# Project Report

to the Swedish Research Council  
[Selected parts for dissemination purposes]

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<td>Project title</td>
<td>Semipresidentialism och regeringskapacitet i transitionsländer</td>
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<td>Semi-Presidentialism and Governability in Transitional Regimes</td>
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Project aim

“The overall purpose of this comparative project is to provide new theoretical and empirical knowledge on the implications of semi-presidentialism in transitional regimes. Our aim is to examine to what extent and in what ways the institutional interaction between the president, prime minister and parliament, matter to governability (in terms of policy-making performance and cabinet stability) in semi-presidential regimes. Based on a set of theoretically derived hypotheses, the project combines a quantitative analysis including all (about 50) semi-presidential countries around the world, with a most-similar and pairwise comparison of four post-communist cases: two EU democracies with premier-presidential systems, Poland and Romania, and two, less than democratic, countries with president-parliamentary systems, Ukraine and Russia.

[.] We propose a project focusing on policy performance in relation to institutional interaction between the president, the prime minister and the parliament. Understanding in detail this institutional interaction, and what possible implications it may have for the functioning of the political system, would allow us to provide possible answers also to the “grand” question of semi-presidentialism and its effects on regime direction in transitional regimes. The expected results of the project would thus be highly relevant for theoretical and empirical research about constitutional design and semi-presidentialism, as well as to international experts engaging in constitutional engineering.” (p. 2 in the original research proposal)

Project results

This comparative project has addressed the role of semi-presidentialism in transitional regimes. In recent decades, semi-presidentialism has become a very popular form of government. Employing Robert Elgie’s (1999) broad definition, semi-presidentialism is where the constitution includes both a directly elected president and a prime minister and cabinet accountable to the parliament. With this wide definition there are now more than 50 countries in the world with some form of semi-presidential constitution and more than 20 of these are European countries. Despite its increasing occurrence, however, the implications of semi-presidentialism in transitional regimes remain understudied, especially in comparison to parliamenterarism and presidentialism.

Our stated purpose of the project was “to provide new theoretical and empirical knowledge on the implications of semi-presidentialism in transitional regimes” by examining “to what extent and in what ways the institutional interaction between the president, prime minister and parliament, matter to governability (in terms of policy-making performance and cabinet stability) in semi-presidential regimes”.

We believe that the project, overall, has made significant contributions in regard to this objective. Based on a set of theoretically derived propositions, the project has combined large-N statistical analyses including all existing semi-presidential countries with focused comparisons and case studies of East and Central European countries with semi-presidential governance. Below, we provide a brief summary on key aspects of our findings.

Democracy and government performance of semi-presidential regimes
Do semi-presidential regimes perform worse or better than other regime types? Following Juan Linz’s (1990) argument that presidentialism and semi-presidentialism are less
conducive to democracy than parliamentarism a few previous studies have empirically analysed the functioning and performance of semi-presidentialism. However, these studies have investigated the performance of semi-presidential sub-types in isolation from other constitutional regimes. By using indicators on government performance and democracy, Sedelius and Linde (2018) examined the two main subtypes of semi-presidentialism (premier-presidential and president-parliamentary regimes) in relation to parliamentarism and presidentialism across 173 countries. Our main finding is that premier-presidential regimes show performance records on par with parliamentarism and on some measures even better. President-parliamentary regimes, on the contrary, show performance records worse than all other regime types on most of our included measures, and especially on democracy. The results thus support the inherent risks associated with president-parliamentarism and it confirms the empirical relevance of differing between the two subtypes of semi-presidentialism.

On the regional level, the pattern of democratisation in Eastern Europe lends support to the risks associated with introducing strong presidencies into the constitution. The East European countries with the strongest power vested in their presidencies are also the ones with the worst records of democratisation, and president-parliamentarism as such finds no positive support by our findings in this region (Sedelius and Åberg 2018). Following the post-communist transitions, parliamentarism and premier-presidentialism prevailed in Central Europe, whereas president-parliamentarism became the dominant model among the majority of the post-Soviet countries. More recently, however, there seems to be a trend towards reducing presidential powers even among the post-Soviet countries and also to abandon president-parliamentarism (for example in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine) (Sedelius 2015; 2016).

The negative implications of president-parliamentarism is further supported by our single case studies of Ukraine. Following recurrent changes of regime direction between autocracy, popular protests and democratization, Ukraine has repeatedly shifted between premier-presidentialism and president-parliamentarism. We thus examined to what extent and in what ways theoretical arguments about premier-presidential and president-parliamentary systems are relevant for understanding the shifting directions of the Ukrainian regime. A main conclusion is that both kinds of semi-presidentialism have, in different ways, exacerbated rather than mitigated institutional conflict. However, the president-parliamentary system has been instrumental in strengthening presidential dominance and authoritarian tendencies. Premier-presidentialism is by no means perfect but has, to some extent, safeguarded against presidential autocracy by anchoring survival of the government in parliament (Sedelius 2016).

During the course of the project, Sedelius was invited to join a team of international experts to make a detailed analysis of executive-legislative relations in the Ukrainian constitution and to provide a set of policy recommendations. The final report was published by International IDEA and the Center for Policy and Legal Reform, and was presented to a number of constitutional and legal experts and policy makers in Kiev 2018. In general, the policy report provides options for further reductions of presidential power. Among the key points, we argue that Ukraine should consider removing the president’s power to appoint certain ministers as well as his power to call referenda. We also raise concern that the National Security and Defence Council, chaired by the President, has grown into something of a parallel government that can bypass both the cabinet and the parliament. A related concern is the considerable size of the presidential administration. The scope and scale of the presidential administration enables the president to shape and direct the political agenda on a range of issues - way beyond his constitutionally designated areas of foreign affairs and national security. Our basic premise is for the political institutions to
guard against presidential autocracy and to enhance semi-presidential power sharing in Ukraine (Choudhry, Sedelius and Kyrychenko 2018).

Executive conflict and policy coordination in semi-presidential regimes
A key factor of semi-presidential regimes is executive power-sharing between president and government. In a couple of journal articles (Raunio & Sedelius 2017; 2019a) and a concluding monograph on Palgrave (Raunio & Sedelius 2019b), we have addressed executive dynamics in light of recent scholarship on the risks and consequences associated with conflict and cooperation between the president and the cabinet. Through an in-depth comparison drawing primarily on interviews with top-level civil servants and office-holders of three premier-presidential systems with broadly similar constitutional designs, Finland, Lithuania, and Romania, we have analysed how coordination mechanisms and political context actually shape presidential influence. Whilst acknowledging the importance of other variables, our findings establish a connection between the level of intra-executive coordination and presidential activism. Our findings reveal that the presidents enjoy considerable informal discretion in Lithuania and Romania while the president in Finland is subject to stronger legal and procedural constraints that contribute to overall smoother intra-executive relations. We contend that absent of a working constitutional division of labour and established modes of intra-executive coordination, presidents are more likely to use alternative channels of influence – such as the strategy of ‘going public’ or direct contacts with political parties, the legislature, or civil society stakeholders – and to intervene in questions falling under the competence of the government. Lack of institutionalized coordination benefits the presidents as they hold the initiative regarding cooperation between the two executives. Hence, in such contexts coordination depends largely on the initiative of the president where ad hoc practices tend to weaken the relative strength of the prime minister. We also conclude that the personality-centred politics in many Central and East European countries creates favourable conditions, formally and informally, for presidential activism.

Theoretically, Raunio & Sedelius (2017; 2019b) have developed a tentative framework for examining executive coordination, imbedded in institutionalism and based on four strands of literature – semi-presidentialism, public administration, political leadership, and foreign policy analysis. Given the political challenges facing many semi-presidential countries, the project ultimately sought to identify institutional solutions that facilitate power-sharing and successful policy-making.

A related component of intra-executive dynamics concerns the key actors’ relationship with political parties. In a separate study, Sedelius (2015) examined how the two subtypes of semi-presidentialism influence political party behaviour in Ukraine. Theoretically, parties in presidential and president-parliamentary regimes have less ability to control the executive since the parties will behave and organize to ultimately win the presidency. This is expected to “presidentialize” parties by giving considerable autonomy to the party leader while simultaneously undermine the collective power of political parties. Following the recurrent shifts between president-parliamentarism and premier-presidentialism in Ukraine, these expectations are largely confirmed. In contrast to the periods of president-parliamentarism (1996-2006; 2010-2014) the relatively short periods of premier-presidentialism (2006-2010; 2014-), saw indications of a gradual strengthening of institutional capacity among the main political parties, while the parliament also became more of a significant political arena during these periods.

The project has benefitted from cooperating closely with a related project financed by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University (cf. Duvold & Agarin 2019; Duvold & Ekman 2016). Ekman, Berglund & Duvold (2016; 2017) have
directed two nationwide public opinion surveys in eight countries in Central Europe in which some specific items were designed in direct relation to this project. Comprising both parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes in Central Europe, these surveys confirm that citizens often express trust in their presidents while they at the same time reveal far more sceptic attitudes to other political leaders and institutions including the prime minister and parliament. The greater popularity of presidents allow presidents to interpret their role as spokesmen for popular discontent and to “go public” to gain influence and strategically criticize the government from time to time. While prime ministers possess the bulk of formal powers within the executive they often fall short on legitimacy among citizens at large. The presidents, for their part, find that their popularity outweigh their formal powers and political influence. In our studies, we have addressed to what extent and in what ways this gap between perceived legitimacy and formal powers is relevant for understanding institutional logics of semi-presidentialism including the frequent occurrences of executive tensions between the president and cabinet (Duvold & Sedelius 2017; 2019; Raunio & Sedelius 2019b).

The choice and diffusion of semi-presidential regimes
In her ongoing PhD project partly financed by this project, Åberg examines the choice and diffusion of semi-presidential regimes across time and space. One of Åberg’s articles thus far (Åberg & Denk 2019), explores the connection between the choice of regime type at the time of democratization and the composition of democratic regime types in six networks of countries: geographic neighbourhood, regional, continental, global, cultural, and postcolonial networks. A main assumption is that the density of a particular regime type in a network positively affects the probability that a country in that network establishes this regime type at the time of democratization. Testing this assumption on 141 cases of democratization their findings confirm diffusional effects. In particular, regime types seem to diffuse in between members of the same regional networks. In addition, presidential regimes seem to spread among cultural networks whereas parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes seem to spread among postcolonial networks (Åberg and Denk 2019).

Identified gaps and avenues for future research on semi-presidentialism
In a structured literature review of 327 publications covering the period 1970–2015, Åberg & Sedelius (2018) mapped the general lines of semi-presidential research with regard to theory, topics and methods. We identified a number of research gaps and provided some recommendations for future studies. Among these, we mentioned the lack of studies on the position and powers of the prime minister, the role and importance of public administration, and the potential effects of EU membership on executive-legislative politics in semi-presidential regimes.

Theoretically, we take a critical stand against a general tendency in the field to take the start of a new constitution as a natural point of departure in a way that often fails to incorporate the way context and pre-constitutional settings impose restrictions on constitutional adaption and influence. To the benefit of future research on semi-presidential regimes, we therefore contend that incorporating alternative analytical frameworks such as Normative Institutionalism can improve our understanding of the way institutions develop, change and mature after the process of establishing a new constitution. Similarly, Historical Institutionalism may improve our understanding of how previous institutions and context impose restrictions on constitutional choices. In addition, our meta review revealed an apparent lack of studies covering semi-presidentialism outside Europe, especially on Africa, which currently harbours more than ten semi-presidential regimes.
Research on semi-presidentialism, like research on institutional effects more generally, struggles with endogeneity. Our review has established a predominance of single-country approaches in the field and a general inconclusiveness about institutional effects and outcomes. Without claiming that statistical methods and more large-N designs would guarantee that institutional effects are sufficiently dealt with, we recognize the need for more methodologically sophisticated and empirically sound large-N studies (Sedelius & Åberg 2018; 2019; Åberg & Sedelius 2018).

Data and material
The project has generated a considerable amount of data of different kind that we believe will be useful for further research also well beyond the confined project period.

Expert interviews
In order to reach ‘behind the scenes’ of executive dynamics in semi-presidential regimes and to go beyond most obvious data on political and institutional conditions, we conducted a series of expert interviews in Finland, Lithuania, Romania, and Ukraine. A number of political experts on each country were contacted in order to collect information on how the semi-presidential systems have worked in practice with regard to constitutional politics, executive relations and institutional coordination. The positions of the interviewees include constitutional and legal experts, current and former high-level civil servants, counsellors and advisors in the offices of the president and the prime minister, speakers and members of parliaments, and ministers.

Documents and literature
Quite conventionally, we have used and examined a large number of written sources including official documents, academic literature, reports and secondary material including also biographies of presidents. The official documents mainly consist of the respective constitutions and relevant laws, constitutional notes and pretexts, as well as governments’ rules of procedure and similar documents regulating intra-executive coordination. In addition, we have used a conventional mix of academic literature (comparative and case study oriented), country-specific reports and updates, including many online resources.

Macro-level indicators, public opinion surveys and other measures
For the wider comparative analyses on semi-presidentialism, we have compiled a set of available macro-level indicators and system-level data. In addition to standard indicators on basic conditions such as level of democracy, electoral system, and corruption, we have datasets on state building and regime types, diffusion, president-cabinet relations including instances of cohabitation and conflict and various measures of presidential power. In addition, we have benefitted from unique public survey data from Central and Eastern Europe tapping trust in the presidency and other institutions, including data on how citizens perceive the role of the president in relation to various policy areas.

References


Raunio, T. & Sedelius, T. (2019a) Presidents and Cabinets: Coordinating Executive Leadership in Premier-Presidental Regimes. Accepted for publication in *Political Studies Review*.


**Comments on the results**

During the course of the project, we conducted a structured literature review of the research field of semi-presidentialism covering 327 publications in the period 1970–2015 (Åberg & Sedelius 2018). This review identified a number of research gaps and provided some recommendations for future studies. Among these, we mentioned the current lack of studies on the position and powers of the prime minister, the role and importance of public administration, and the potential effects of EU membership on executive-legislative politics in semi-presidential regimes. Raunio and Sedelius (2019a; 2019b) offer some
exploratory insights about these under-researched topics and we certainly encourage further research in these directions, especially from the side of the prime minister.

Theoretically, we take a critical stand against a general tendency in the field to take the start of a new constitution as a natural point of departure in a way that often fails to incorporate the way context and pre-constitutional settings impose restrictions on constitutional adaption and influence. To the benefit of future research on semi-presidential regimes, we therefore contend that incorporating alternative analytical frameworks such as Normative Institutionalism can improve our understanding of the way institutions develop, change and mature after the process of establishing a new constitution. Similarly, Historical Institutionalism may improve our understanding of how previous institutions and context impose restrictions on constitutional choices. In addition, our meta review revealed an apparent lack of studies covering semi-presidentialism outside Europe, especially on Africa, which currently harbours more than ten semi-presidential regimes.

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Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning av projektsresultaten* (ca 2000 tecken)

Detta jämförande projekt har studerat effekter av semipresidentialism i länder som genomgått en regimförändring (transitionsländer). Semipresidentialism - kanske mest känt från Finland och Frankrike - innebär att en folkvald president delar verkställande makt med en premiärminister som måste ha stöd i parlamentet. Idag är semipresidentiella författningar på plats i cirka 50 länder runt om i världen och i Central- och Östeuropa är detta nu den mest spridda styrelseformen. Trots detta är forskningen om semipresidentialism fortfarande i sin linda.

Projektet har undersökt i vilken utsträckning och på vilka sätt den institutionella interaktionen mellan president, premiärminister och parlament spelar roll för regeringsförmåga i termer av policyeffektivitet och regeringsstabilitet. I projektet har vi kombinerat kvantitativa analyser utifrån databaser som inkluderar alla semipresidentiella länder med fallstudier och fokuserade jämförelser av semipresidentiella länder i Central- och Östeuropa. Jämförelserna har inkluderat de två huvudtyperna av semipresidentialism: premiärministerdominerad (premier-presidential) (bl a Finland, Litauen, Rumänien och Ukraina 2006-10; 2014-), och presidentdominerad (president-parliamentary) semipresidentialism (här framförallt Ukraina 1996-2006; 2010-2014).

Såväl på statistisk som på fallstudiennivå visar våra projektsresultat att den presidentdominerade formen av semipresidentialism är negativt kopplad till demokrati och regeringskapacitet. Den premiärministerdominerade formen klarar sig klart bättre statistiskt och matchar parlamentariska länder ganska väl vad gäller både demokratinivå och regeringskapacitet. I ett pågående avhandlingsprojekt studeras också vilka faktorer som påverkar inrättandet av semipresidentiella konstitutioner efter en regimförändring. Våra kvalitativa studier, baserade på bland annat expertintervjuer i Finland, Litauen och Rumänien, visar på betydelsen av både formella och informella institutioner för hur relationen mellan president och premiärminister faktiskt fungerar. Generellt är det presidenterna som i termer av policyinflytande och makt tycks tjäna på om relationen
mellan president och premiärminister är vagt reglerad och om koordineringen mellan dessa sker ad hoc och utan etablerad praxis. Samtidigt visar vi, inte minst utifrån Rumänien och Ukraina, hur sådana förhållanden genererar konflikt och politisk instabilitet. I Central- och Östeuropa har presidenterna framgångsrikt nyttjat sitt folkliga stöd – både direkthandlingar och deras relativt stort starkare opinionsstöd – för att nå ett inflytande som går utöver vad deras formellt sett svagare befogenheter antyder. Vi menar att projektet har bidragit både teoretiskt och empiriskt till att öka förståelsen för hur semipresidentiella system faktiskt fungerar och under vilka förutsättningar en viss form av semipresidentialism är gynnsam respektive problematisk för regeringskapacitet och demokrati. På så sätt är resultaten av hög relevans även för aktörer utanför forskarsamhället som på olika sätt arbetar med konstitutionella system och maktdelningsfrågor.

Publications of the project

1. Artiklar i referee-granskade tidskrifter (Web of Science)


2. Monografier (markera ev. huvudmonografi från projektet)


*Main monograph of the project

3. Antologibidrag (motsv.)


4. Konferensbidrag (motsv.)


5. Övriga publikationer


Duvold, K. (2017) "What we talk about when we talk about national minorities", presentation at Humboldt University, 2017/05/26. To be published in a report on national minorities by the think-tank Magma, Helsinki.


6. Populärvetenskapliga arbeten


Raunio, T. (2015) "In Finland, a conservative government supported by a conservative president" *Presidential Power* blog, 18/06/2015 (http://presidential-power.com/?p=3485).


7. Manuskript och planerade arbeten

Duvold, K. & Sedelius, T., Presidents between National Unity and Ethnic Divisions. Trust in the Baltic States (under review in *Journal of Baltic Studies*)

Sedelius, T. & Duvold, K. Support for Elected Strongmen in Central and Eastern Europe (for a journal article).

Stanley, B., Ekman, J., Duvold, K., Voting Populist or Just Voting for Populists? A Comparative Analysis of Populist Attitudes and Vote Choice in Central and Eastern Europe (under review in *Government and Opposition*)


Alternative dissemination of results

In addition to conference papers and presentations at Nordic and international conferences, listed above, the project participants have presented project ideas and findings at various seminars and lectures throughout the period. This includes research
seminars and lectures at Charles University Prague, Dalarna University, Linneaus University, Lund University, Queen’s University Belfast, the Swedish Research Council, Södertörn University, Tampere University, TNS Riga, University of Bergen, Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), and Örebro University. The project participants have also contributed with comments and reflections in local and national media on issues relating to presidential politics. See also a series of blog posts listed above.

Falun, March 2019

Thomas Sedelius

Date

Project leader