Conclusion

Executive presidency in USSR as well as in Russia was established during the last years of the Soviet era, although the dominance of a single leader was of much older origin. Presidency in USSR was formally constituted in 1990. Russia gained its presidency a year later, in June 1991, when Boris Yeltsin defeated five other candidates in a popular election. Gorbachev’s attempt to reforms Soviet system through perestroika and glasnost shook the whole political system of union and the republics of USSR. These reforms were one of the main reasons that resulted in the adoption of presidency in Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republic (RSFSR) or Russian First Republic of 1991. Likewise, the institutional conflict (executive-legislature) and the social and economic instability during 1992-93, finally led to adoption of present political system characterised by strong presidency.

Russian presidency as discussed in the first chapter does not fit into the classical definition of presidential system. American political system is considered by many as ‘pure form of presidential system’. Presidential system of government is characterised by a constitutional and political separation of powers between legislative, executive and judiciary ensuring checks and balances among the three organs of the state. Moreover, the president is popularly elected and is both the head of state and the head of the government (cabinet).

Russian presidency does not either fit into the definition of semi-presidential system, which can be found in French Fifth Republic. Semi-presidential regime in France is referred to as a system of ‘dual powers’. Semi-presidential system of government is characterised by the fact that the head of state is directly elected by universal suffrage and that he posses certain powers which exceed those of a head of state in a normal parliamentary regime. However, the government still consists of a cabinet formed by prime minister and ministers who can be dismissed by a parliamentary vote.

Russian presidency by definition fits into what academicians’ describe as ‘super-presidential system’. A system understood as constitutional order that provides
for an extraordinary strong president and relatively weak legislature. In Superpresidential system the president enjoys the powers to legislate by decree, to determine the composition and dismissal of the government without legislative approval, and to shield the executive branch from the parliamentary scrutiny.

Russian presidency which emerged out of the desideratum due to socioeconomic and political conditions of Russia in particular and USSR at large during the early 1990s. Since its adoption it has augmented its power very rapidly. The expanding powers of the presidency were at first delegated by the parliament, there after converted itself into self-sustaining. The growth of presidential power above all other organs of the state has in sum affected the democratisation process in Russia. The growth of presidential power can be traced to the referendum of March 1991 and the constitutional amendment in May 1991 that created executive presidency in Russia. Initially, against the background of fast changing political scenario and economic hardship, Yeltsin convinced the Congress to empower him (president) to issue binding presidential decrees.

However, the honeymoon between the president and the parliament did not last long. There was a bitter conflict between the communist dominated parliament and reformist president over the constitution making and the economic reforms initiated by Yeltsin. The conflict finally culminated into tragic event of violence on 4th of October, when the deputies resisted the dissolutions of the parliament by refusing to leave the house. Yeltsin called out the army and forcefully seized and bombarded the parliament building with tanks killing at least 160 people, an event which is popularly known as 'October Revolution'. The power which the parliament granted to Yeltsin initially to promote economic reform programs later dissolved the parliament violently and consumed the parliament’s independence post 1993 constitution. Though this tragic event gave victory to Yeltsin, his economic reform and agenda of constitutional making, it was by no means democratic and was the darkest hour of Russian democracy.

Expectedly, the president crafted a constitution with the view to control the parliament and to prevent repetition of conflict and struggle between the executive and legislative authorities that had so nearly destroyed the Russian state by strengthening the former at the coast of the latter. Another reason for creating strong
presidency was the belief among Yeltsin supporters that, only strong presidential system could institute radical economic reform and any dissent could hamper the economic reform. The new Russian constitution of 1993 legitimated the dominant position of the president (executive). Complex arrangements for amending the constitution were included to limit the ability of opponents to tinker with new set of arrangements. A strong and irremovable president was made to act as a focus of stability, while the government was largely removed from the control of parliament.

The constitution of 1993 might have succeeded in preventing the repetition of October 1993 incident and might have worked as a catalyst for prevention of future institutional conflict between the presidency and the legislature. However, establishing strong presidency by no means has helped democratisation process in Russia. The president’s power to dissolve the Duma, reject laws passed by the legislature, power to rule by decree, and the difficult procedure to impeach the president, has truly subordinated the legislature to the presidency. The other organ of the state the judiciary too is not spared from the shadow of the presidency. Judiciary like in the days of Soviet era is dependent on the executive. All the judges of the Russian Supreme Court and The Constitutional Court are appointed by the president. It is also dependent on the executive for execution of its judgments and is at the mercy of the presidency for its resources. The subordination of these two organs of the state to the presidency has defeated the most important principle of democracy i.e. the separation of power and checks and balances among the three organs.

Putin who succeeded Yeltsin did not leave any stone unturned to further strengthen the institution of presidency and recentralise power. Yeltsin left a legacy of dubious relationship between the centre and regions characterised by a complex and unstable balance drawn between the claimed prerogatives of the centre and the normative and de facto powers of the units. The tension between central and regional claims concerned not only practical issues of governance and finances, but also focused on fundamental competing sovereignty claims.

Putin started his campaign with the centre-regional relation by dividing Russia into Seven Super Region, the very act which was against the spirit of true federalism in its essence. Federalism is characterised by division of power between centre and the regions and certain autonomy to the latter. Second, he restructured the
composition of the Federation Council by removing the regional governors and regional assembly speakers, who earlier used to occupy seats in the Federation Council and influenced the federal decision-making, with two individuals appointed by the region representing the executive and legislature. This change has further created discontentment with the regional leaders. Most importantly, Putin on 13 September 2004 put an end to the gubernatorial elections, to be replaced by the direct appointment of governors by the Russian president subject to nominal approval by local parliaments. These moves of Putin have strengthened the presidential control over the regions by curbing the regional autonomy, a move that has defeated the spirit of federalism. Hence, federalism in Russia under Putin emerged as a federal in form and unitary in content.

Civil society during Soviet times was non existent as a result of the negative effects of the rigid economic, socio-political and legal system, and ideological uniformity. Gorbachev’s policy of reforms i.e. perestroika and glasnost, paved the way for the dramatic changes towards democratic governance. It was these two policies, which laid down the foundations for the process of democratization in Russian society in 1980s. Innumerable dissident groups emerged in legitimate shape as informal organisations and associations, which began to function openly. This led to the rebirth of civil society in the Russia as a democratic alternative to the authoritarian socialism.

The post-Soviet Russian society during the first decade showed some positive features of the development of civil society (third sector). The 1993 constitution of Russian Federation not only guarantees individual rights and liberties (Articles 17-46) but, it recognises the principle of equality and self-determination of people. The constitution further ensured certain democratic principles, such as, political pluralism (regular elections, multi-party system and opposition), free market and private property, rule of law, and an open society of pluralism and diversity (free press, voluntary groups and associations which challenge the state action). These were reflected in emergence of a ‘civic culture’. Although, the existence of formal democratic structure in Russia provides a good scope for the development of societal powers at the expense of the state power, mere existence of such features and activities does not guarantee the sustenance and furtherance of a mature civil society.
The civic enthusiasm that burst forth and spilled onto the streets of major Russian cities turned out to be mostly fleeting after a decade. Putin’s democratic roll back, such as recentralisation of power, law on Doctrine of Information Security, stringent election law for political parties, law on the control of NGOs, disregard of property rights (e.g. Handling of Yokos affair), and poor record on human rights, might have ensured strong state but it has hindered the democratisation and growth of civil society. These developments were gargantuan democratic roll back that Russia witnessed. Putin’s weakening of independent institutions and autonomous political groups have also created a political system which, in the wrong hands, could easily morph into a full-fledged repressive autocratic regime.

Moreover, it has been said that history predisposes Russians’ attitudes toward mutual distrust and toward stoic acceptance of what the government does rather than confidence in the government. Russian attitudes towards civic life may themselves be an obstacle that must be overcome for democracy to take root. Political interests still exists and now more so than ever before, citizens have a stake in what the government does.

The principal flaws of the presidential system in Russia is the weak incentives for the formation of parliamentary parties, charismatic leaders instead of parties with programs, polarization of the electorate, and authoritarian tendencies. These flaws endanger the federal division of powers and diminish the federal potential for conflict resolution. The approval of a strong presidency by regional executive elites could be relied on so long as these elites are appointed by the president himself. With president Putin’s initiative of further centralisation and enhancement of presidential power today Russia is truly a presidential federalism. In essence, Moscow has moved away from the conception of Russia as a multi-ethnic state.

The increasing role and powers of the president in effect contradicts the democratic principle. Some political analysts say that it is only a ‘delegative democracy,’ while others say that it ensures an ‘authoritarian president’. In other words, the model of government that emerges in Russia today is both pseudo parliamentary and Superpresidential. The president wields extensive powers, incomparable to either French system or American system. Though democracy is the
basic principle behind the Russian Constitution of 1993, economic liberalism took precedence over democracy. Hence, the constitution has ensured strong presidency at the cost of the legislature. The constitution was drafted with the single purpose of legitimising a strong executive who would be instrumental in changing the state controlled economy into private one.

Both president Yeltsin and Putin have tried to make the presidency the central institution of the Russian political system. Many observers consider the “super-presidential” nature of Russia's political system to be the source of many problems, such as low accountability of officials, a weak party system, and disengagement of citizens from the state. A strong presidency might have served the purpose it was intended for, but has not been conducive for the consolidation of a true vibrant civil society and liberal democracy in Russia.