

# THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE RESEARCH INTO SOCIAL SPACE

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## SOCIAL CONTRACT AS THE BASIS OF EMERGING RUSSIAN SOVEREIGNTY



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*The purpose of imposing an unprecedented number of sanctions on Russia was not only to disrupt its economy, but also to create internal division through growing citizen discontent and internal unrest. However, the authority's rapid response, who reacted to both economic destabilization and the society's aggravated needs, made it possible to counteract the emerging threat and led to the society's consolidation and the increase of its civic consciousness. The aim of the study is to understand the phenomenon of the social contract, which originated in the era of statehood formation and is the basis for the stable existence of the state. The study of the evolution of this phenomenon from antiquity to our days allowed us to define the principle of justice as a key principle in the formation of social contract. This principle, formulated in ancient times and later reflected in the teachings of J.-J. Rousseau, I. Kant, D. Rawls, etc., manifested itself most clearly in the ideological concepts of Russian philosophers of the 19th century. Historical analysis of the phenomenon of social contract allowed us to define it as an informal agreement between society and sovereign power, based on the consolidation of the former and the responsibility of the latter. The study of the need to rethink the social contract in Russia after 2022 has shown that the requests for the elaboration of the country's ideology and the introduction of responsibility for anti-Russian propaganda (the request for justice) are the most acute in the public discourse. They are already reflected in the emerging new social contract, the basis of which is the agreement based on unity, justice, freedom, patriotism and sovereignty.*

*Geopolitics, trust, ideology, narrow corridor concept, model of deliberative democracy, social contract, Russophobia, Russian world, justice, sovereignty.*

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## Introduction

The Russophobia that unfolded in the world, which actually became the ideology of Western elites, contributed to the reformatting of Russian society, the rethinking of its ideological foundations, and the formation of a demand for a new social contract that should lay down new principles for the existence of Russian society, become its basis and mark a radical transformation of the country's governance regime from dependent to sovereign. The imposition of countless sanctions on Russia with the aim of not only destroying the country's economy, but also undermining its ability to exist through internal discord and destabilization of harmony in society has caused a response from Russia, which was expressed, among other things, in the search for new foundations of dialogue between the authorities and society. The formation of a new social harmony (social contract) under the current conditions is the key to stability and security in Russia.

The aim of this paper is to consider conceptual foundations of the social contract using a historical approach to its study and to substantiate the need to form a new social contract in Russia.

The novelty of the work consists in revealing the ideological foundations of a new social contract between Russian society and the government, generated by the global geopolitical transformation that began in 2022.

The research methodology includes the use of historical and structural approach to the study of the social contract in combination with general scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, description, generalization).

## Literature review

The topic of social contract is constantly reflected in the works of both Russian and foreign researchers. Some works are devoted to historical aspects of the evolution of the social contract, including the Russian experience (Vtorushin, 2023; Zubov, 2023; Toshchenko, 2023; Fink, 2011; Lubenow, 2012). The conclusions that the authors come to on

the basis of the results of the analysis are that in the process of evolution the social contract has undergone a certain transformation from a mechanism of society's transition to the state as a whole to an instrument for regulating the relationship between different social elements (the state and civil society, the center and subjects in complex states with a federal structure, the authorities and the population), as well as the ideological basis of the state (Zubov, 2023). In addition, the study of historical milestones of the transformation of the social contract allows us to talk about the degree of its effectiveness in strengthening both individual associations (Fink, 2011) and the state as a whole (Vtorushin, 2023; Toshchenko, 2023).

A number of works are devoted to comprehending the essential components of the social contract. Thus, the article (Bokova, Palekha, 2021) presents the conceptual foundations of the most prominent theories of social contract. Habermas's concept of deliberative democracy as a model of the relationship between the system and the lifeworld is conceptualized in (Lubenow, 2012). The work (Filippov, Novikov, 2023) analyzes social contract from the point of view of various approaches that emerged at different stages of development of philosophical and political thought (hierarchical, optimistic, skeptical, conjectural, sociological, etc.), concludes on the relativity of social contract, depending on the specific type of political system and the interest of political actors. The study of interpretations of the social contract put forward by J.-J. Rousseau and T. Hobbes in the context of their correlation with the socio-political situation in Russia is considered in the work (Borovikhin, Pavlovich, 2022). The authors conclude that the theory of social contract of J.-J. Rousseau is more suitable for Russia, while the position of T. Hobbes in the conditions of the new reality is absolutely unacceptable for our country. The analysis of the theory of social contract in the relationship with the concept of alienation is carried out within the framework of the article (Ogarkov, Smetankina, 2020), in which the authors note that the theory of social contract

is the most “balanced” interpretation of the concept of alienation, when a person gives up his “natural” generic quality (to be free) in favor of voluntary associations burdened with social duty. The monograph by E. McCandless substantiates the need to rethink the concept of social contract in the context of instability and conflict<sup>1</sup>. A combination of effective institutions, social cohesion and mechanisms of political settlement are proposed as “driving forces” contributing to the maintenance of peace and stability. The theme of the social contract as an instrument of informal institutions that is designed to make the interaction between social groups and their sovereign (the state) more predictable and effective is continued in (Loewe et al., 2021). The communicative concept of the social contract, oriented not so much at reaching a compromise as at discussing the positions of the parties and reaching mutual understanding about the image of the future socio-economic development of the country, as well as the role of the high-tech elite in the process of convergence of the positions of social clusters are studied in (Dementiev, 2023).

The events that took place in Russia after 2023 have actualized another aspect of studying the topic of social contract, its transformation in modern Russian realities. The pool of works on this aspect is still insufficiently formed, but scientific thought is actively developing in this direction. Thus, in the study (Balatsky, Ekimova, 2022b) the manifestation of the social contract is proposed, in (Balatsky, Ekimova, 2022a) the requirements to the emerging social contract in Russia are analyzed, and in the article (Ilyin, Morev, 2022) an attempt is made to consider the contours of this new contract supported by the majority of the country’s population and determining the legitimacy of the authorities of the renewed Russia. Our work is in line with the ongoing research and reflects the outlines of a future social contract in the context of meeting the key public demand for justice.

### **Social contract: evolution of understanding**

The historical roots of the social contract go back to ancient times, where in the works of Greek philosophers one can find many arguments about social relations, which should be based on consent and justice. For example, Democritus explained the evolution of society as a consequence of people coming together to jointly solve urgent problems and work out some rules of joint existence. Socrates believed that the basis of harmony in society is the unity of morality and law, and the form of government is determined by law and the will of the people (Nersesyants, 1979). Plato based the ideal state on the notion of justice as the virtue of the three estates (philosophers, warriors, artisans/farmers) agreeing to voluntarily carry out their prescribed functions (to govern, protect, produce), thus recognizing the inequality of society as a natural state of being. Aristotle developed his teacher’s theory, naming a dialog of equal citizens as a condition for achieving a just society. Epicurus defined the main task of the state as to achieve the consent of citizens in order to ensure their security (Mikhailov, 2016).

In the Middle Ages, the idea of a social contract was practically not developed, but some of its elements, expressed in the search for drivers of cooperation of any forms of human associations, can be found even at that time. A striking example of such a contract is the Novgorod office of the Hanseatic League, created to ensure the safety of trade and control the observance of the developed rules, which represented a kind of agreement between the members of the trading community (Fink, 2011).

The social contract theory received its final form in the New Age, which was characterized by the search for a compromise between the civil and natural states of man, between public and private, between security and freedom. The classics of the social contract theory in the New Age were T. Hobbes, D. Locke, J.-J. Rousseau and Kant. The state, according to Hobbes, is a community of people in a civil state, which is

<sup>1</sup> McCandless E. (2028). Reconceptualizing the social contract: In contexts of conflict, fragility and fraught transition. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand. Available at: <https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/faculties-and-schools/commerce-law-and-management/wits-school-of-governance/documents/Forging%20Resilient%20Social%20Contracts%20-%20Framing%20Paper%20May%202018.pdf> (accessed: January 20, 2024).

characterized by a partial renunciation of the desire to do and get whatever one wants in favor of justice and public safety. According to Locke, the state is an association of people to whom, on the basis of a social contract, a part of the functions of citizens is delegated for the purpose of their protection and development of society. The ideas of Locke and Hobbes were generalized in the doctrine of J.-J. Rousseau, who believed that the sources of justice in the state are the reason and conscience of a person who concluded a social contract and became a part of society (Zubov, 2023). I. Kant extended the idea of moral responsibility to persons involved in the development and adoption of laws (Makarenko, 2012). Utopianism of the ideas of New Age philosophers is associated with the impossibility of achieving universal consent, in connection with which absolute justice in society is unattainable, because the state always reflects the interests and attitudes of only that part of people who support it.

Contemporaries of the social contract theory are D. Rawls with his distributive paradigm of justice based on two opposing principles – redistribution, which generates tension in society, and recognition, which creates opportunities to eliminate structural inequality (Surovtsev, Syrov, 2015), J. Habermas with the model of deliberative democracy based on the idea of compromise and dialog (Lubenow, 2012), D. Acemoğlu and J. Robinson with their concept of narrow corridor, according to which the construction of an effective state is possible only in the conditions of balance between institutions (state) and culture (society) (Acemoğlu, Robinson, 2021).

Thus, the historical background of the social contract allows us to define it as an informal agreement between society and sovereign power, based on the consolidation of the former and the responsibility of the latter.

### **Social contract in Russia: from antiquity to the present day**

The ideas of social contract can also be found in Russian history. Thus, contractual agreements were the basis of the “calling” of Varangian princes by the Novgorodians in

862, were traced during the reign of Vasily III (1505-1533), determined the ascent of Mikhail Romanov to the throne in 1613, and accompanied the church reform under Peter the Great. However, the concept of social contract was most clearly manifested in the 18th–19th century in the ideas of A. Radishchev, A. Herzen and the Decembrists, when the concept of “justice” took new shape and became the leitmotif of social harmony in Russia (Grudtsyna, Lagutkin, 2016). In the early years of the USSR, the idea of social contract was realized in the participation of the people in the struggle against “oppressors” and usurpation of power; in the 1980s, society’s demand for a change of the ideological paradigm and the elimination of the absolute monopoly of the Communist Party was formed. The lack of feedback from the authorities led to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent chaos of the 1990s, which was managed by a new social contract between society and Vladimir Putin’s government.

It is worth noting that the social contract of the early 2000s caused contradictory assessments and led to the emergence of discussions about what it should be. In particular, in A. Auzan’s concept the social contract was considered as a civil society, the degree of its strength determines the scheme of the social contract and its effectiveness. If civil society is strong, a horizontal scheme of social contract emerges, where society is the dominant factor determining the relationship between citizens, business and government. In the case of weak civil society, the principle of hierarchy is determined by the state, and a vertical scheme of social contract emerges. The author proves the futility of the vertical scheme on the example of England and Spain, which, having approximately the same potential in the 16th century, chose different trajectories of movement and found themselves at a fundamentally different level of development in the 19th century. England, which accidentally fixed the horizontal scheme of the social contract, became a world leader, while the vertical social contract that emerged in Spain made it one of the most backward

countries in Europe. Characterizing the Russian reality of the early 2000s, the author makes a disappointing diagnosis that the country has a hierarchical structure of power under the vertical contract, aggravated by the dominance of redistributive groups, which is the worst possible condition for economic development and characterizes the complete lack of public trust in the authorities (Auzan, 2005).

It should be noted that the weakness of A. Auzan’s concept consists in the underestimation of two points. First, the specifics of Russia: the vast territory of the country and its harsh climate require a strong central government to preserve its internal unity and ensure external security; otherwise, the country will either disintegrate itself or be subjected to military invasion from outside. Second, the properties of innovation ambivalence, when even a strong central government with sufficient flexibility and efficiency is able to directly influence innovation processes and not interfere much in market mechanisms, thus accelerating economic growth (Balatsky, Ekimova, 2020). The past two decades have shown the fundamental importance of taking these factors into account, since it was their neglect that led to erroneous judgments in the concept of A. Auzan. In addition, modern theories of the social contract, the last word among which, perhaps, is the concept of a narrow corridor by D. Acemoğlu and J. Robinson, point out that a modern effective state arises only in conditions of political equilibrium between society (the masses) and the state (the elites) – the Shackled Leviathan, whereas any deviations both toward the vertical scheme (Despotic Leviathan) and towards the horizontal one (Absent Leviathan) lead to negative consequences and contribute to the formation of either despotism of power or organizational anarchy (Acemoğlu, Robinson, 2021).

The basis for the formation of a new demand of the society in our days were the events of 2022, when due to the unfolding geopolitical transformation of the world, the sense of patriotism inherent in the Russian mentality in difficult life situations became more acute. The Russophobia that engulfed the Western

world contributed to an unprecedented unity of society and growth of trust in the President of Russia and the Government of the Russian Federation. Thus, the ratings of trust in V.V. Putin and the Government of the Russian Federation are less than in the past. According to VCIOM, in less than 4 months since the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, ratings of trust in V.V. Putin and the RF Government have increased by more than 15 p.p. and reached unprecedentedly high values (81.3 and 54.3%, respectively), which have not changed significantly over the past period of time (78.8 and 54.7%, respectively). The dynamics of the indicator of approval of the President of Russia’s activity since the beginning of the Special military operation, obtained based on the results of opinion polls carried out by various organizations, is shown in *Table*.

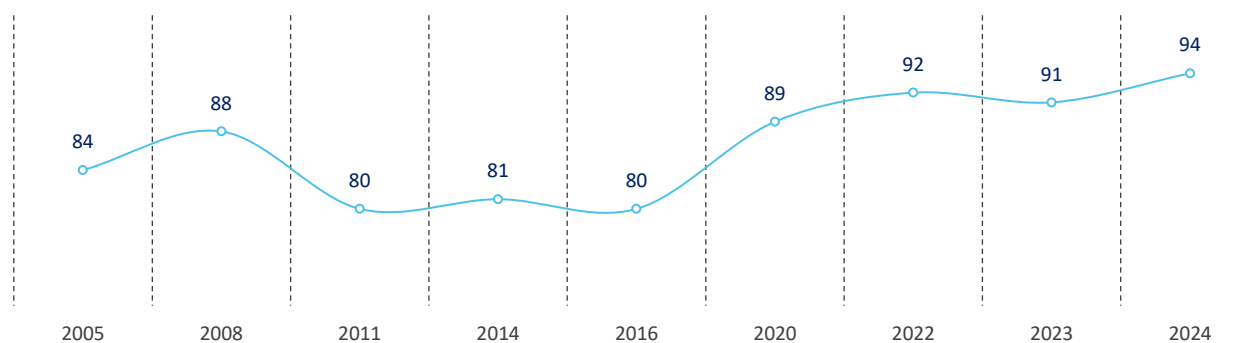
**Table. Dynamics of the Russian President’s approval rating, %**

Agency	December 2021	February 2022	August 2022	August 2023	August 2024
VCIOM	61.7	70.4	78.1	73.6	72.4
Public Opinion Foundation	61	81	81	77	78
Levada-Center*	65	71	83	80	85

Source: polling data of VCIOM, POF, Levada-Center\*.  
\* Included in the register of foreign agents.

At the same time, the level of patriotism in Russian society has increased significantly since the beginning of the SMO and has now reached the highest levels: according to the results of the VCIOM poll conducted in March 2024, 94% of Russians consider themselves patriots of Russia (*Figure*).

Another manifestation of society’s new demand was its reaction to sabotage in the work of Russian officials (Manushin, Nureyev, 2022) and its attitude toward representatives of the creative professions who have spoken out against their country. Thus, according to the VCIOM poll, 63% of respondents disapprove of the artists’ decision to leave Russia; 61% consider people who have been given the status



### Dynamics of the percentage of surveyed respondents who consider themselves patriots of Russia

Source: VCIOM data. Available at: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/o-sovremennom-rossiiskom-patriotizme>

of foreign agents as traitors spreading lies about Russia; 47% are ready to stop watching and listening to their favorite actors and singers in full or in part if they are recognized as foreign agents. Thus, in 2022 there is a need to form a new social contract in society, the contours of which can already be clearly traced.

The most important provisions of the emerging contract are the request to develop the ideology of the country and the demand to introduce responsibility for anti-Russian propaganda. According to paragraph 1 of Article 13 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, ideological diversity is recognized in Russia, which resulted in the absence of any ideology in society in the three decades after the collapse of the USSR. Modern events have shown that this situation is unacceptable, because it is the absence of a single ideology that contributes to the disunity of society and opens the possibility of influencing the minds of the population from the outside. That is why, against the background of Russophobia, which has become the ideology of the Western ruling elites, the formation of the Russian World, based on the principles of diversity and unity of peoples, cultures, languages, traditions, religions, is becoming a huge competitive advantage of our country. The speech of the President of Russia V.V. Putin's speech at the plenary session of the

25th World Russian People's Council set the vector of the emerging Russian ideology and defined its outlines<sup>2</sup>. Agreement based on unity, justice and freedom is the basis of the emerging Russian ideology aimed at building a sovereign state capable of guaranteeing the distinctive development of all peoples living in Russia, increasing the well-being of citizens and building a just society. "We have a large, diverse country. And in this diversity of cultures, traditions, customs is our strength, huge competitive advantage and potential. We must constantly strengthen it, protect this diverse harmony, our common heritage"<sup>3</sup>. The unifying factor, according to the President of the Russian Federation, is the Russian World, which represents "all generations of our ancestors and our descendants who will live after us. The Russian world is ancient Russia, the Moscow Kingdom, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and modern Russia, which returns, strengthens and multiplies its sovereignty as a world power. The Russian world unites all those who feel a spiritual connection with our Motherland, who consider themselves bearers of the Russian language, history, culture, regardless of national or religious affiliation"<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it becomes obvious that the request for ideology that appeared in society was heard by the authorities and now the process of its

<sup>2</sup> Plenary Session of the World Russian People's Council. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863> (accessed: January 20, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

formation is underway, which contributes, among other things, to the growth of trust in the authorities, mentioned above.

Another public demand is the requirement to introduce responsibility for anti-Russian propaganda, which is clearly reflected in the attitude of society to the statements and actions of public figures who carry out anti-government and anti-Russian propaganda. The overwhelming part of the population, outraged by their behavior, has formed a fair request for the punishment of such people. This is especially noticeable with regard to those who continue their public activities in Russia (acting in movies, appearing on television, selling books, giving lectures, writing articles, etc.). For some time it seemed that the authorities did not notice this public demand, but now it has become obvious that the authorities hear it and respond to it.

For example, in 2023, the public demanded the cancellation of performances by D. Arbenina<sup>5</sup>, K. Orbakaite<sup>6</sup>, V. Meladze<sup>7</sup>, A. Revva<sup>8</sup> and other artists who spoke out against the actions of the Russian authorities and spoke out against the SMO. B. Akunin<sup>9</sup> and D. Bykov<sup>10</sup>, recognized by the Russian Ministry of Justice as foreign agents<sup>11</sup>, made statements about the country, the army and Russians. The Maly Drama Theater canceled productions with the participation of D. Kozlovsky<sup>12</sup>, and the series “One Call Bar”, in which the actor played the lead role, did not receive a rental certificate from the Ministry of Culture. A. Pugacheva and A. Makarevich<sup>13</sup> (rock band “Mashina Vremeni”<sup>14</sup>) topped the anti-rating of musicians causing shame.

Another confirmation of the above thesis is the reaction of Russian society to the so-called “naked party” of the Russian beau monde, which took place in December 2023 and received such a wide public response that the media, law enforcement agencies, and government officials, including the President of the Russian Federation, reacted to it. In addition, artists who spoke against the country gradually began to disappear from the screens, books by authors who did not support Russia were withdrawn from sale, and concerts of performers whose statements were anti-people and anti-government in nature were canceled. In mid-February, Russian President V.V. Putin signed a law on confiscation of property and deprivation of honorary titles and awards for calling for anti-state activities, financing activities against Russia’s security, and spreading deliberately false information about the Russian army<sup>15</sup>.

It is worth noting that the demand to introduce responsibility for anti-Russian propaganda is part of a broader demand for justice, which includes decent living conditions, broad opportunities for self-realization and guarantees for the well-being of all citizens. Thus, justice has become another point of the emerging social contract and one of the bases of modern Russian ideology, along with freedom, patriotism and sovereignty.

All this suggests that, despite the existing difficulties, the work on building a dialog between the authorities and society is underway and the new social contract, without the formation of which stable and secure development of society is impossible, is gaining clearer outlines.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://news.ru/culture/v-rossii-mogut-otmenit-koncerty-diany-arbeninoy> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2024/02/07/18244189.shtml?updated> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/486744-v-treh-sibirskih-gorodah-otmenili-koncerty-valeria-meladze> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27485.5/4742302> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Entered in the register of foreign agents.

<sup>10</sup> Entered in the register of foreign agents.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/19546235> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/15/05/2023/64623ab59a7947275965e73d> (accessed: September 2, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Entered in the register of foreign agents.

<sup>14</sup> Available at: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/shou-biznes-ehpokhi-svo-ot-patriotov-do-relokantov> (accessed: January 20, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Putin signed a law on confiscation of property for spreading fake information about the Army. Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/19978975> (accessed: January 20, 2024).

## Conclusion

The social contract, which is an informal institution and has no normative form, nevertheless has properties that, on the one hand, stabilize social relations in society and, on the other hand, promote its development. The unprecedented political and economic impact of the Western coalition on Russia has forced the country not only to embark on a large-scale economic transformation, but also to revise the social contract, which has

been the tacit basis of social harmony for the past two decades. The events of 2022 laid the groundwork for the formation of a new social contract, which is now taking shape. The key requirement of the new contract is the construction of an ideological foundation for society, the basic components of which are defined as justice, freedom, patriotism, and sovereignty. The ongoing work of building a new social harmony is the key to the future of a stable and secure society.

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