



ESSAYS AND REVIEW

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Social contract: Evolution of ideas and lessons of history*

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Abstract. The article is a review of the book by Zh.T. Toshchenko *Fates of Social Contract in Russia: Evolution of Ideas and Lessons of Realization* (Moscow; 2025. 844 p.). The book describes the emergence of the ideas of social contract as an agreement between the people and the state, often of a latent nature, which were first developed by thinkers of Enlightenment. The author considers various theories of social contract, revealing peculiarities in its contemporary interpretation and fulfillment and focusing on the main characteristics of social contract, its essence as a unity of goals of all participants striving for mutual trust, balance of interests and constant feedback. The author provides a review of the contemporary interpretations of social contract and of the new options for understanding practices of its implementation in the social-political life. The main part of the book presents the analysis of the Russian/Soviet history of the social contract implementation at different stages under the contradictory development of the country, also explaining the forms of participation of the main social groups in the social contract. Finally, the author considers the essence, content, and evolution of the social contract ideas in the 20th — 21st century, their transformation and lessons of the social contract implementation at different stages of the contemporary society development.

Key words: social contract; evolution of ideas; power; lessons of history; new challenges and risks; future

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On the eve of his 90th birthday, Zh.T. Toshchenko delighted readers with a new book which is not an anniversary edition but a serious generalizing work of an outstanding scholar. As can be seen from its content, the author has developed this research project throughout his scientific career which coincided with the turning points of eras, i.e., has focused on the phenomena of paradoxicality [1], their centauric [2] and phantom nature [3], and the precariat [4]. Previously Toshchenko considered contradictory processes of social-political life, which are presented in his books *Ethnocracy: History and the Present State* [5] and *Theocracy: Phantom or Reality?* [6]. A generalized analysis of these ambiguous processes and phenomena, focusing on various aspects of the Russian society, was reflected in the author's theoretical attempt to apply the systems approach to the study of economic, political, social and spiritual-cultural development as a set of characteristics and trends in his book *Trauma Society: Between Evolution and Revolution* [7].

In this book, Toshchenko offers some new content for the concept of social contract, which has been forgotten by contemporary researchers. Moreover, he examines this phenomenon in the dynamics of changing times and eras and makes conclusions based on both empirical studies and historical information. When comparing the current research results with the data on public consciousness obtained at the Academy of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1985–1991, the author argues that “there was a need to examine and analyze the relationship between the people and the government not only at the current stage of the country's development but also in previous years. At the same time, there was a need to answer the question of how the interaction of the Soviet government with the people and its main social communities and groups developed at various historical periods, starting from the Soviet power establishment and further existence. Moreover, there was a need not only to describe but also to give this interaction a qualitative definition in the form of a scientific concept that would allow a purposeful and systematic presentation of what was happening in public consciousness in the perspective of the people's interaction with the state and its representatives at all levels of social organization” (P. 13).

Toshchenko defines social contract as “the social-economic, social-political and social-cultural establishment of a balance of interests between the people and the state, which both openly and latently demonstrates the consistency of relationships and interactions of the state and the people in the organization and arrangement of social (public) and personal (private) life” (P. 97). The author rightly asserts that “today the concept of social contract is the most important theoretical, political and social construct for the

analysis, explanation and implementation of the evolutionary or revolutionary development of the state and society. This concept implies a coordinated policy for the transformation of social-economic and political environment, approved methods and forms of state and political governance and acceptable ideological influence on public consciousness. Thus, the implemented social contract forms ideas, beliefs and, accordingly, actions to create and achieve a common destiny of the people and the state” (P. 843).

In the world plunging into chaos of instability, with international institutions of crisis containment unable to cope with new challenges, social contract becomes a point of support, stability and solution for urgent problems. Regardless of the definitions of the situation, a certain latent process is observed in the spiritual life of society — coordination of positions of different social groups and regions and relations between groups and people. There is either a convergence of positions of social groups and regions or, on the contrary, deepening contradictions between them, which determines social consolidation, stability of life, attitudes of people and authorities to the events that take place, i.e., the very basis of social contract.

Social contract was generated by the objective course of human development due to the need to turn every community and each person into a subject of the historical process, regardless of one’s class, nation or religion, social or material status. The basic component of social contract were constitutions that reflected the principles of ruling classes’ understanding of people’s interests and aspirations and of public organizations and movements representing people. It is equally important that social contract is “not some document that records the relationship between the state and the people. It is a special state of society, which, in addition to obvious indicators, contains hidden, latent relations reflecting the degree and level of balance of interests between political authorities and social communities and groups, the intention and readiness to support actions of authorities in managing the main spheres of society. It should be especially emphasized that the latent component of social contract often becomes the decisive factor that ensures the existence of the state” (P. 836). Although the essence of social contract has changed at different times, “it was generally understood as a unique social phenomenon that today guarantees the existence of the state and provides an opportunity for an effective solution for economic, political, social and spiritual-moral problems” (P. 837).

A distinctive feature of Toshchenko’s style is that all sides and aspects of social contract in the USSR/Russia are analyzed with one methodological approach — the country’s development is considered “from below”, from the

standpoint of people's participation, attitudes and assessments of changes. At the same time, special attention is paid to everyday life as a sphere of concentration of motives — to show the contradictory diversity of public and private life at all stages of development.

The book is logically structured and consists of an introduction, three sections, 16 chapters, a conclusion and references. Each section is structurally independent and includes its own introduction, conclusion and references. The first section “Fundamentals of Social Contract: A Historical, Philosophical and Sociological Analysis” presents the evolution of ideas about social contract, their origin and explanation, specifics of interpretation and attempts to implement social contract from the 19th century to the present time, reveals the essence and content of social contract and interpretations of its real practices in the contemporary world. The author wonders if the country's constitution is the basis of social contract, considers the relationship between its formal (open) and informal (latent) foundations, seeks to characterize its subjects and highlight its main criteria. Thus, the first part of the book compares different interpretations of the evolution of ideas and practices of social contract.

In the second, largest section “Stages of Social Contract Implementation in Russia/USSR”, Toshchenko examines the situation during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The very structure of the section shows the following stages in implementing social contract: its new version in 1917; its military-political basis; implementation of the proclaimed rights and freedoms (In the 1920s); mobilization society (In the 1930s); the Great Patriotic War; transformation of social contract (second half of the 1940s — early 1950s); the search for answers to challenges of the time (mid-1950s — early 1960s); achievements, zigzags and miscalculations of the Khrushchev decade; society at a crossroads — turbulent state of social contract (mid-1960s — first half of the 1980s); perestroika — corrosion of social contract (1985–1991); new Russia — hopes and disappointments (1990s–2020s). The author analyzes the functioning of social contract in the Soviet/Russian state in the perspective of its two main subjects — the state represented by political power and the people represented by its main classes (workers and peasants).

“Social contract in its Soviet guise was not developed by chance or due to a conspiracy or deception. Its appearance on the historical arena is connected with the fact that it was based on the key aspirations of the people (peace to the nations, factories to the workers, land to the peasants, power to the Soviets), which were fully and unconditionally accepted by the Bolshevik Party, while other political forces to one degree or another ignored or paid little attention to these demands” (P. 837–838). “The results of the post-war

and Khrushchev periods turned out to be ambiguous, including in the social contract perspective. By the early 1960s, contradictions had intensified, which was clearly reflected in public consciousness. Many people had questions and complaints about the results of ongoing reforms. While recognizing the importance and necessity of many reforms, people judged their results. Thus, the economy began to lose its growth rate, which was reflected in a decrease in GDP growth. The situation in agriculture, despite the virgin land campaign, made the country start importing grain in 1962 to make up for the food shortage, and there were other restrictions on consumption. People were confused about measures taken to manage the economy (councils of the national economy did not bring the expected effect). People did not understand the division of the party and Soviet power into industrial and agricultural bodies. By the end of the 1950s, voluntarism had fully manifested itself. The reckless decision making by one person — Khrushchev — was aggravated by general disregard for many issues and complete disregard for expert opinions. Moreover, there was a temptation to make simple decisions and a belief in miracles, which were rejected by reality” (P. 474–475).

“Until the end of the 1970s, the Soviet man was a part of a mobilization-type society. He had long experience of overcoming many challenges, starting from the civil war, then industrialization, collectivization, the Great Patriotic War, restoration of the national economy and participation in grandiose plans for the transformation of virgin lands, Siberia, the Far East and the Far North. These changes and transformations were accompanied by mobilization of patriotic aspirations of the Soviet people, mainly of the youth. In all these processes and events, the social model of the member of the CPSU (widespread belief in “true communists”) was of great importance for people and especially for the youth due to its aura of romanticism, responsibility and self-sacrifice. However, in the long peaceful period that followed, this model could not be automatically reproduced — a different model, a different guideline, a different example of trust was required. This image — of a selfless communist — was spoilt by bureaucratization of the party, the growth of careerist sentiments of some party members and the erroneous staffing of party ranks (at the expense of “the working class as the support of the Soviet society” under the limited admission of the intelligentsia)” (P. 518).

It should be noted that the Soviet period is considered in the book in particular detail and its assessments are very accurate. The hopes for perestroika that was announced in 1985 and “promised to bring the objective needs of state development into line with the new needs of the people” were not fulfilled. The level and quality of political power did not correspond

to historical trends, which, according to Toshchenko, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, i.e., “the geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” (P. 9–840).

In new Russia, social contract was based on people’s expectations that the accumulated shortcomings and miscalculations of the Soviet era would be overcome, and the country would receive impetus for further socialist development. However, “these expectations were not only called into question but also rejected, and people were offered to return to the path of capitalist development” (P. 840), which again raised the question of a fundamentally different social contract. It began to take shape in a very contradictory situation, when many projects of political power already in their first years showed a discrepancy with people’s expectations. The results of the state actions turned out to be far from what the government promised to the people. “There is still a discrepancy between interests of the state and the people, especially since after thirty years new Russia has not reached the levels of 1990” (P. 840).

The third section “Participation of Social Communities and Groups in the Social Contract Implementation: Achievements and Miscalculations” focuses on the role of such leading social communities as pedagogical, engineering, technical, scientific and artistic intelligentsia in ensuring social contract. The author assigns a special role to intelligentsia as a developer of the spiritual foundations of social contract, expressing and protecting interests of the people, creating national culture and forming strategy of the future. Under global instability and unpredictability caused by the escalation of military conflicts, abrupt climate changes, reductions in biological diversity, destruction of living space and a lack of natural resources, science faces the task of developing a new evolutionary strategy for mankind. The way out of the crisis that gets worse every year is not so much in solving social-economic, ecological and geopolitical problems as in a radical change in people’s consciousness, worldview and moral values.

Toshchenko rightly notes that “society cannot be more developed than its education. These words of the US President John Kennedy refer to the period when the US recognized the system of education and training of personnel in the USSR as more perfect” (P. 679). “The social contract idea of turning the USSR into a leading world power was quite attractive for the engineering-technical intelligentsia that played a decisive role in this transformation despite difficult and even harsh working conditions, persecution and repression... As for post-Soviet Russia, after the invasion of neoliberal ideas into its management science was in a state of uncertainty about both the fate of its

divisions and its real participation in the life of society and the state” (P. 772). “The artistic intelligentsia made an enormous but not always adequately assessed contribution to the social contract implementation and to the Soviet man formation” (P. 825). “Post-Soviet Russia has not brought clarity — swings from one extreme to another, numerous attempts to copy Western achievements, unhealthy competition, the rise of show business and other dubious actions have made uncertainty and inadequacy of real life the main feature of culture, including in the field of literature and art... It is precisely the superficial understanding of the foundations of real life that makes many works of literature and art attract attention for a short time and then disappear forever not only from people’s memory but also from the history of culture” (P. 829–830).

Let us summarize lessons that the book teaches: social contract was a result of the objective course of human development — society, expressing interests of the people, began to act as an independent force opposing the state; the basic component of social contract were constitutions that reflected the ruling classes’ understanding of interests and aspirations of the people and of social, political organizations and movements representing it; social contract is not a document but a special state of society, which consists of both obvious indicators and hidden relationships reflecting the degree and level of balance of interests between political power and social communities; the essence of social contract was gradually revealed — today it is generally understood as a unique social phenomenon that guarantees the existence of the state and provides a possibility of effective solutions for economic, political, social and spiritual-moral problems.

A critical analysis of the history of the social contract development and implementation in Russia/USSR does not cancel the general conclusion that its essence was and remains to ensure agreement, trust and balance of interests between the state (political power) and the people (represented by public organizations and movements), and it is the people who determine the “face” of the contemporary society. Agreement is especially important at the moral level, since spiritual and moral unity is based on value orientations of main social forces, coordination of which is the state function. Social contract presupposes agreement and balance of interests not only between the people and the government but also between social communities that make up the people, i.e., social contract accepts the diversity of orientations and aspirations of numerous social groups at the political, economic, social and, most importantly, spiritual and moral levels. In Russia, social contract has significant reserves for improvement in terms of agreeing on goals and means

and of ensuring regular feedback and effective participation of all social communities in public administration and social management.

An attentive reader with specific perception of issues considered in the book may disagree with the author but will not be able to deny his honesty and reasoning in revealing the essence of such a complex phenomenon in the development of contemporary society as social contract, which determines the fundamental nature and relevance of the new book of our outstanding contemporary. Toshchenko knows how to surprise, and this is wonderful. The book can rightfully take place among sociological classics and become the main book of life for the author.

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Общественный договор: эволюция идей и уроки истории*

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Аннотация. Статья представляет собой рецензию на книгу Ж.Т. Тощенко «Судьбы общественного договора в России: эволюция идей и уроки реализации» (М.: ФНИСЦ РАН; РГГУ, 2025. 844 с.). В монографии описано возникновение и проанализировано содержание концепции общественного договора, впервые выдвинутой и обоснованной мыслителями эпохи Просвещения как идеи социального контракта между народом и государством, причем латентного характера. Значительное внимание в книге уделено сложившимся теориям общественного договора и их особенностям, многообразным вариантам его толкования и осу-

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ществления в современной социальной практике. Особый акцент автор делает на выявлении основных характеристик общественного договора, его смысловой сущности как единства целей участников, ориентированных на взаимное доверие, баланс интересов и постоянное использование обратной связи. Представлены современные интерпретации общественного договора и новые варианты осмысления практик его реализации в современной общественно-политической жизни. Проведен обстоятельный анализ исторического опыта реализации общественного договора на разных этапах существования России/СССР в противоречивом развитии и функционировании страны, а также форм участия основных социальных групп в общественном договоре. Обозначены суть, содержание и эволюция идей общественного договора в XX–XXI веках, их трансформация и уроки реализации общественного договора на различных этапах общественного развития.

Ключевые слова: общественный договор; эволюция идей; власть; уроки истории; новые вызовы и риски; будущее

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