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# The Social Contract Revisited: Evidence from Communist and State Capitalist Economies

LINDA J. COOK & MARTIN K. DIMITROV

## *Abstract*

The social contract thesis explained stability in communist autocracies as a consequence of an implicit exchange between the regime and the populace: citizens remained quiescent and the regime provided them with secure jobs, social services, subsidised housing, and consumer goods. Our essay asks how well the social contract thesis applies in three different types of regimes. We review classic literature on the socialist social contract in light of newly available archival evidence on the Soviet Union. We turn then to reform-era China and Putin's Russia, finding that these post-socialist regimes create distinctive 'market social contracts'. Our work shows that communist and authoritarian leaders cater to the consumption needs of populations in a strategic effort to remain in office and highlights the centrality of mass cooptation for explaining durable authoritarianism.

SCHOLARS DEVELOPED THE SOCIAL CONTRACT THESIS IN THE LATE 1970s and early 1980s to address a seeming paradox: the Eastern Bloc was experiencing a period of unprecedented social stability despite a palpable decline in the use of repression. This empirical reality could not be reconciled with the dominant theoretical view that still defined the use or threat of massive repression as the central instrument of rule in communist single-party systems. The contribution of the social contract thesis<sup>1</sup> was to explain stability as a consequence of an implicit exchange between the regime and the populace: citizens would remain quiescent as long as the regime provided them with benefits including secure jobs, social services, subsidised housing, and consumer goods. Popular quiescence reduced the regime's need to

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<sup>1</sup>Use of the term 'social contract' here departs from the classical concept of Locke and Hobbes in which the 'social contract' was negotiated by equal sets of free agents. A different concept was established in political science during the 1980s and 1990s, defining a socialist social contract in which the state dictated the contract's terms, which then bound and constrained both society's behaviour and the state's policy-making.

rely on repression. The social contract thesis also identified a major cause for the eventual dissolution of communist regimes in Eastern Europe: as these regimes became increasingly unable to deliver on their commitments under the social contract in the 1980s, citizens felt empowered to engage in anti-regime protests. Protesters made demands for social services and civil rights that could not be met, thus contributing to the implosion of the regimes.

The social contract thesis generated a great deal of controversy when it was initially advanced. Now that a quarter century has passed since the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars can revisit the concept with the benefit of historical distance. This essay focuses on three interrelated questions that have relevance for our assessment of the theoretical value of this concept both before and after 1989.

The first question has to do with how accurately the social contract thesis, which was developed without access to materials on the inner logic of decision-making in single-party communist regimes, captures state–society dynamics in centrally planned economies. Such documents are now available, allowing us to demonstrate that communist leaderships felt bound by the social contract, largely in ways that the literature argued they did. We bring evidence from the Soviet Union to address this question.

The second issue concerns the applicability of this concept to single-party communist states that have dismantled the planned economy. Using the case of reform-era China, we demonstrate that a market social contract exists and is indeed essential for maintaining social stability. We define the market social contract as a set of state policies and practices that shield some population strata from the effects of market competition, at the cost of economic efficiency and productivity, in order to maintain social stability. We provide specific evidence that entitlements are preserved (or re-introduced) in order to minimise social discontent in China. The expansion of the social contract in China has persisted even after the post-2009 decline in growth, negating facile assumptions that social spending is driven mainly by economic expansion. This evidence suggests that the social contract plays a central role in the maintenance of single-party communist regimes, regardless of the economic model they adopt.

We then turn to the third question, namely the relevance of the social contract in dominant-party authoritarian regimes. Using the example of Putin's Russia, we provide evidence that dominant party autocracies that emerged from the single-party communist regimes preserve certain features of the social contract. However, Russia's 'market social contract' is much narrower, more selective and strategic than its Soviet version. Major universalist features of the social contract that have been preserved in China, including limited consumer price subsidies and very low unemployment (a state policy that aims to shield workers from market-dictated outcomes), were eliminated in post-communist Russia in favour of targeted provision mostly to state-dependent social strata that have the potential for disruptive protest and are seen as mobilisable to support Putin's 'Party of Power'. This comparison suggests that higher levels of authoritarianism correlate with greater preservation of the social contract.

Our research contributes to several literatures. By challenging traditional conceptualisations of communist regimes, which excluded the possibility that the leadership may take popular opinion seriously (Arendt 1951; Friedrich & Brzezinski 1965; Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* 2003), our essay joins a growing group of scholars who have provided detailed evidence that communist leaders catered to the consumption needs of the population in a strategic effort to extend their tenure in office (Cook 1993; Landsman 2005; Corner 2009; Bren & Neuburger 2012; Dimitrov 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). We also contribute to the literature on electoral

authoritarianism, which has argued that autocracies engage in social spending during election cycles (Magaloni 2006; Blaydes 2011). Although we acknowledge that spending in communist and post-socialist regimes may follow an electoral rhythm (Zaslavsky & Brym 1978; Maltseva 2012), we also show that major expansion in the scope of the social contract in China was driven by protests, rather than elections. Finally, our essay complements the recent literature on comparative authoritarianism by highlighting the role of the social contract in maintaining regime longevity (Gandhi 2008; Levitsky & Way 2010; Bunce & Wolchik 2011; Svoboda 2012). Our findings suggest that theories of durable authoritarianism need to take seriously the role of mass cooptation through the social contract in communist and post-communist autocracies.

This essay is organised as follows. The first section reviews the major theoretical propositions advanced by social contract theories in light of the newly available archival evidence on the Soviet Union. The second analyses the applicability of the social contract arguments to contemporary China. The third section focuses on the market social contract in Russia under Putin. The final section concludes by offering some broad reflections on the utility of social contract theories for understanding political dynamics both in centrally-planned and in market economies. In the concluding section of the essay we also emphasise that ours is an empirical study of how authoritarian regimes use welfare policy for their political ends; it is not a normative assessment of these policies as relatively good or bad.

#### *The Soviet social contract: main theoretical propositions*

The social contract thesis was put forth in the 1980s by scholars attempting to theorise state–society relations in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. They puzzled that, while the regime remained strongly authoritarian, it had become considerably less repressive, and more broadly distributive and egalitarian. The central claim of the thesis was that the Soviet regime provided a set of policy goods and allocational outcomes, including full and secure employment, stable and subsidised consumer prices, socialised health and education services, and egalitarian wage and income policies. For its part, society responded with political quiescence and conformity, accepting the Communist Party’s monopolistic power over politics, society, and economy. The terms of the contract were dictated by the state, not bargained with society; the theory’s key claim is that these terms nevertheless imposed constraints on both parties: the regime acted as if it had to deliver these policy goods and allocational outcomes in order to maintain political and social stability; the population had to receive them in order to remain quiescent and conformist.

A significant group of scholars developed the ‘social contract’ thesis, characterising it as an anticipatory response to the aspirations of modernising Soviet society that allowed the regime to maintain social stability with a minimum of overt repression (Breslauer 1978; Bialer 1980; Hauslohner 1987). In a book published shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Linda Cook subjected the thesis to systematic analysis on the basis of then-available documentary and statistical sources, concluding that the empirical patterns of policy outcomes from 1960 to the early 1980s conformed to the contract’s expectations (Cook 1993). Throughout this period, employment remained full and secure, consumer prices relatively stable, funding and provision for health and education services, though modest by international standards, grew, and wage structures became more egalitarian. During the Khrushchev period parts of the social contract, particularly state pensions, were extended to rural residents.

To test whether the leadership delivered these outcomes because it was constrained to do so, Cook presented case studies of ‘pressured decision points’, in the policy-making process when leaders had to decide between delivering social contract outputs or pursuing other compelling policy goals (Cook 1993). Case studies of employment and consumer pricing showed that the contract won out, even when powerful economic interests and claimants pressed for changes in employment policy that promised greater production efficiency, and even when the state had to absorb significant new costs in order to maintain price controls on food and other social benefits. Moreover, in their public statements at least, Soviet leaders beginning with Khrushchev cited concern about popular dissatisfaction and protest as major motivations for these policy decisions. Cook argued that the ‘social contract’ applied most fully to the regime’s relationship with urban and working class populations, pointing to evidence that industrial workers protested when the social contract was violated by sharp consumer-price increases and wage declines. Workers’ protests were treated as political crises at the highest levels of the Soviet political leadership, and were settled with a combination of repression, concessions, and replacement of officials who were deemed responsible for the unrest (Gidwitz 1982; Baron 2001).

The social contract thesis is based in two core premises: firstly, that majorities in communist societies valued highly what the contract delivered, that contract goods motivated them to conform politically; and secondly that post-Stalinist leaderships prioritised social peace, that they maintained the contract because costs of repressing open protest were too high. Sources available during the Soviet period and just afterward provide limited evidence for these claims; available sources did not offer a window into the inner logic of the leadership’s decision-making (Gitelman 1977; Silver 1987; Cook 1993).

Archival evidence that has become available since 1989 shows that most societal grievances did relate to issues of social provision such as housing and food prices, as shown previously by the Soviet Émigré Project.<sup>2</sup> But why should communist leaders address social grievances, or pay to prevent open protest, if they could simply resort to repression? Here we offer an answer, finding that the massive societal uprisings in 1953 (in the German Democratic Republic) and 1956 (in Hungary and Poland) took communist leaderships by surprise and convinced them that they needed information about attitudes and preferences in their societies in order to prevent future upheavals that might lead to their dismissal from office.<sup>3</sup> Getting the necessary information imposed two conditions: avoiding repression, which would cut off the flow of reliable information; and responding to the societal aspirations and grievances that were expressed, as people will complain only if they expect some response (Dimitrov 2017). Post-Stalinist leaderships constructed elaborate instruments for tapping into societal grievances by sponsoring genuine sociological research, opinion polling, and forums for complaints (Dimitrov 2014b). Officials at the highest levels of the party and state studied this information and designed policies to respond. In sum, a ‘new equilibrium’ emerged at a certain point in the development of these regimes. Overt use of repression would violate this equilibrium, suppress sources of information, and leave systems at risk of destabilisation. During the 1960s the Soviet leadership itself promoted empirical sociology, public opinion

<sup>2</sup>Tsentr khraneniya sovremennoi dokumentatsii (hereafter TsKhSD), F. 89.

<sup>3</sup>While all three uprisings were ended quickly by repression (in the German Democratic Republic and Hungary) or concessions (in Poland), and the regimes re-stabilised, the Soviet hegemon replaced wholesale ‘from above’ the leaderships that had been in place when protests escalated.

polling, and citizens' critical letters to the press as sources of 'essential feedback ... on the impact of policy decisions' (Pravda 1979, p. 343). The trade union daily *Trud* sent analyses of critical letters to the union's leadership quarterly (Pravda 1979, p. 343).

Soviet leaders were also unsettled by workers' strikes that began in the mid-1950s and peaked in the early 1960s. The strikes were usually provoked by poor food supplies and rising prices and settled with a mix of concessions, repression, and dismissals of managers, local party, and trade union leaders. The best-known was the 1962 Novocherkassk strike.<sup>4</sup> In response several members of the Politburo were dispatched to the scene, workers were shot, factory and local trade union officials dismissed, and use of sudden large increases in food prices as a policy option ended (Pravda 1979; Cook 1993). In sum, Soviet leaders responded to popular protests as politically urgent, heeded them as critical policy feedback, and punished them as failures of leadership. Khrushchev was ousted in part because the collective leadership blamed his policies for provoking the East European uprisings. Strikes in Poland during the 1970s and the rise of Solidarity kept the Soviet leadership vigilant in its efforts to avoid unrest as long as economic conditions permitted it to sustain the social contract.

In sum, the classic literature has argued that though it is costly, the social contract is established and maintained in communist regimes with a planned economy because, to the extent that citizen buy-in occurs, it allows for the maintenance of social stability without totalistic repression. Newly available archival materials allow us to conclude that authoritarian elites in the Eastern Bloc were indeed constrained by citizens' expectations of extensive welfare provision, which was economically inefficient but politically expedient.

#### *The Chinese state socialist and market social contract*

This section examines the evolution of the Chinese social contract over the past four decades, a period that witnessed a gradual shift away from central planning to a market economy. Although Russia underwent a similar transition, the Chinese model of economic reform featured the preservation of single-party rule, which mandated that necessary but politically costly reductions in benefit provisions be initially postponed and eventually implemented only with the utmost care. Because it lacks competitive elections, which can both channel and defuse popular discontent, the Chinese state is much more sensitive to social unrest and more willing to acquiesce to the demands of protesters than its Russian counterpart.

This section first examines the changing content of the social contract from the late 1970s to the present in China. It then turns to the question of how the social contract was made operational, focusing in particular on the role of citizen petitions and protests as channels for transmitting information about public preferences regarding the content of the social contract to the leadership.

#### *The changing nature of the social contract in post-Mao China*

One distinguishing characteristic of the Chinese social contract is that it was significantly less expansive than its Soviet counterpart. Under Mao the social contract covered only a portion of urban residents (those working for government offices and state-owned enterprises) and did not extend to rural residents, who did not enjoy the package of labour insurance and cradle-to-grave welfare benefits that were accorded to privileged urban workers (Dillon 2015).

<sup>4</sup>TsKhSD, F. 89 per. 6 d. 11–9, 23–5.

Reforms like the dismantling of the people's communes, though an essential prerequisite for implementing the extremely successful agricultural liberalisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, further exacerbated the inequity of living in rural China by limiting access to education and health care.<sup>5</sup> Urban residents were spared a reduction in benefits for most of the 1980s. However, a series of laws promulgated in 1986–1988 aimed to change the welfare system for urban residents as well. In 1986 an attempt was made to transition from enterprise-based retirement provision to a social pooling scheme (*shehui tongchou*) (Zou 2008, p. 638). The Four Provisional Decrees on the Reform of the Labour System in 1986 stipulated that all newly hired state-owned enterprise employees had to sign a labour contract, which could be terminated, thus allowing state-owned enterprises to sever the lifetime employment relationship.

In addition, a Law on Enterprise Bankruptcy was promulgated in 1986 and the 1988 Law on Industrial Enterprises Owned by the Whole People stipulated that state-owned enterprises could be abolished through dissolution or bankruptcy.<sup>6</sup> The rise of the Tiananmen protests in 1989 postponed the implementation of these welfare-reducing reforms by almost a decade: the central government supplied state-owned enterprises with sufficient funds to maintain and even expand their pre-1989 workforce, so the number of individuals employed by state-owned units (*guoyou danwei*) grew from 103 million in 1989 to 112 million in 1994.<sup>7</sup> This economically costly delay was undertaken for political reasons under conditions of economic retrenchment.

Prior to the late 1990s, the most important policy change that affected urban residents was the abolition of rationing (which involved direct food subsidies) in 1993. The end of rationing did not, however, mean that consumer price subsidies were eliminated as well. These subsidies not only persisted in the wake of the Tiananmen protests (which were at least in part a reaction to high levels of consumer price inflation) but actually increased substantially, from 31.7 billion yuan in 1988 to 71.2 billion yuan in 1998.<sup>8</sup> Government expenditure on consumer price subsidies was so significant that in 1998 it was four times larger than the 17.1 billion yuan that were allocated to pensions and social welfare.<sup>9</sup> Utility subsidies survived in various forms until 2012–2013, when a gradual transition towards market prices was introduced for coal, petroleum products, natural gas, and electricity (Zhang 2014). Other consumer price subsidies have persisted and currently extend to the price of grain, cotton, oil, meat, vegetables, and agricultural production materials.<sup>10</sup> The survival of subsidies nearly four decades after the start of the transition away from central planning attests to the awareness of the central government that allowing all consumer prices to be determined by the market can have politically destabilising effects.

The dismantling of the socialist social contract for urban workers only began in 1997 when the Fifteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party inaugurated the policy of 'grasping the

<sup>5</sup>By 1993, only 6.4% of China's rural population had health insurance, with coverage eroding further later in the 1990s (Brown *et al.* 2009, p. 304).

<sup>6</sup>'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo qiye pochuan fa (shixing)', promulgated 2 December 1986, entered into effect 1 October 1988; 'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo quanmin suoyou zhi gongye qiye fa', promulgated 13 April 1988, entered into effect 1 August 1988.

<sup>7</sup>*Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2010* (Beijing, China Statistics Press, 2010, p. 118).

<sup>8</sup>*Xin Zhongguo 50 nian tongji ziliao huibian* (Beijing, Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1999, p. 12).

<sup>9</sup>*Xin Zhongguo 50 nian tongji ziliao huibian* (Beijing, Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1999, p. 17).

<sup>10</sup>'Jiage butie zhichu tongji', *scimao*, 30 May 2016, available at: <http://www.scimao.com/read/3380555>, accessed 30 September 2016.

large and letting go of the small' (*zhuada fangxiao*). The Congress authorised the dismantling of smaller state-owned enterprises, which were to be privatised and to have their workforce drastically reduced. Learning from Eastern Europe, where enterprise restructuring resulted in the massive rise of unemployment, China implemented state-owned enterprise reform gradually. Workers were initially classified as 'laid off' (*xiagang*) rather than unemployed. For three years these laid-off workers maintained a relationship with their work unit, drew a salary, received benefits, and engaged in retraining. It was only after the three-year period was over that workers still seeking employment were to be reclassified as unemployed (Tang & Yang 2008). Another policy that was meant to ease the transition to a post-socialist social contract was that workers were allowed to purchase at below-market rates the subsidised housing provided to them by their work units. The late 1990s also inaugurated the *dibao* (minimum-living guarantee), which supplied means-tested financial assistance for those who were worst affected by the transition (Solinger & Hu 2012).

The 2000s and early 2010s saw important steps towards the expansion and standardisation of benefits provision. The New Rural Cooperative Medical System (*xinxing nongcun hezuo yiliao zhidu*) was introduced in 2002 as a way to reduce illness-related poverty among rural *hukou* holders (Klotzbücher *et al.* 2010). The Labour Contract Law passed in 2007 stipulated that all employees were entitled to a labour contract. To the extent that it was properly enforced, this law made it harder for employers to fire workers without cause, to maintain forced labour conditions, to delay the payment of wages, and to avoid making benefits contributions.<sup>11</sup> The 2010 Social Insurance Law mandated that employees and employers make contributions to five different types of social insurance: pensions, medical insurance, work-related injury insurance, unemployment insurance, and maternity insurance.<sup>12</sup> Although the law is a step in the right direction, several serious problems remain: great inter- and intra-provincial variation in the extent of coverage of various social insurance schemes; non-transferability of benefits and entitlements from one location to another; and incomplete implementation and coverage, especially for migrant workers in the cities, for urban residents without fixed employment, and for residents of rural areas (Frazier 2010; Huang 2015). The biggest issue is the existence of a two-track social benefits system: progressive (for urban residents) and regressive (for rural residents) (Gao 2010). The situation is especially problematic for rural migrants who have worked in the cities for a long period of time but still possess a rural *hukou*, which only entitles them to rural pensions that are inadequate for survival in urban areas.<sup>13</sup> For example, there is a 40-fold gap between the highest urban pension (for civil servants) and the lowest pension accorded to rural residents under the New Rural Social Pension Insurance Scheme (Frazier & Li 2015). Internal government publications reveal that the leadership is justifiably concerned about the potential regime-destabilising effects of levels of inequality that approach those in Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, as China was moving from a socialist to a market social contract, the scope of the contract initially shrank but eventually expanded and reached levels that surpassed the provision under Mao, especially with regard to rural residents who did not receive pensions

<sup>11</sup>'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo laodong hetong fa', promulgated 29 June 2007, entered into effect 1 January 2008.

<sup>12</sup>'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shehui baozhang fa', promulgated 28 October 2010, entered into effect 1 July 2011.

<sup>13</sup>The *hukou* system is currently undergoing major reform that will improve access to urban welfare for at least some migrants. See Müller (2016).

<sup>14</sup>*Lingdao canyue*, no. 3/2012, 25 January 2012, pp. 36–41.

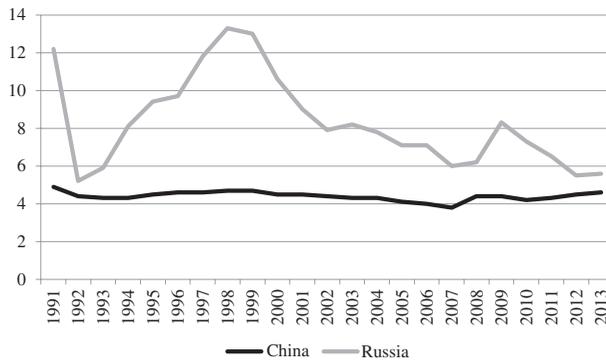


FIGURE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN CHINA AND RUSSIA, 1991–2013 (%).  
 Source: World Development Indicators Online, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>, accessed 30 September 2016.

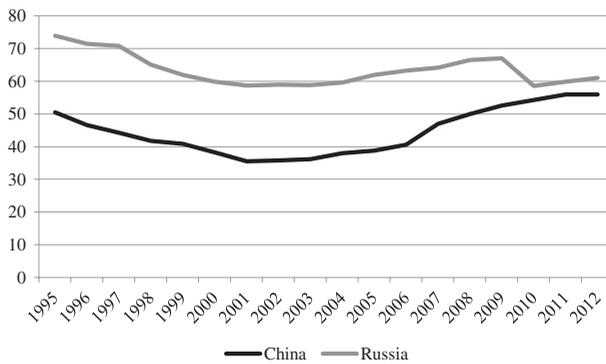


FIGURE 2. PUBLIC HEALTH EXPENDITURE IN CHINA AND RUSSIA (AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL HEALTH EXPENDITURE), 1995–2012.

Source: World Development Indicators Online, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>, accessed 30 September 2016.

under central planning. In post-Soviet Russia, by contrast, the scope of the post-socialist social contract decreased significantly in the 1990s and expanded somewhat in the 2000s, but has not returned to Soviet levels. We can refer to various indicators to elucidate these trends. Key are the low level of unemployment (which fluctuated between 4% and 5% in 1991–2013 in China, in contrast to Russia, where it started at 12% in 1991 and never fell below 5.6% throughout the 1991–2013 period) (see Figure 1); the increase in male life expectancy in China (from 68.1 in 1991 to 74 years in 2012; in contrast, male life expectancy in Russia reached 65 years in 1987, decreased significantly in the 1990s and returned to 65 years in 2012); and public health expenditure as percentage of total health expenditure, which decreased from 73.9% in 1995 to 61% in 2012 in Russia and increased from 50.5% to 55% in China during the same period (see Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> In addition, the human development index (HDI) has been growing in China and declining in Russia (see Table 1).

<sup>15</sup>All data from World Development Indicators Online, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>, accessed 30 September 2016.

TABLE 1  
HUMAN DEVELOPEMENT INDEX, CHINA AND RUSSIA

	1990	2013
China	0.634	0.719
Russia	0.815	0.778

Source: UNDP Human Development Indicators, available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, accessed 30 September 2016.

*Leadership reactions to information about citizen preferences about the social contract*

In competitive authoritarian regimes, elections can transmit information to the leadership about citizen preferences with regard to the social contract. China uses non-electoral mechanisms to assess these preferences. One channel for studying public opinion is the analysis of the content of citizen petitions (*xinfang*), which focus primarily on citizen dissatisfaction with the fulfilment of the social contract. Petitions reports, which have existed since the Mao period,<sup>16</sup> supply leaders with statistical data on the volume of petitions, the breakdown of petitions into different categories (labour protection, welfare concerns, legal matters), and the social characteristics of petitioners. These reports are prepared with different frequencies. In Zouping county in Shandong province, for example, *Reactions of the Masses (qunzhong fanying)* is issued weekly.<sup>17</sup> At the provincial level, this bulletin is issued three times a week.<sup>18</sup> At the national level, leaders received 597 petitions reports in 2007.<sup>19</sup> In addition to petitions reporting, leaders assess public opinion on the social contract through other avenues like reports on the origins of mass incidents (*quntixing shijian*),<sup>20</sup> analysis of the role of social media in facilitating the rise of sudden incidents (*tufa shijian*),<sup>21</sup> and opinion polling (which has become extensively used, especially in the last decade).<sup>22</sup> In short, Chinese leaders have access to multiple channels to assess citizen perceptions about the fulfilment of the social contract.

A question that arises is how responsive the leadership is to citizen preferences. Here we need to draw a distinction between macro-level responsiveness by top leaders and micro-level responsiveness at the local level. Data on leadership response are hard to come by, but can be found in internal government publications. An annual report of the National Administration for Letters and Calls reveals, for example, that central leaders (*zhongyang lingdao tongzhi*) responded to 62% of the 597 petitions reports they received in 2007.<sup>23</sup> Politburo Standing Committee members were even more attentive: they issued instructions on 90% of the reports on trends in letters and phone calls (*xindian qingkuang*) that they received throughout 2007.<sup>24</sup> We also have specific evidence that Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao have

<sup>16</sup>Shanghaishi dang' anguan B180-1-41-15 (1965).

<sup>17</sup>Interview with letters and visits office bureaucrat, Zouping, China, 29 July 2011.

<sup>18</sup>*Tianjin tongji: Xinfang zhi* (Tianjin, Tianjin Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 1997, p. 311).

<sup>19</sup>*Zhonggong zhongyang guojia jiguan gongzuo baogao 2008* (Beijing, Zhonggong Zhongyang Guojia Jiguan Gongzuo Weiyuanhui Yanjiushi, 2008, p. 1083).

<sup>20</sup>*Gaige neican*, no. 27/2014 (this particular report focuses on the sources of collective labour protests).

<sup>21</sup>*Gaige neican*, no. 11/2012, pp. 1–11.

<sup>22</sup>*Gaige neican*, no. 13/2014, pp. 2–20 (the poll focuses on the sources of dissatisfaction among rural residents).

<sup>23</sup>*Zhonggong zhongyang guojia jiguan gongzuo baogao 2008*, p. 1083.

<sup>24</sup>*Zhonggong zhongyang guojia jiguan gongzuo baogao 2008*, p. 1083.

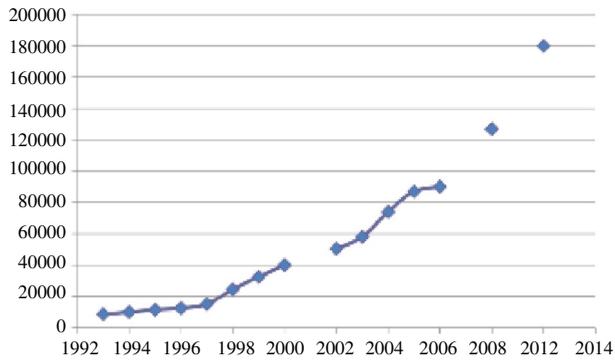


FIGURE 3. MASS INCIDENTS IN CHINA, 1993–2010.

Sources: Wedeman (2009) and Sun (2011).

all issued instructions on citizen complaints.<sup>25</sup> This surprisingly high level of responsiveness bespeaks the value that leaders attach to monitoring petitions. Major legislative change, such as the abolition of the agricultural tax in 2006, the promulgation of the Labour Contract Law in 2007, and the expansion of the social safety net in the 2000s and 2010s can be directly traced to citizen grievances expressed through complaints and protests. Internal government publications emphasise that preserving responsiveness to the social contract is essential for safeguarding trust in communist party cadres,<sup>26</sup> for maintaining social stability,<sup>27</sup> and for avoiding collective protests.<sup>28</sup>

The biggest challenge for the centre over the past decade has been the low micro-level responsiveness of local governments to citizen grievances, as indicated by the constantly increasing volume of mass incidents (protests). Scholars estimate that 60% of mass incidents stem from the unsatisfactory resolution of citizen complaints (Lin & Liu 2008, p. 3). As Figure 3 shows, these incidents have been increasing constantly and eventually surpassed 180,000 in 2010. This is a rate of protest activity that is considerably higher than in Russia. The available evidence indicates that the authorities are generally responsive to protests in China, provided that they focus on social contract issues and do not involve political demands (Cai 2010). As of 2014, the number of complaints that escalate to higher levels of government is no longer used in cadre evaluations, thus limiting incentives for cadres to suppress petitioners who aim to reach higher levels of government. It remains to be seen how effective these policies will be in incentivising citizens to use the complaints system rather than to engage in protests. In 2014, for the tenth consecutive year, the number of petitions handled by letters and visits offices in China declined.<sup>29</sup> The decline is a source of concern for the central government, which is interested in increasing local-level responsiveness to complaints and restoring the faith of citizens in the letters and visits system that serves as an essential tool for transmitting

<sup>25</sup>On Zhu, see *Renmin xinfang*, no. 7/2000, p. 16; on Jiang, see *Renmin xinfang*, no. 3/2000, p. 3; on Hu and Wen, see *Zhonggong zhongyang guojia jiguan gongzuo baogao 2008*, p. 1084.

<sup>26</sup>*Lingdao canyue*, no. 29/2014, 15 October 2014, pp. 23–6.

<sup>27</sup>*Lingdao canyue*, no. 20/2013, 15 July 2013, pp. 34–7.

<sup>28</sup>*Gaige neican* (Wenzhai ban), no. 23/2012, 1 December 2012, p. 17; *Gaige neican* (Zonghe ban), no. 27/2014, 25 July 2014, pp. 27–33.

<sup>29</sup>*Minqing yu xinfang*, no. 348, December 2015, p. 40.

information to the leadership about public perceptions of inadequacies in the fulfilment of the social contract. In short, the leadership's ongoing attentiveness to popular preferences for redistributive social spending acknowledges the importance of the market social contract for regime preservation in China.

*Re-construction of a 'market social contract' in Russia's electoral-authoritarian regime*

This section examines Russia's social and labour policies since the collapse of the Soviet Union, arguing that, after a decade of welfare retrenchment during the 1990s, the Putin regime has re-constructed a narrower, more strategic 'market social contract' that shapes and constrains key areas of contemporary social and labour policies. This market contract is far less comprehensive than the Soviet version. Major features including universal price controls, full employment guarantees, and fully public social services, were abandoned by the mid-1990s. Other social programmes and entitlements, including pension provision, industrial subsidies, and health care, were starved of financing during Russia's decade-long economic decline from 1990 to 1999, but here Putin's administration restored many guarantees and protections after 2000. Pensions have been reliably paid by the State Pension Fund and their real value protected against recessions and inflation until 2015–2016. Industrial employment remains artificially inflated. While real wages have declined in the recessions, unemployment levels have barely responded to economic downturns. The health care sector retains excessive staffing by international standards. Moreover, during the period of economic growth from 2000 to 2008 the state added new benefits for maternity and families, including increased work leave for mothers, higher child benefits and mortgage subsidies for young families.<sup>30</sup>

We argue that Putin-era pension income stability, industrial employment protections, and health care guarantees form the core of a narrowed, selective 'market social contract'. These policies have been maintained, at great costs in both budget expenditures and market inefficiencies, through the 2008–2009 recession and the first three years of the current economic downturn. Economists and other experts in all three policy areas have repeatedly called for reforms that would reduce costs, increase productivity in industry and health care, and expand invested (accumulative) pension savings. But loosening of employment protection legislation has been eschewed, health facilities remain overstaffed by international standards, and contributions to invested pension accounts have been frozen in order to maintain payments to current pensioners. Putin's government justifies these policies with rhetoric of state responsibility for society's well-being and maintenance of social stability.

In short, the 'market social contract' shapes and constrains Russia's single largest social expenditure programme, pensions; employment practices in a substantial part of the industrial labour market; and staffing in the health care sector, which the government has designated a top social policy priority. It has shielded pensioners, some industrial workers, and health sector practitioners from the full brunt of market and efficiency pressures. It shares with the Soviet social contract the privileging of social security over efficiency, though to a much more limited extent.

<sup>30</sup>This last set of policies formed part of a pro-natalist campaign that was designed to raise birth rates through social incentives.

We argue that Putin's increasingly authoritarian government maintains these policies in response to expressed public preferences, social protests, and pressures of electoral mobilisation.<sup>31</sup> Societal attitudes and grievances are communicated through frequent public opinion surveys and complaint mechanisms, which show that a majority of Russia's population continues to prioritise social rights and to hold the state responsible for their welfare. Social and labour protests, while generally small, localised, and particularistic in focus, likewise feature social grievances and demands. The single massive nationwide social protest, mounted by pensioners in 2005 against benefit cuts, marked the end of the social reform impulse of the early Putin years. Labour activism remains low and hobbled by restrictions, but anticipatory fear of unrest, especially in old industrial settlements and monotowns, has been voiced at the highest levels of government. Local, particularistic protests over health, education, and housing-related grievances occur regularly. Putin's government faces pressures across a range of social issues, but it has strategically concentrated 'market social contract' guarantees and protections mostly on groups that are strongly state-dependent, have demonstrated potential for collective solidarity and disruptive action, and are available for electoral mobilisation.

The remainder of this section presents evidence that Russia's government has constructed a 'market social contract' that shapes pension, industrial employment, and health sector staffing policy in order to cushion impacts of markets on selected population strata. Evidence is presented to show that these guarantees and protections have been maintained since 2000 at the cost of rising budget deficits, deepening inefficiencies, and in the case of pension privatisation, abandonment of hard-fought reforms designed to improve the system's long-term financial viability. We then present evidence on Russian society's preferences and grievances, as communicated by public opinion surveys and protests.

#### *Maintaining entitlements for current pensioners*

During the 1990s pension security in Russia collapsed. The real value of average payments fell below subsistence amidst rampant inflation, and even these payments were often months in arrears. The watershed year 2000 brought economic recovery and the first election to the Presidency of Vladimir Putin, who stabilised and raised pensions, thereby contributing to his growing popularity.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent government policies have protected the real value of pension payments through the recession of 2008–2009 and the first three years of the current recession (though in 2015–2016 inflation has not been fully compensated). The claims-making capacity of pensioners in post-communist Eastern Europe is well-established. Governments in the region have famously avoided raising low retirement ages,<sup>33</sup> increased budget expenditures, and reversed privatisations. What makes the Russian case striking is the extent of the government's efforts to maintain full indexation of pensions to inflation.

Over the past ten years pensions costs have in fact increased quite significantly, from some 5–6% of GDP in 2001–2008, pension spending now constitutes about 8–9% of GDP. Incomes of current pensioners were protected almost fully from the effects of severe recession and

<sup>31</sup>Pressures from state-bureaucratic actors to maintain existing social policies and practices have also played a role but will not be discussed in this essay. See Cook (2007), Remington (2015).

<sup>32</sup>In surveys conducted during 1999–2000, 51% of respondents rated Putin as the candidate with competence in the issue areas of social security; 59% of those in their sixties and seventies ranked pension increases as one of his best decisions; see Colton and McFaul (2003, pp. 190–97).

<sup>33</sup>The pension eligibility age for civil servants in Russia was raised in 2016 to 65 for men and 63 for women (to take full effect by 2032).

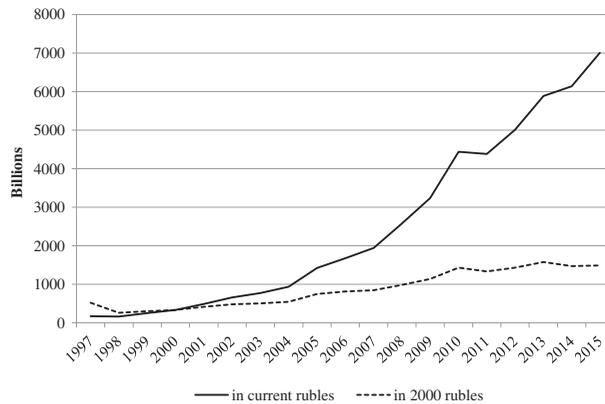


FIGURE 4. EXPENDITURE OF THE CONSOLIDATED BUDGET OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO FINANCE PAYMENTS FOR THE POPULATION'S PENSIONS.

Note: Calculations by Natalia Forrat.

Sources: 'Statisticheskii sbornik', Sotsial'noe polozhenie i uroven' zhizni naseleniya Rossii, 2003, p. 194, Table 6.19; 'Statisticheskii sbornik', Sotsial'noe polozhenie i uroven' zhizni naseleniya Rossii, 2005, p. 196, Table 6.3; 'Federal'noe kaznacheistvo, Konsolidirovannyi byudzhnet Rossiiskoi Federatsii i byudzhnetov gosudarstvennykh vnebyudzhnetnykh fondov', available at: <http://roskazna.ru/ispolnenie-byudzhnetov/konsolidirovannyj-byudzhnet/>, accessed 30 September 2016; 'Goskomstat Rossii, Indeksy potrebitel'skikh tsen na tovary i uslugi', available at: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/prices/potr/2015/I-ipc.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/prices/potr/2015/I-ipc.xlsx), accessed 30 September 2016.

inflation. This protection was purchased by massive increases in federal budget subsidies to the Pension Fund that began in 2005 and grew almost steadily through 2013 (see Figure 4), as well as *de facto* confiscation of current workers' private pension contributions to maintain payouts after 2012. Since 2013 Russia's government has been debating abandonment of private pension accounts, potentially returning to a pay-as-you-go system in which all payments of current workers would be available for current pensioners' benefits.

#### *Inflating industrial employment*

Industrial workers in Russia, especially those employed in old Soviet-era enterprises and single-industry monotowns, have also been shielded from market competition and productivity pressures. Russia's economy has gone through large-scale structural adjustments and sharp GDP declines and recoveries with little change in unemployment levels (Kapeliushnikov 2001). During the 1990s economic crisis, open unemployment peaked at 13.2% in 1998, while production fell by a much more drastic 40%. Low unemployment levels continued through the 2008–2009 and current recessions, with wages consistently adjusting downward much more than employment levels (see Figure 5) (Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov 2011). Though the extent of employment inflation is difficult to measure, analysts point to the persistence of loss-making enterprises, which comprised one-fourth of Russia's industry in 2007 and one third in post-recession 2009 and include several hundred monotowns dominated by obsolete and uncompetitive industries that anchor entire communities. The main mechanism for maintaining inflated employment is a system of employment protection legislation that is stricter than that of EU states, and that makes costs of dismissing workers prohibitively high.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Interview with Russian labour market expert, Moscow, 4 December 2015.

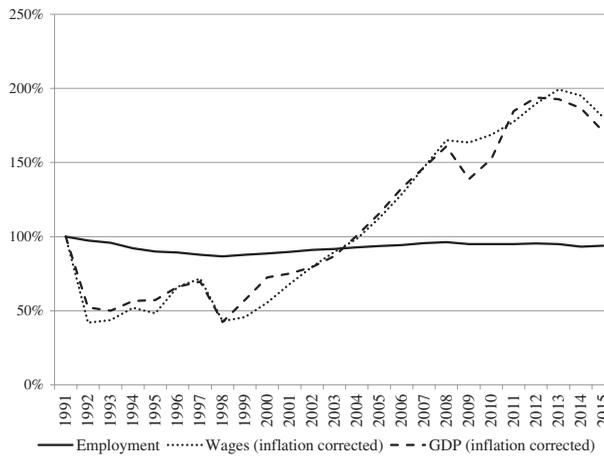


FIGURE 5. EMPLOYMENT, REAL WAGES, AND GDP IN THE RUSSIAN ECONOMY, 1991–2015.

Note: Calculations by Natalia Forrat.

Sources: ‘Social’no-ekonomicheskie pokazateli Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 1991–2014 gg.’, supplement to Russian Statistical Yearbook 2015, available at: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/doc\\_2015/year/pril\\_year15.xls](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/doc_2015/year/pril_year15.xls), accessed 30 September 2016; Index of consumer prices, available at: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/prices/potr/2015/i-ipc.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/prices/potr/2015/i-ipc.xlsx), accessed 30 September 2016; ‘Social’no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Rossii 2015 g.’, issue 12, available at: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/doc\\_2015/social/osn-12-2015.pdf](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/doc_2015/social/osn-12-2015.pdf), accessed 30 September 2016; current data on GDP available at: <http://www.gks.ru/>, accessed 30 September 2016; ‘Srednegodovaya chislennost zanyatykh v ekonomike (raschety na osnovakh integrirovaniya dannykh)’, available at: <https://www.fedstat.ru/indicator/43211>, accessed 30 September 2016.

Why has the Putin administration kept industrial employment artificially inflated despite the obvious costs to modernisation and performance of Russia’s economy? Official rhetoric and experts’ assessments point to the leadership’s concerns about social stability as a major motivation (Zubarevich 2012; Crowley 2015). Concerns about unemployment and social protest in monotonowns came to the fore of the leadership’s attention during the 2008–2009 economic crisis, focused by an article likening the then-current situation to that in Novochoerkassk ’62 in its potential to produce a ‘social explosion’ (Gontmakher 2008). A major policy study was commissioned to assess conditions and risks in monotonowns, which are categorised according to level of social stability. New federal subsidies were directed to some (Crowley 2015). New measures of unemployment prevention have been elaborated by Russia’s government as part of its recent anti-crisis plans, including billions of rubles allocated to improve labour market efficiency, but in the view of at least some experts, have been designed mainly to manage the crisis by avoiding structural change and adjustment (Crowley 2015).

#### *Preserving health care entitlements and staffing*

In the health sector the Putin leadership has largely maintained inflated medical staffing patterns inherited from the Soviet period, and abandoned efficiency-oriented reforms. Numbers of doctors have increased steadily since 2000 while their density (number per 100,000 population) continues to significantly exceed the EU average (Goskomstat 2016). Repeated studies have shown Russia’s health care sector to be overstaffed and inefficient in international

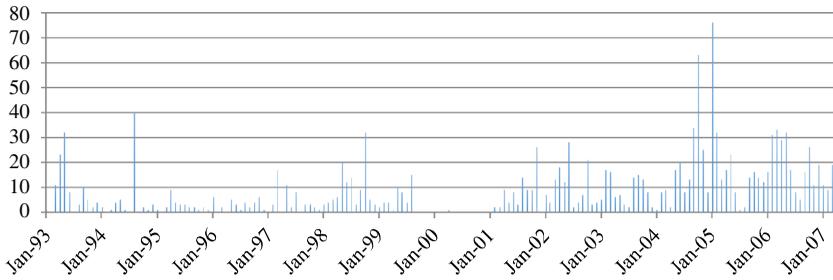


FIGURE 6. LENGTH OF DEMONSTRATIONS (IN DAYS).

Source: Kniazeva (Beznosova) (2013).

comparisons (Popovich *et al.* 2011). Russian legislation specifies a ‘guaranteed package’ of medical services for all citizens, but large numbers of medical facilities, especially obsolete facilities in rural areas, have been closed, often leaving these areas underserved. By contrast protests have delayed planned consolidation of at least some urban health facilities.<sup>35</sup> And the state has repeatedly backtracked on or abandoned rationalising and efficiency-oriented health sector reforms, leaving old systems of administration and practice in place. Efforts to convert the health insurance system to more rational ‘single channel’ financing have floundered. In sum, costs have been imposed mainly on rural populations, while medical staffs have grown and old systems of administration and financing have resisted efficiency-oriented reforms.

#### *Mechanisms for transmitting citizens’ preferences: public opinion and protests*

Russian citizens transmit their policy preferences and grievances to government through public opinion surveys, complaints, protests, and elections. Public opinion surveys conducted from the early 2000s to the present show that substantial majorities hold the state responsible for social welfare and rank social above political rights (Lipsmeyer 2003; Potapchik *et al.* 2011). Citizens also register complaints, mostly focused on social issues; more than one million complaints (*obrashcheniya*) were received by the Presidential Administration in 2014.<sup>36</sup> While majorities are dissatisfied with the quality of public social services, most would not prefer to purchase these services in the market (Kulmala *et al.* 2014). In sum, no leadership can doubt that the majority of Russian citizens, excepting the young and affluent, want existing social welfare benefits to remain public and to improve.

Citizens’ preferences and grievances are also communicated through protest. Levels of social and labour protest have been absolutely and comparatively low in Russia since 1992. That said, protests have focused on social and economic grievances. Robertson’s authoritative study of all protests during 1997–2000 found that, while most were local and limited to particularistic demands, a large majority of these demands concerned economic and social grievances (Robertson 2011; Bizyukov 2011). The largest and most politically-consequential protests in post-communist Russia (except those around the 2011–2012 elections) were mounted by pensioners in 2005 against monetisation of social benefits and privileges (see Figure 6). The

<sup>35</sup>‘Otstoim nashe pravo rodit’! a vlasti nas ne slyshat’, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 10 December 2015.

<sup>36</sup>‘Informatsionno-statisticheskii obzor rassmotrennykh v 2014 godu obrashchenii grazhdan’, available at: <http://letters.kremlin.ru/digests/periodic/141>, accessed 30 September 2016.

government responded immediately by retracting monetisation and raising pensions, then abandoning liberalising social reforms. According to a knowledgeable specialist, ‘the 2005 protests were critical in change of the government’s social policy strategy’,<sup>37</sup> highlighting the leadership’s sensitivity to large-scale protest. Recent research reveals frequent, small scale local protests, against housing evictions and demolitions, education policies, inadequate facilities for children and disabled, and so forth.<sup>38</sup> There is no systematic evidence of the government’s response; anecdotal evidence indicates that some protesters’ demands are ignored, but others are addressed, especially when they relate to services the government is formally committed to provide.

‘Market social contract’ benefits also contribute to electoral mobilisation in Russia. Despite rampant fraud, Russian elections require popular participation. Electoral participation is mobilised particularly from pensioners, who comprise some 40% of the electorate. Enterprises, especially those that are state-owned or dependent on state subsidies, frequently engage in electoral mobilisation. A recent study by Frye *et al.* found that the workplace has become the ‘key locus’ of voter mobilisation (Frye *et al.* 2014; Crowley 2015). According to their study,

Employers whose economic fate is more closely tied to the state have incentives to sell the votes of their workers more cheaply to the autocrat. For example, autocrats have significant leverage over the directors of state-owned enterprises ... [and] employers whose enterprises are financially dependent on the state ... those living in a *monogorod* [single-company town] are twice as likely to have been mobilized than those living in other types of cities (41.3% versus 20.2%). (Frye *et al.* 2014, pp. 208, 217)

While not, strictly speaking, a way of expressing societal policy preferences, workplace electoral mobilisation is another mechanism of control that results from the state’s maintenance of a subsidised and inflated industrial labour force.

### *Conclusion*

This essay has provided evidence that a social contract existed in the Soviet Union, and continues to exist in contemporary China and post-Soviet Russia. We have argued that pre-1989 communist regimes supplied costly benefits to the population because, under declining repression, welfare served as the key mechanism for maintaining political quiescence. We also examine the operation of a market social contract in a country that is still ruled by a communist party (post-Tiananmen China) and in a hegemonic-party authoritarian regime (Russia under Putin). We find that after contracting in the early 1990s, the social contract in China has been expanding largely in response to pressure from the population expressed through citizen complaints and frequent protests. In Russia, a dramatic contraction of the social contract in the 1990s was followed by some expansion after 2000. We argue that since Russia made a clear turn towards semi-autocratic rule under Putin, the contract has been expanded selectively in response to public opinion, social protest, and pressures of electoral mobilisation.

<sup>37</sup>Interview with social policy expert, Moscow, 21 December 2015.

<sup>38</sup>See Kollektivnoe deistvie (site run by Carine Clement, European University, St Petersburg), available at: <http://www.ikd.ru/taxonomy/term/41?page=1>, accessed 30 September 2016.

How do market social contracts compare in contemporary China and Russia? On the basis of evidence from these two countries, we have argued that more authoritarian market capitalist states should be more distributive, using social goods to satisfy popular preferences in order to maintain political stability and quiescence; additional research can show whether our argument applies to a larger group of non-democratic regimes. The logic of our argument suggests that China should maintain a more extensive social contract, because it remains more politically authoritarian than Russia, the state has weaker sources of information about popular preferences, and the population has fewer means of communicating. Russia should become more distributive as it becomes more authoritarian, and this has already been happening. As we have argued in the essay, China outperforms Russia on some elements of the social contract for which we have comparable data: consumer subsidies (except for energy and *l'goty*) are gone in Russia, though some still remain in China (the Chinese government regularly intervenes to lower the price of pork, despite the liberalisation of virtually all other prices);<sup>39</sup> unemployment is lower in China; male life expectancy is higher; and HDI has been growing, although it is declining in Russia. On public health expenditure, however, Russia outperforms China (although public health expenditure in China has been consistently expanding and in Russia it has declined by comparison with the Soviet period).

We anticipate that the scope of the social contract will change in the countries that we discuss in this essay. China needs to continue to expand its social contract to incorporate all losers from the reform experience. If it fails to do that, it will face a level of social unrest that may destabilise the entire political system. In the case of Russia, the ongoing economic contraction calls into question how much longer the regime can maintain the legacies of the socialist social contract. The regressive distributive policies may be supplemented by more effective means-tested policies.

Finally, our essay does not make a normative judgement of the Chinese social spending policies as good and Russian policies as bad. We have provided empirical evidence that the allocation of budgetary resources towards redistribution (both under central planning and in a market economy) has a political logic that may diverge from strict economic efficiency. The social contract is driven by short-term political considerations. Over the long term, future generations both in China and in Russia will have to bear the economic costs of social spending decisions that were made in order to maximise short-term goals like the maintenance of social stability and the engineering of popular support for the regime.

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<sup>39</sup>'Premier Wen Pledges Further Price Regulation Measures', *Xinhua*, 17 September 2011, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/17/c\\_131143250.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/17/c_131143250.htm), accessed 30 September 2016.

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