Argentina experienced its gravest period of hyperinflation, which illustrates the validity of Corrales’ argument. Nevertheless, he also recognizes the potential negative impact of economic crises; in fact, he claims that hyperinflation and the high expectations of the people almost toppled the Menem regime during the first year and a half of his presidency. All this confirms that O’Donnell does not pay due attention to the importance of economic conditions, and when he does, he suggests that in the case of Argentina, the economic crisis was only a positive catalyst for Menem’s presidency. Thus, here we reach the first major inconsistency within the existing framework on delegative democracy.

Another aspect of the Argentine case that ostensibly corroborates O’Donnell’s theory is the presidential practice of excessive use of vetoes and decrees to shape policy, as well as the apparent circumvention of the legislature. However, Peruzzotti has a different take on those: “It is congressional autonomy that has been forcing the executive to bypass normal legislative procedures” (Peruzzotti 152). This argument closely follows Panizza’s critique of O’Donnell in terms of the strength of existing institutions. While O’Donnell underestimates the autonomy and strength of institutions within the delegative framework, it is evident that those were quite potent and firmly in place even during Menem’s presidency, and the pressure of circumventing them was on him. He was in conflict with horizontal accountability agents precisely because they had the capacity to curb the policies he wanted to introduce. This is quite different from O’Donnell’s

explanation that other actors in the political sphere are merely “nuisances” to the strong executive (O’Donnell, 60).

In this context, both the decrees and vetoes that Menem employed excessively were the tools that he needed, in order to overcome the strong institutions of horizontal accountability. Moreover, those were not weakened during his presidency, but rather became stronger, and together were responsible for pressuring him against running for a third presidential term. After 1998, those agents reclaimed their primary role in the democratic process and facilitated the consolidation of democracy. That is why, after the 2001 crisis, elections did not lead to anew period of hypermajoritarian rule. In short, the evidence suggests that Menem’s presidency left a legacy of strong horizontal accountability that will be hard to circumvent in the future.

Overall, the case of Argentina is, on the surface, an ideal case of delegative democracy. The concentration of power in the executive, the strong, charismatic leader, the radical policy shifts, and the lack of horizontal accountability all appear in agreement with O’Donnell’s theory. However, upon closer analysis, Menem’s regime and its consequences deviate dramatically from the orthodox definition of delegative democracy. Firstly, institutions of horizontal accountability are in fact much stronger than O’Donnell assumes; secondly, Menem’s executive power was an impetus behind the ultimate consolidation of democracy; and lastly, the economic crisis was at the outset a danger to, rather than a positive force behind, the strength of the delegative mandate. What is more, the Argentine case opposes O’Donnell’s most fundamental assumption, which places political change as the first and most important step after a democratic transition. In fact, the immediate pertinence of economic circumstances is a much stronger driver for government institutions and civil society.

IV. Reaching the Threshold in Delegative Democracy: A View from Eastern Europe

The case of Russia puts O'Donnell's theory on delegative democracy in a different context. The concept itself has been crafted to explain primarily cases in Latin America, but applying it in a cross-regional framework provides another useful tool for evaluating and critiquing O'Donnell's definition. At the outset, it is important to note that Russia has never experienced any degree of representative democracy. After the fall of the monarchy in 1917, the country was governed for more than seventy years by a strong totalitarian regime. The communist party had all the power, fusing together the various branches of government and going through intensive and milder periods of personality cults. As a result, the transition in 1991 could not possibly be expected to bring immediate democratization on all levels of government. In "The Problem of Executive Power in Russia", Lilia Shevtsova corroborates this idea, emphasizing that the "habit and tradition of monolithic government, personified by a charismatic leader, remain powerful within both the Russian establishment and Russian society as a whole" (Shevtsova, 34). All this shows that institutions of horizontal accountability have been traditionally weak, which would be expected to facilitate the emergence of delegative democracy.

In fact, many claimed that Russia was a democracy after the arrival of Boris Yeltsin, an outsider who managed to mobilize the masses and lead a bloodless coup in 1991. A closer look at Yeltsin's nine years in power, however, reveals the power dynamics between the various branches of government, an important feature of the Russian case that has remained largely unchanged after Putin's election in 2000. This is also an important point of departure when analyzing the case of Russia within the context of delegative democracy.

In "The Politics of Russia's Partial Democracy", Neil Robinson suggests that the Duma has always been merely a rubber stamp to the decisions of the President. If it rejects more than three times his nominee for Prime Minister, the President has the power to dissolve it and appoint

whomever he wants, triggering parliamentary elections. Indeed, Yeltsin used the threat of dissolution a number of times, rendering the balancing role of the legislative branch irrelevant. Moreover, appointments of cabinets and judges on the Supreme Court were also among the prerogatives of the executive, which classified Russia as much more than a presidential republic. What is more, Shevtsova discusses the near impossibility of removing the Russian president from power: “two-thirds of the State Duma must vote to charge him with treason or some other grave crime, These charges must be validated by the Supreme and Constitutional Courts. Then two-thirds of the Federation Council must vote to remove him” (Shevtsova, 33).

The constitutional strength of the executive relative to other governmental branches would suggest that O’Donnell’s claim of weak horizontal accountability stemming from fragile institutions is supported by the facts. Nevertheless, Robinson refutes this assumption: “the ability of the Duma to present a unified face has allowed it to pass much more legislation than it is commonly given credit for” (Robinson, 2003). This shows that – contrary to what would be expected – it is not the inherent weakness of the legislative that facilitates the delegative aspect of governance in Russia. In fact, it is the relative strength of the Duma, which has repeatedly forced Yeltsin and more recently, Putin, to coerce and threaten representatives about the way they vote on legislation.

Once we have built a complete picture of the political conditions in place before Putin’s ascendancy to power, an obvious conclusion emerges: in 2000 Russia was already a delegative democracy, in terms of the strength of the executive, the marginalization of institutions of horizontal accountability, and the high but declining popularity of the president. I will argue that after the democratic transfer of power in 2000, the consolidation of delegative democracy in Russia continued, a unique phenomenon that O’Donnell does not address. In addition, it is also

important to examine Putin's regime and place it on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism.

If we adopt the characteristics of delegative democracy as a starting point, we would expect that Putin came to power as a result of a deep social and politico-economic crisis. In fact, this was not the case. He was one of the "nominees" that Yeltsin selected as his successors and won democratic elections in 2000. Evidently, this sets him apart from other presidents of delegative democracies. At the same time, however, he was, and still is, very popular among ordinary voters, often employing populist tools to garner wide support for his policies. This brings him closer to O'Donnell's characterization of delegative democracy as far as the nature of the leader is concerned.

When looking at the policies he implemented, however, one does not see the radical, polarizing reforms that were typical for strong presidents in Latin America. Even though this is one of the seminal features of delegative democracy, Putin's social and economic policies are not strikingly radical or contradictory as those of delegative rulers in other countries. In terms of the strength of the executive branch, however, Putin surpasses O'Donnell's theory. While it is evident that horizontal accountability is weakened and the executive has disproportionately larger prerogatives than any other branch of government, questions about the presence of vertical accountability in Russia have emerged. This stemmed partially from the 2000 elections and was further corroborated by the Putin's 2004 re-election, which was characterized as "free but not fair" by outside observers.

This has led some to venture calling Russia a country on the path towards authoritarianism.⁶ A closer look into Putin's domestic policy in Russia after 2000 should reveal

⁶ In fact, even O'Donnell recognizes that "In DDs, parties, the congress, and the press are generally free to voice their criticisms" (O'Donnell, 61). This certainly appears to be questionable under Putin's administration in Russia.

whether the country already stands beyond delegative democracy and much closer to even more centralized forms of rule. The president's current domestic agenda can simply be characterized as a gradual encroachment upon individual rights and freedoms that are considered the foundation of representative democracies. Putin builds upon Yeltsin's legacy of strong executive, but some of his actions surpass the delegative nature of many of Yeltsin's policies.

In "Russian Democracy under Putin", Colton and McFaul provide a useful analysis of today's state of democracy in Russia. Firstly, the situation in Chechnya has widely been recognized as a persistent violation of human rights that Putin has staunchly defined in terms of the country's sovereign right to address internal conflicts and overall domestic policy. Moreover, the president has initiated periodic crackdowns on any domestic media attempting to criticize his controversial policies. Broadcast content has been openly censored, outlets have been closed or closely monitored, and journalists have often been threatened or physically abused because of the reports and analysis they attempted to present to the general public. What is more, the freedom of association has also been egregiously trampled. Human rights organizations and various other NGOs in the country have been pressured not to release information about internal issues in Russia. Even international non-profits have been subject to the watchful eye of the state. In terms of economy, the income gap has been growing, with capital concentrated in the hands of a tremendously wealthy oligarchy that is often regarded as richer than many billionaires in the West.

As far as official government policy goes, Putin has not flouted the 1993 Constitution. However, the super-majorities that he has assembled in the Duma, as well as his efforts in weakening the Federation Council has convinced Colton and McFaul that democracy in Russia has to be qualified at least as "managed", if not completely delegative (Colton, McFaul, 144). Moreover, Putin has not allowed a level playing field for all parties in parliamentary elections,

hoping to eventually marginalize some of them, leaving only the Communist Party and Unified Russia as the only major players. Despite these egregious deviations from what Shevtsova calls “liberal democracy”, Colton and McFaul recognize that “the regime has not become a total dictatorship” because “democratic rules and procedures are still embedded in the regime, and democratic norms permeate society” (Colton and McFaul, 149). This shows that rather than altogether placing Russia in the authoritarian camp, expanding the definition of delegative democracy itself could be enough to provide a theoretical context for Putin’s current abuse of power.

Moreover, as Shevtsova argues in “The Limits of Bureaucratic Authoritarianism”, a great deal about the theoretical context of the Russian regime will be revealed as the 2008 presidential elections approach. Many believe that Putin is capable of changing the constitution and running for a third term. Others oppose this view, saying that he will simply select his successor and continue the trend of limited democracy. Regardless of the outcome in 2008, Russia today has a unique place within the theoretical conversation on democracy. Moreover, as argued previously, both Putin and Menem’s presidencies in Russia and Argentina significantly deviate from the existing theoretical framework on delegative democracy. Thus, an in-depth analysis of the commonalities between the two cases will reveal the aspects in which O’Donnell’s original theory can be evaluated and improved.

V. Redefining the Game: Menem, Putin, and the Importance of Universal Theories

The literature of democratic transitions often employs comparison of cases within a single region. In this context, Menem and Putin’s presidencies in Argentina and Russia comprise an unusual pair of case studies, especially as tools for evaluating the merits of the theoretical

framework of delegative democracy⁷. However, the two exhibit a series of unexpected similarities when compared against the characteristics that O'Donnell presents. There are also significant differences between the two regimes⁸, and yet, the features they display call for a new, revised definition of delegative democracy, that uses O'Donnell's theory as a starting point.

There are two aspects in which the two cases are similar. Both Menem and Putin rose to power as charismatic, populist leaders with a wide base of support among the people. Even though Putin could not be considered as an outsider, particularly since he was selected as Yeltsin's successor and used to be the former director of the KGB, he resembles Menem with his strong personality, unwavering belief in the policies he enacts, and the drive to centralize power. Moreover, the two cases are alike in the degree to which they deviate from O'Donnell's catalyst for the emergence of delegative democracy. In the case of Argentina, the economic and political crisis considerably destabilized – rather than strengthened – Menem's delegative mandate after its first year in office. It was not until 1991 that the regime was firmly in the driving seat of the economic and political life of the country, riding the wave of popular support after the success of the Convertibility Plan. Similarly, Russia in 2000 was not experiencing an economic crisis on the same scale described in the overall theory of delegative democracy. In essence, Putin's presidency emerged as an extension and deepening of the political dynamics created by the Yeltsin administration. The two are also similar in corroborating later theories, especially Panizza's view that existing institutions in a delegative democracy are not weakened – but on the contrary, they become stronger – as they interact with the centralized executive. This means that

⁷ After all, the concept emerged within the Latin American political context.

⁸ Even though Menem and Putin's regimes come from different decades (1990s and the 2000s respectively), this paper will show that there is merit to comparing the two, especially since this would enrich and expand on the existing literature on delegative democracies. Moreover, the time difference between the two presidencies does not preclude the fact that they share a series of commonalities.

both Russia and Argentina exhibit features that place them outside the existing theoretical framework of delegative democracy.

At the same time, the differences between the two cases reinforce the need for a new framework for delegative democracy that fully accommodates various cross-regional cases and transcends the Latin American context in which it originally emerged. Firstly, Argentina had previous experience, though to a limited extent, with representative governance during the Alfonsín administration. In turn, this facilitated the consolidation of representative democracy after 1998. Contrastingly, Russia had never enjoyed a completely representative liberal democracy. Moreover, even though in Argentina the 1989 elections were perceived as a critical moment in the history of the country, they carried a relatively smaller importance in Russia in 2000. This also defined the disparate nature of the policies enacted by Putin and Menem. While the former preferred stability and did not enact any sweeping changes, the latter quickly reformed the existing economic framework under increasing pressure from hyperinflation, soaring unemployment, and external debt. Further, while Menem was forced to relinquish ambitions for a third term in office, thus indicating the end of delegative rule in Argentina, a relatively smooth transition of power between Yeltsin and Putin implied the endurance of delegative democracy in Russia. What is more, in the current political context in Russia, it is unclear whether civil society would be capable of preventing Putin from running for an unconstitutional third term in 2008 or simply give power to another nominated successor. Nevertheless, both the similarities and disparities between the two cases support the argument that O'Donnell's theory needs to be revisited and expanded, in order to confirm its professed universal applicability.

A comprehensive representation of the existing theory of delegative democracy, as well as a comparison between Putin's Russia and Menem's Argentina relative to the theory can be found in the following table.

Table 1: Features of the Existing Delegative Democracy Framework in the Literature as Applicable to the Cases of Argentina and Russia.

Categories	Menem’s Argentina	Putin’s Russia
Background: The country had previous experience with representative democracy	Yes	No
Catalyst: A deep socio-economic crisis	Yes	No
Elections: Highly majoritarian, providing a sweeping delegative mandate	Yes	Yes
Leader: Charismatic and populist; a relative outsider	Yes	Yes
Policy: Sweeping reforms, aiming to address existing crisis	Yes	No
Governance: Marginalization of institutions of accountability and centralization of executive power	Yes	Yes
Institutions: Existing institutions of horizontal accountability are inherently weak and easily dominated by the executive	No	No

As the table illustrates, the similarities between the two cases outweigh the differences when Argentina and Russia are examined through the lens of both O’Donnell’s framework, as well as later extensions of the theory⁹. This shows that O’Donnell’s framework is insufficient to fully examine the two cases. What is more, the categories where the two cases diverge constitute some domains in which O’Donnell’s theory can be expanded and enhanced.

In order to accommodate the varying cases that fall between representative democracy and authoritarianism, a comprehensive definition of delegative democracy is necessary. O’Donnell’s model is a good starting point, but it fails to adjust for the unique cases of delegative democracy that have developed recently. Moreover, as was previously shown, it does not completely encompass the features of delegative democracies *per se*, either. Menem’s regime in

⁹ For a complete overview of those, refer to Section II of this paper.

Argentina in the early 1990s exhibits important characteristics that are not found in O'Donnell's model. At the same time, Russia under Putin presents an even bigger deviation from the orthodox definition of delegative democracy. Thus, after tracing the similarities and differences between the two cases, several critical additions and qualifications to O'Donnell's theory are necessary.

First, as far as the catalyst behind the emergence of delegative democracy, the theory should be more flexible, allowing for regimes that have not experienced crisis, or the crisis has not been completely helpful for the consolidation of executive power. Secondly, the theory should accommodate both countries with previous experience in representative democracy, as well as those that traditionally have been governed by undemocratic regimes. Thirdly, in terms of the policy that the elected leader enacts, theory should either predict sweeping changes, or it should imply stability, the executive still being the overwhelmingly dominant branch of government. This is mainly observed in cases of transfer of delegative power, a phenomenon that O'Donnell does not address at all, but which is evident when studying Putin's abuse of power in Russia. Fourth, existing institutions of horizontal accountability are indeed weakened in most cases of delegative democracy, but there are also cases in which they become stronger, and in this way they force the executive to centralize power.

Lastly, a stronger overall emphasis on the existing economic circumstances is necessary, since those almost always trump the less tangible need for democratic consolidation (especially once free elections are instituted). This is especially important in the case of Argentina, where the 1989 crisis precluded any attempts to first strengthen the representative democratic system. The importance of economic conditions is also strongly supported in the literature after 1994, and it appears that O'Donnell disregards their fundamental importance for the emergence and sustenance of delegative democracies. As a whole, changes in the delegative democracy paradigm are critical, so that a viable theoretical framework is constructed that fully encompasses

the scope between representative democracies and more intrusive regimes such as authoritarianism. What is more, the cases of Argentina and Russia have shown that there are many more similarities than differences between the two, and this justifies the development of a universal definition of a political concept that encompasses not only Latin America, but also the majority of the other so-called “third-wave” democracies.

When the cases of Menem’s Argentina and Putin’s Russia are evaluated in the context of this improved definition of delegative democracy, one could argue that they truly fit within the theory, helping O’Donnell’s original idea to transcend its regional roots and become universally applicable. Thus, while the existing literature on delegative democracy informed the analysis of Menem and Putin’s presidencies, the two case studies also enrich and expand the definition of the concept. This has contributed to the theoretical lens through which one views regimes that hover between consolidated representative democracy and authoritarianism.

VI. Conclusion

The comparison between Menem and Putin’s presidencies in Argentina and Russia has yielded a critical evaluation of the existing theoretical framework of delegative democracy. Starting with O’Donnell’s definition of the concept in 1994 and tracing the development of the term in the literature, it becomes clear that a rethinking of its ramifications is necessary to account for various features that unconsolidated democracies have exhibited recently. Therefore, this paper has contributed to the current discussion of delegative democracy and democracy as a whole. It has revisited the central elements of O’Donnell’s argument, expanding on their meaning and implications. Along with a more flexible set of conditions for the emergence of delegative democracy, I have proposed a more comprehensive view of the type of policies typically promulgated by the executive. Moreover, I have clarified the nature of institutions of horizontal

accountability. Finally, I have couched the entire theory of delegative democracy within the critical importance of economic circumstances, rather than considerations about democratic consolidation.

As we have observed during the transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America, democracy has increasingly become a less lucid and universal term as it develops in various regions of the world. The recent emergence of a “grey” area between consolidated representative democracies and authoritarian regimes needs to be addressed theoretically. While O’Donnell began a discussion of the issue in 1994, this has been a task that the literature has so far failed to fully accomplish. Therefore, this essay has aimed at taking another step towards developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that reflects the various degrees of democratization that emerged in regions all the way from Argentina in the 1990s to Russia in the 2000s.

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