

**THE TREND FROM A SHAM DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION TO A
REAL AUTHORITARIAN CONSTITUTION: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF CHINA AND RUSSIA**

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University
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*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Law in Comparative
Constitutional Law*

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Vienna, Austria
2025

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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis examines the trend of authoritarian regimes moving from “making democratic constitutions but not enforcing them” to “making and enforcing authoritarian constitutions” and the reasons for this trend. Today's people have largely accepted the values of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, and human rights, and few countries openly deny them. Countries that openly defy the values of “world society” by refusing to pay lip service to human rights and democracy invite ostracism from the international community. So why do authoritarian states now dare to blatantly add authoritarian elements to their constitutions is an interesting question. This paper uses China and Russia as comparative case studies. China and Russia are the two of the most powerful and influential authoritarian states in the world. It can be said that the similar changes produced by the Chinese and Russian constitutions can be conclude into a trend.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	3
1.1 Text Evaluation: Democratic or Authoritarian	3
1.2 Effectiveness: Real Constitution or Sham Constitution	10
1.3 Definition Framework: Constitution Spectrum.....	14
CHAPTER 2. TREND OF CHANGE: 2018 AMENDMENT IN CHINA AND 2020 AMENDMENT IN RUSSIA.....	17
2.1 China	17
2.1.1 Personalist Autocracy in Ideology.....	17
2.1.2 The Party Leads Everything	19
2.1.3 Abolition of Term Limits.....	22
2.2 Russia	24
2.2.1 Abolition of Cumulative Presidential Term Limits	25
2.2.2 Presidential Power over the Separation of Power	26
2.2.3 Reconstruction of National Identity and Constitutional Value.....	27
2.3 Comparison and Conclusion	28
CHAPTER 3. REASONS FOR THE AUTHORITARIAN TURN IN CONSTITUTIONAL TEXTS	38
CHAPTER 4. LIMITATIONS.....	47
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	54

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Framework of Global State of Democracy Indices.....	5
Figure 2. A typology of constitutions by David S. Law	12
Figure 3. Russia’s and China’s Overall Rule of Law Score from 2015 to 2024	13
Figure 4. Two Dimensions of Constitutions, Four Types of Constitution.....	15
Figure 5. China’s WJP Rule of Law Index Rank by All and Sub Factor 1	35
Figure 6. Russia’s WJP Rule of Law Index Rank by All and Sub Factor 1	36
Figure 7. The Trend from Democratic Sham Constitution to Real Authoritarian Constitution	37

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Text Comparison between Russia's and China's Constitution	5
Table 2. Text Comparison between Russia's and Germany's Constitution	8
Table 3. Overall Rank and Rank by Income Group of Russia's and China's Rule of Law Score from 2015 to 2024	13

INTRODUCTION

What does the word constitution stand for? A neutral definition states that a constitution is the aggregate of fundamental principles or established precedents that constitute the legal basis of a polity, organization or other type of entity, and commonly determines how that entity is to be governed.² Historically, constitutions have been designed to limit power, protect rights, and establish a legal framework that ensures accountability. However, the connection is not absolute—authoritarian regimes also use constitutions, sometimes for different purposes.

Over the past decade, a significant shift has emerged in the constitutional and legal landscapes of authoritarian regimes. The collapse of Soviet communism gave rise to a roughly fifteen-year period of Western liberal hegemony, marked by unrivaled U.S. military, economic, and ideological power. This hegemony, together with unprecedented international efforts to promote democracy, made the cost of outright dictatorship become prohibitively high.³

Unlike earlier decades, where authoritarian regimes relied on "sham democratic constitutions" to project adherence to democratic norms, contemporary authoritarian states are embedding overtly authoritarian principles into their constitutions and legal systems. For example, Mao Zedong's lifelong rule brought great disaster to China. After his death, the next leader Deng

² Angus Stevenson and Christine A Lindberg (eds), 'New Oxford American Dictionary' (Oxford University Press 2011).

³ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, 'The New Competitive Authoritarianism' (2020) 31 *Journal of Democracy* 51.

Xiaoping explicitly abolished the lifelong system and established a rule that leaders could not be re-elected for more than two terms. In the past two decades, although the Communist Party of China (CPC) still monopolizes power, power is not monopolized by one person. Although whether the power transfer is carried out on time depends on the leader's wishes (for example, Jiang Zemin once served as Chairman of the Central Military Commission and held military power after stepping down as General Secretary of CPC, the leader can only delay the handover of power but cannot rule for life.

More importantly, these regimes are redefining foundational legal concepts to assert ideological independence and counter the dominance of Western liberal legalism.

This trend, while relatively recent, has profound implications for both domestic governance and the global legal order.

CHAPTER 1. DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Both Russia and China are considered authoritarian countries, but the term authoritarian is too general and ignores the differences in the actual conditions of the two countries. In order to describe the two countries more accurately, it is necessary to establish a set of coordinates.

What is certain is that both Russia and China have constitutions, and they both claim that the country operates in accordance with the democratic mechanisms enshrined in their constitutions. Previous studies have used authoritarian constitutions or sham constitutions to describe the two countries.

There are two adjectives in these concepts, “sham” and “authoritarian”. Sham describes the gap between the constitutional text and political reality, and authoritarian describes the content of the constitutional provisions. This brings up two dimensions for evaluating the Constitution: effectiveness and content of text.

1.1 Text Evaluation: Democratic or Authoritarian

Evaluating whether a constitution is democratic or authoritarian solely from its text involves a careful examination of its structural design, normative commitments, and provisions related to power distribution and fundamental rights. Democratic constitutions typically enshrine principles such as electoral competition, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, clear checks and balances, political pluralism, and robust protections for civil liberties and political freedoms. In contrast, authoritarian constitutions explicitly embed mechanisms that centralize

political authority, concentrate power in the executive branch or a single party, limit political competition, and often subordinate rights and freedoms to broader ideological or state-defined goals.

Global State of Democracy Indices⁴ provides a framework (Figure 1) to evaluate how democratic a country or a constitution is. The advantage of this framework is that it focuses on the core of the system rather than its outward form. For example, in the area of Representation, it uses six indicators—Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Local Democracy, Effective Parliament, and Elected Government—to conduct its assessment. This approach helps to move beyond the variations in institutional design that arise from different national contexts. Whether a country adopts a unitary or federal system, a presidential or parliamentary model, this framework avoids getting bogged down in debates over specific structures and instead directly evaluates how well a system promotes democracy.

⁴ ‘Global State of Democracy Indices’ <<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsoi-indices/>> accessed 2 December 2024.

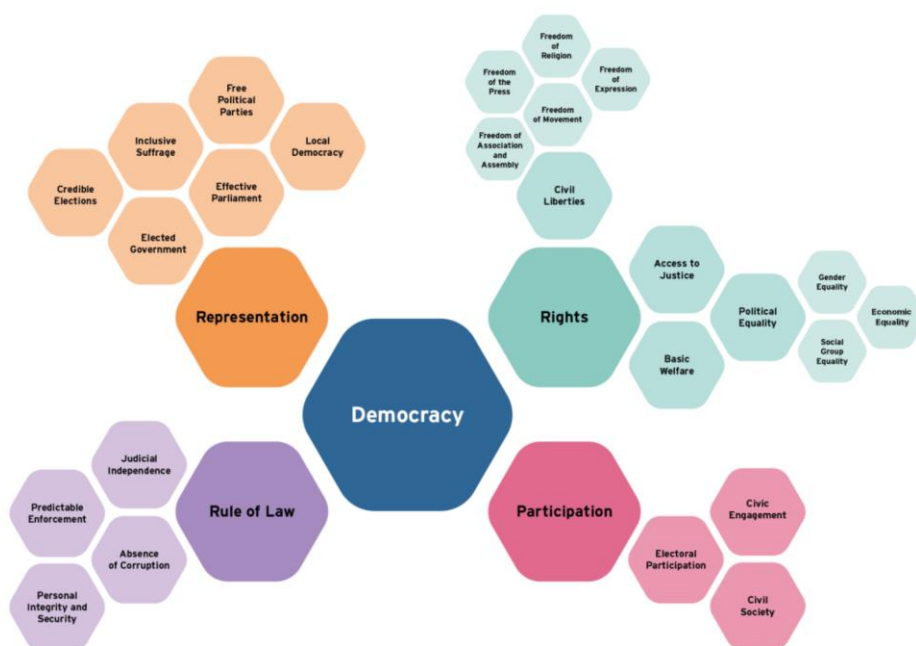


Figure 1. Framework of Global State of Democracy Indices

Table 1. Text Comparison between Russia's and China's Constitution⁵

Index		Russia	China
Representation	Credible Elections	Art. 81, 95 (periodic and direct elections)	Art. 2, 59, 97 (indirect elections through people's congresses)
	Inclusive Suffrage	Art. 32 (universal suffrage)	Art. 34 (universal suffrage)
	Free Political Parties	Art. 13, Art. 30 (the right to form political parties and participate in their activities)	No, even the multi-party cooperation system must under leadership of the Communist Party
	Local Democracy	Art. 130-133 (local self-government)	Art. 111 (local people's congresses and village-level autonomy)
	Effective Parliament	Art. 94-109 (a bicameral parliament with legislative powers)	Art. 57-70 (the National People's Congress as the highest legislative body)
	Elected Government	Art. 81 (President as elected directly by citizens)	Art. 79 (indirect election of key governmental positions through

⁵ Made by author

			people's congresses)
Rights	Freedom of Religion	Art. 28	Art. 36
	Freedom of Expression	Art. 29	Art. 35
	Freedom of Movement	Art. 27	No
	Freedom of Association and Assembly	Art. 30-31	Art. 35 (No right of strike)
	Freedom of the Press	Art. 29	Art. 35
	Access to Justice	Art. 46	Art. 41
	Basic Welfare	Art. 7, 39-41 (social welfare and state responsibility for welfare)	Art. 42-49
	Political Equality	Art. 19, 32	Art. 33-34
	Gender Equality	Art. 19	Art. 48
	Social Group Equality	Art. 19	Art. 4, 33
	Economic Equality	Art. 7	Art. 6-7
Rule of Law	Predictable Enforcement	Art. 1, Art. 15 (the rule of law principle)	Art. 5 (the rule of law principle)
	Judicial Independence	Art. 120 (judicial independence)	No, the courts exercise judicial power under the leadership of
	Absence of Corruption	Art. 114, 128 (public accountability)	Section 7 (Commissions of Supervision)
	Personal Integrity and Security	Art. 21-23 (protection of human dignity, rights, and personal security)	Art. 37-40 (protection of human dignity, rights, and personal security)
Participation	Electoral Participation	Art. 32 (establishes citizens' right to participate in elections and referendums)	Art. 34

	Civic Engagement	Art. 30, 32 (encourages citizen engagement in public affairs)	Art. 41
	Civil Society	Art. 30 (allows the creation and participation in civil society organizations)	Art. 35

Analyzing from the constitutional texts (excluding practices), the Russian Constitution formally addresses all indices related to democratic governance, establishing broad rights, freedoms, democratic mechanisms, rule of law, and political participation. And the Chinese Constitution formally includes most democratic governance indices, but many rights and freedoms are explicitly subject to state-defined limits and the leadership role of the Communist Party. Russia's constitution (before 2020 amendments) appears much more democratic compared to China's (before 2018). In addition to lacking some democratic elements (such as checks and balances, judicial independence, judicial review, and ideological openness), the most important thing is that as a one-party state, "the Communist Party leads everything" is written into the Constitution of China.⁶ For example, although both the Russian and Chinese constitutions provide for parliaments, the Russian parliament is an independent supreme legislative body, while the Chinese parliament (the National People's Congress), although also the supreme legislative body, is under the leadership of the CPC at the constitutional provision level.

Germany is widely regarded as one of the best-functioning democracies today, and its Basic

⁶ The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (2018 Version) art 1.

Law, along with the constitutional system it established, has had a significant influence globally. The Basic Law can serve as an effective point of reference for evaluating other constitutions. To make the comparison clearer, let us compare the provisions of the Russian Constitution with those of the German Basic Law.

Table 2. Text Comparison between Russia's and Germany's Constitution⁷

Index		Russia	Germany
Representation	Credible Elections	Art. 81, 95 (periodic and direct elections)	Art. 38
	Inclusive Suffrage	Art. 32 (universal suffrage)	Art. 38(2)
	Free Political Parties	Art. 13, Art. 30 (the right to form political parties and participate in their activities)	Art. 21
	Local Democracy	Art. 130-133 (local self-government)	Art. 28
	Effective Parliament	Art. 94-109 (a bicameral parliament with legislative powers)	Art. 42, 77
	Elected Government	Art. 81 (President as elected directly by citizens)	Art. 20(2), 63
Rights	Freedom of Religion	Art. 28	Art. 4
	Freedom of Expression	Art. 29	Art. 5
	Freedom of Movement	Art. 27	Art. 11
	Freedom of Association and Assembly	Art. 30-31	Art. 8
	Freedom of	Art. 29	Art. 5

⁷ Made by author

	the Press		
	Access to Justice	Art. 46	Art. 19(4), 103
	Basic Welfare	Art. 7, 39-41 (social welfare and state responsibility for welfare)	Art. 14, 20
	Political Equality	Art. 19, 32	Art. 3(1)
	Gender Equality	Art. 19	Art. 3(2)
	Social Group Equality	Art. 19	Art. 3(3)
	Economic Equality	Art. 7	Art. 20's social state principle
Rule of Law	Predictable Enforcement	Art. 1, Art. 15 (the rule of law principle)	Art. 19(4), 103(2)
	Judicial Independence	Art. 120 (judicial independence)	Art.97
	Absence of Corruption	Art. 114, 128 (public accountability)	Art.20
	Personal Integrity and Security	Art. 21-23 (protection of human dignity, rights, and personal security)	Art. 1-2
Participation	Electoral Participation	Art. 32 (establishes citizens' right to participate in elections and referendums)	Art. 38
	Civic Engagement	Art. 30, 32 (encourages citizen engagement in public affairs)	Art. 9
	Civil Society	Art. 30 (allows the creation and participation in civil society organizations)	Art. 5, 8, 9 (Not directly mentioned, but protected by rights)

Considering only the text, the Russian Constitution is not inferior to the German Basic Law in most indicators. Obviously, the Russian Constitution is much more democratic than the Chinese Constitution in terms of text.

This conclusion is also consistent with the historical context in which the constitutions of both countries were drafted. Russia's 1993 Constitution was not written by Western actors, but Western legal and constitutional advisors played a supportive role, especially in promoting liberal norms, rights protections, and rule of law principles. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and various European constitutional experts provided technical legal advice, especially on institutional design, human rights norms, and checks and balances.⁸ In contrast, China's 1982 Constitution was drafted independently, without any direct Western help. While Western liberal constitutional ideas had indirect symbolic influence, the document remains firmly embedded in Marxist–Leninist principles and serves the CPC's monopoly on power.⁹

1.2 Effectiveness: Real Constitution or Sham Constitution

To what extent can a constitution be called “sham”? “An old Soviet joke has it that a man goes into a restaurant and surveys the menu. ‘I’ll have the chicken,’ he says, only to be told by the waiter that the restaurant is out of chicken. He asks for the beef, only to be told the same thing. Working his way through the menu, he is repeatedly told that the restaurant is out of the selected dish, until he gets upset and says, ‘I thought this was a menu, not a constitution.’”¹⁰

⁸ Victoria Schwartz, ‘The Influences of the West on the 1993 Russian Constitution’ (2009) 32 UC Law SF International Law Review 101.

⁹ Cai Dingjian, *Constitution: An Intensive Reading*, p 81.

¹⁰ Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser (eds), ‘Introduction’, *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge University Press 2013) 1.

This joke is not serious, and constitutions in authoritarian countries do have many functions, but it reveals people's stereotype about them: it is useless.

Karl Loewenstein considers three types of constitutions (normative, nominal, and semantic) by reference to two elements: the legal validity of the constitution and its efficacious social value.¹¹ The first constitutional type is a normative constitution. Normative constitutions have legal validity and are effectively implemented.¹² The nominal constitution exists when the “written constitution is different from the constitution that is applied”. And a semantic constitution is nothing more than an instrument that guarantees the perpetuation of political power in the hands of the current public authorities.¹³

On this basis, David S. Law (see Figure 4) focuses on the magnitude of the gap between what a country promises in its constitution and what it delivers in practice. The greater the gap between reality and the provisions of the Constitution, the more sham the Constitution is. Although this categorization only considers the protection of rights, it can be extended to other parts of the constitution. For example, if a country's constitution provides citizens the right to vote and stand for election, but these rights are not implemented in practice, this means that the provision for the election of state organs is also not implemented.

¹¹ Karl Loewenstein, ‘Reflections on the Value of Constitutions in a Revolutionary Age. Outline of an Ontology of Constitutions [Réflexions sur la valeur des constitutions dans une époque révolutionnaire. Esquisse d’une ontologie des Constitutions]’ 20.

¹² Karl Loewenstein, *Political Power and the Governmental Process* (University of Chicago Press 1957) 174.

¹³ Loewenstein (n 11) 20.

<i>A country . . .</i>	<i>. . . delivers little in practice</i> (<i>low de facto rights protection</i>)	<i>. . . delivers much in practice</i> (<i>high de facto rights protection</i>)
<i>. . . promises much in its constitution (high de jure rights protection)</i>	“sham constitution” (e.g., Sudan)	“strong constitution” (e.g., Finland)
<i>. . . promises little in its constitution (low de jure rights protection)</i>	“weak constitution” (e.g., Saudi Arabia)	“modest constitution” (e.g., Australia)

Figure 2. A typology of constitutions by David S. Law¹⁴

It should be noted that the truth or falsity of a constitution does not involve value judgments; it does not matter whether the constitution is democratic or authoritarian. For example, Saudi Arabia's Basic Law stipulates a theocratic political system, and the people's basic rights are greatly restricted. It is undoubtedly an authoritarian constitution. However, the reality of Saudi Arabia operates as stipulated in the Basic Law, so this law is not sham.

In the previous section, we compared the degree of democracy of the Russian and Chinese constitutions themselves. Next, we need to compare the realities of the two countries to measure the degree of falsity of the constitutions.

The WJP Rule of Law Index is an annual report published by the World Justice Project (WJP) that measures how the rule of law is experienced and perceived worldwide. It provides a detailed, country-by-country look at how effectively the rule of law is functioning in practice—not just in theory.

Back to the WJP index again, this time the focus is not on the indicator framework, but on the

¹⁴ David S Law and Mila Versteeg, ‘Sham Constitutions’ 4 California Law Review 853, 883.

specific index.

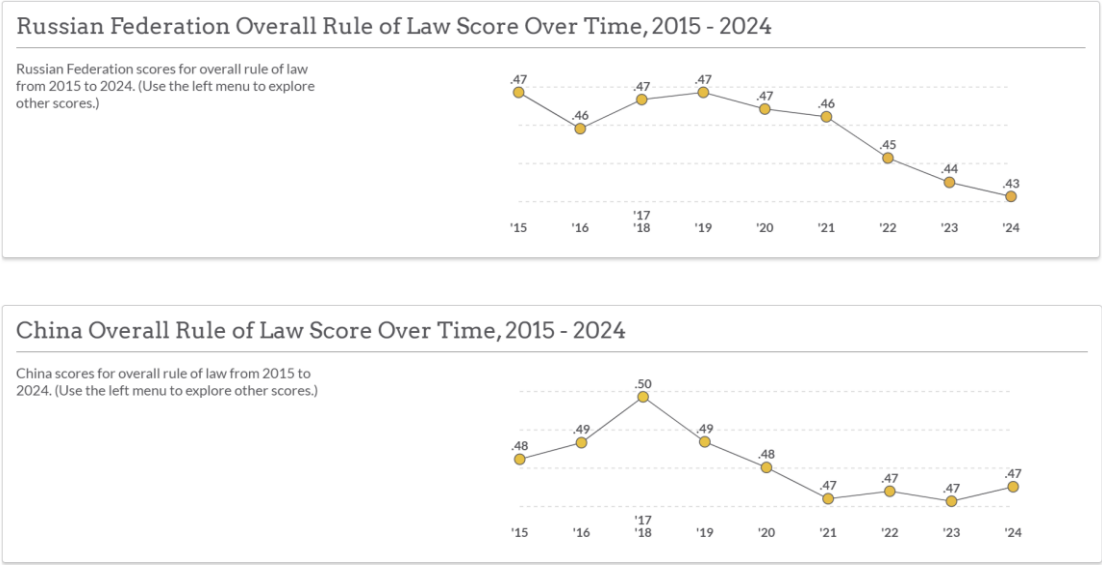


Figure 3. Russia’s and China’s Overall Rule of Law Score from 2015 to 2024¹⁵

Table 3. Overall Rank and Rank by Income Group of Russia’s and China’s Rule of Law Score from 2015 to 2024¹⁶

	RUSSIA’S OVERALL RANK	RUSSIA’S RANK BY INCOME GROUP	CHINA’S OVERALL RANK	CHINA’S RANK BY INCOME GROUP
2015	76/102 (Top 74.5%)	31/31 (Top 100%)	70/102 (Top 68%)	24/31 (Top 77%)
2016	90/113 (Top 79.6%)	32/37 (Top 86.4%)	80/113 (Top 70%)	27/37 (Top 73%)
2017-2018	89/113 (Top 78.7%)	31/36 (Top 86.1%)	76/113 (Top 67%)	26/36 (Top 72%)
AVERAGE RANK	Top 77.6%	Top 90.8%	Top 68.3%	Top 74%

From the data in the table, it is clear that between 2015 and 2018, Russia’s actual rule of law situation was worse than China’s, both in terms of overall ranking and ranking within income

¹⁵ ‘WJP Rule of Law Index’ <<https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index>> accessed 2 December 2024.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Sheet made by author

groups. Interestingly, based on the same indicators, Russia's constitution is more consistent with the rule of law than China's in text. So the conclusion is obvious, Russia's constitution is more sham than China's constitution.

1.3 Definition Framework: Constitution Spectrum

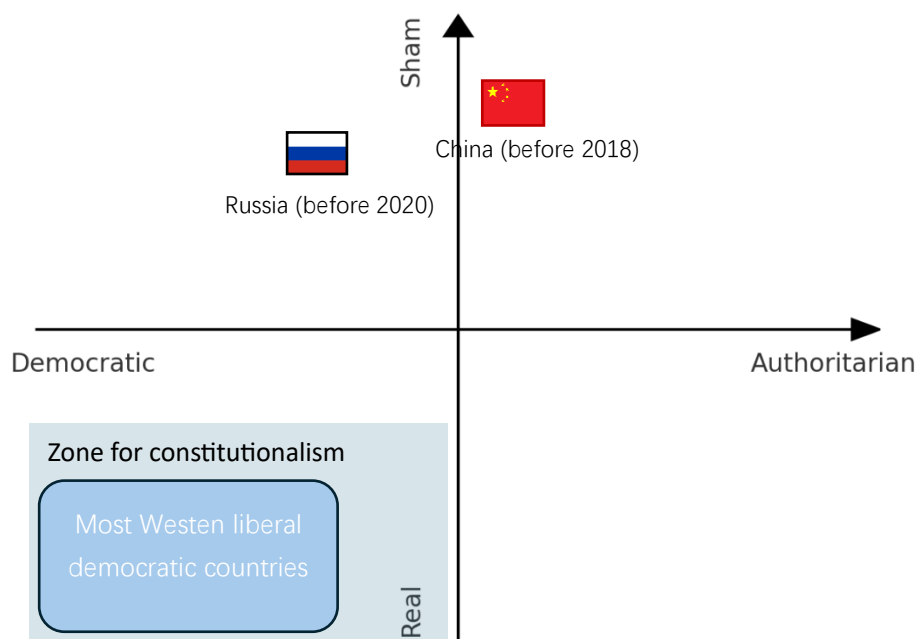
Combining these two indicators, we can get a coordinate system (Figure 2) that describes the nature of the constitution.

Constitutionalism is “political organizations contain institutionalized mechanisms of power control for the protection of the interests and liberties of the citizenry, including those that may be in the minority.”¹⁷ Of course, this is the definition of constitutionalism from the perspective of liberal democracy. Some scholars have suggested that there are other types of constitutionalism, such as Absolutist Constitutionalism, Rule-of-Law Constitutionalism and even Authoritarian Constitutionalism.¹⁸ There are two reasons why the definition from a liberal democratic perspective is adopted here. On the one hand, concepts such as the constitution are highly related to politics, and it is almost impossible to exclude ideological connections. On the other hand, this study is intended to study the evolution of the constitution in politics and ideology. On the axis of "autocracy-democracy", taking democracy as a reference point is a necessary step in the study.

¹⁷ Scott Gordon, *Controlling the State: Constitutionalism from Ancient Athens to Today* (Harvard University Press 1999) 4.

¹⁸ Mark Tushnet, 'Authoritarian Constitutionalism' (2015) 100 Cornell Law Review 415.

Apparently, to achieve these requirements, a constitution must be democratic in text, and wellly enforced. Corresponding to the above two standards, the constitution should be a "democratic" and "real" constitution. So the Zone for Constitutionalism is located in the third quadrant of the coordinate axis.



X-Axis: Degree of authoritarianism in the content of the constitutional provisions

Y-Axis: The magnitude of the gap between what promises in constitution and practice

Figure 4. Two Dimensions of Constitutions, Four Types of Constitution¹⁹

Using this classification method, we can more clearly distinguish between the authoritarianism of Russia and China: although both Russia and China are authoritarian countries, Russia has a constitution that is very democratic in text, and Russia's authoritarianism is due to the fact that political practices do not operate in accordance with the

¹⁹ Made by author

constitution; China's constitution is more authoritarian than Russia's, but China's political practices are correspondingly more in line with the constitution. It can be said that in many ways, Russia achieves autocracy by ignoring the constitution, while China achieves autocracy by enforcing the constitution.

CHAPTER 2. TREND OF CHANGE: 2018 AMENDMENT IN CHINA AND 2020 AMENDMENT IN RUSSIA

In 2018 and 2020, the world's two most powerful authoritarian countries amended their constitutions, making important changes that attracted international attention.

2.1 China

Constitutional amendments are not uncommon in China. Since China promulgated a new constitution in 1982, not counting the amendment in 2018, China has amended its constitution four times, almost as often as the leadership changes. What made the 2018 constitutional amendment particularly noteworthy was that it broke with many constitutional conventions established since the beginning of China's Reform and Opening-up era.

On March 11, 2018, the Third Plenary Session of the 13th National People's Congress voted to adopt the draft amendment to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. The following three amendments are particularly significant:

2.1.1 Personalist Autocracy in Ideology

The Preamble of the Constitution was revised to include "Scientific Outlook on Development" (科学发展观) and "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想).

The amendment of the Chinese Constitution is highly political. For example, after each new leader takes office, he will add the "thoughts" of the previous leader to the preamble of the Constitution. This has become an unwritten constitutional convention. However, in 2018, while Xi Jinping included Hu Jintao's "Scientific Outlook on Development" in the Constitution, he also added his own "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era".

This was significant in two ways. On the one hand, it was the first time a leader had written his own ideology into the Constitution. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, only Mao Zedong Thought (毛泽东思想) was written into the Constitution during Mao's own time in power. "Deng Xiaoping Theory" (邓小平理论) was incorporated during Jiang Zemin's tenure, while Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" (三个代表) was written into the Constitution after he stepped down, during the Hu Jintao era. Similarly, Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development was added to the Constitution under the leadership of Xi Jinping. On the other hand, this marked the first time a leader proactively named an ideological doctrine after himself. Historically, "Mao Zedong Thought" and "Deng Xiaoping Theory" were named by later generations, rather than by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping themselves. The term "Mao Zedong Thought" first appeared in an official document at the Seventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1945 by Liu Shaoqi.²⁰ The term

²⁰ Shaoqi Liu, 'Report on the Revision of the Constitution of the Communist Party of China [关于修改党章的报告]' (1945) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64559/4526957.html>> accessed 13 May 2025.

“Deng Xiaoping Theory” was not coined by Deng Xiaoping himself either, but was formally named and established by the collective leadership of the CPC—particularly during Jiang Zemin’s tenure as General Secretary. It was at the 15th National Congress in 1997 that Jiang Zemin, in his political report, officially introduced the term “Deng Xiaoping Theory” for the first time.

2.1.2 The Party Leads Everything

The Constitution formally affirmed the leadership status of the Communist Party of China (CPC). A new sentence was added after Article 1, Paragraph 2: "The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics."²¹

The 1982 Constitution did not include "upholding the leadership of the Communist Party of China" in the main text. On the contrary, according to Article 5 of the Constitution: "...all political parties ... must abide by the Constitution and the law. Accountability must be enforced for all acts that violate the Constitution or laws."²² This means that, from the logic of the constitutional text, the Communist Party of China, as the ruling party of a one-party state, is also bound by the constitution. This is regarded by many scholars as the constitutional framework for China's future democratic reforms. After the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012, Xi Jinping was appointed to be the new

²¹ The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (2018 Version) art 1.

²² *ibid* 5.

General Secretary. On December 4, 2012, in a speech delivered at a commemorative event in the capital marking the 30th anniversary of the promulgation and implementation of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping stated: *"The vitality of the Constitution lies in its implementation, and so does its authority. We must make unremitting efforts to ensure its enforcement and raise constitutional implementation to a new level."* He further emphasized that *"all acts that violate the Constitution and laws must be held accountable,"* and underscored the need to *"uphold rule of law in governance and in exercising power."*²³ He also introduced a new governance vision and launched a series of initiatives—including the "Eight-point Regulation" and a sweeping anti-corruption campaign—which sparked widespread speculation about whether he would go on to advance political reform. So at the same time, over seventy prominent scholars—including Jiang Ping (江平)²⁴, Zhang Qianfan (张千帆)²⁵, He Weifang (贺卫方)²⁶, and He Bing (何兵)²⁷—jointly signed an online petition titled the "Consensus Reform Initiative," calling on the authorities to carry out constitutional reform. Given that the initiators were among the most

²³ Xi Jinping, 'Speech at the Commemorative Meeting for the 30th Anniversary of the Promulgation and Implementation of the Current Constitution [习近平在纪念现行宪法公布施行 30 周年大会上的讲话]' (2012) <https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-12/04/content_2282522.htm> accessed 13 May 2025.

²⁴ Lifetime Professor at China University of Political Science and Law; former President of China University of Political Science and Law; Member of the Standing Committee of the 7th National People's Congress and Vice Chairman of its Law Committee; former Vice President of the China Law Society.

²⁵ Professor at Peking University Law School and Council Member of the Constitutional Law Society of the China Law Society.

²⁶ Professor at Peking University Law School

²⁷ Professor at the School of Law, China University of Political Science and Law, and Director of the Center for Public Policy Research.

well-known legal scholars in China, the topic of constitutional reform quickly became a focal point in academic research.

In 2013, as part of efforts to counter the growing calls for political reform within academic circles, Xi Jinping issued a directive prohibiting university professors from teaching seven specific topics: universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, civil rights, the historical mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party, the privileged capitalist class, and judicial independence. In 2014, at a Party meeting, he declared: *“We must clearly understand that people’s democracy in our country is fundamentally different from the so-called ‘constitutionalism’ of the West.”* The following year, he further asserted: *“The question of ‘Which Is Supreme: The Party or the Law?’ is a political trap (党大还是法大)—a false proposition.”* He emphasized that *“the leadership of the (Communist) Party is the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the most fundamental guarantee of socialist rule of law.”*²⁸

The incorporation of these Party meeting rhetorics into the Constitution still marked a significant shift. From a historical perspective, adding "the leadership of the Communist Party of China" to the text of the Constitution not only reminds people of the 1975 Constitution drafted during the Cultural Revolution.²⁹ From a textual perspective, Xi Jinping’s refusal to

²⁸ Jinping Xi, “‘Which Is Supreme: The Party or the Law?’ Is a False Proposition and a Political Trap [“党大还是法大” 是伪命题，是政治陷阱]” (11 May 2015) <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0511/c385475-26978527.html>> accessed 9 January 2025.

²⁹ The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (1975 Version) art 2.

answer the question “Which Is Supreme: The Party or the Law?”—denouncing it as a “false proposition” and a “political trap”—is a way of avoiding the issue. It reveals the Party’s unwillingness to engage in this fundamental tension and its desire to divert attention away from it. The constitutional amendment did not resolve the awkward relationship between the Party and the Constitution; on the contrary, it laid bare the contradiction even more directly: Article 1(2) of the Constitution provides “Leadership by the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics”³⁰ while Article 5 still states that “...all political parties ... must abide by the Constitution and the law.”³¹

2.1.3 Abolition of Term Limits

The term limits for the President and Vice President were abolished. The third paragraph of Article 79 was amended by removing the provision that “the President and Vice President of the People's Republic of China shall serve no more than two consecutive terms.”³²

The term limit is a new mechanism in the 1982 Constitution compared to previous version. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping ended the system of lifetime leadership from the Mao era and

³⁰ The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (2018 Version) art 1(2).

³¹ *ibid* 5.

³² *ibid* 79.

established a term limit and retirement system,³³ which is reflected in the article 79.³⁴ Within the Communist Party of China, although there are no term limits for the General Secretary and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission themselves, term limits for the President have always been seen as part of the balance of power at the top of the Communist Party of China. Since the reform and opening up, China has gradually established some party rules and governance practices, such as collective leadership and term limits for cadres. Although these are not completely democratic, they help prevent excessive concentration of power. The Chinese Constitution imposes limited constraints on public power and lacks effective mechanisms to sanction leaders who violate it, the term limit system was nonetheless observed by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao after Deng Xiaoping—as if it were a gentleman’s agreement. When Xi Jinping assumed the position of General Secretary at the 18th Party Congress, he praised Hu Jintao for “taking the lead in stepping down from the central leadership, demonstrating noble character and a strong sense of integrity.”³⁵

The removal of restrictions means Xi can continue to consolidate his overall control over the military and the party through the presidency, further reinforcing the trend toward centralizing

³³ Communist Party of China (CPC) News, ‘Deng Xiaoping Abolished the Lifetime Tenure System for Leadership Positions: A Complete Withdrawal, Holding No Official Titles [邓小平废除领导职务终身制:一退到底, 不担任任何职务]’ (*Reform Big Data Service Platform of China*, 7 April 2011) <<http://www.reformdata.org/2011/0407/15403.shtml>> accessed 16 March 2025.

³⁴ The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (2018 Version) 79.

³⁵ ‘Xi Jinping: Paying High Tribute to Hu Jintao and Others for Stepping Down from Leadership Positions [习近平: 向胡锦涛等退出领导岗位致崇高敬意]’ (*Caixin*, 16 November 2012) <<https://china.caixin.com/2012-11-16/100461272.html>> accessed 2 June 2025.

power. Abolishing the term limit for the President in the Constitution not only broke the gentleman's agreement, but also laid a constitutional foundation for prolonged—or even lifelong—rule. While term limits are not a necessary condition for democratic governance (for instance, Germany's Basic Law does not impose term limits on the Chancellor), Germany has a well-functioning parliamentary multiparty system in which it is effectively impossible for any one leader to remain in power indefinitely at their own discretion.

2.2 Russia

In January 2020, President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly announced major changes to the Russian Constitution. Seven months later, after a week of voting, Russia formally made the most significant changes to its constitution since its adoption in 1993. These amendments do not formally alter Russia's fundamental—and still not realized—constitutional commitments to democracy, separation of powers, and individual rights found in Chapters 1 and 2 of the Russian Constitution. They do, however, further centralize the organization of public power in Chapters 3–8 of the Russian Constitution. In addition, they further isolate Russia from international law and, therefore, its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. They therefore represent the most significant changes to the text of the Russian Constitution since the foundation of Russia's post-Soviet constitutional order in 1993.³⁶

³⁶ William Partlett, 'Russia's 2020 Constitutional Amendment: A Comparative Analysis' (2021) 23 Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies 311, 311.

2.2.1 Abolition of Cumulative Presidential Term Limits

Abolition of cumulative presidential term limits and reset of Putin's re-election eligibility.

Before the amendment, the Russian Constitution limited the presidency to a maximum of two consecutive terms. The newly added provision³⁷ reset the term count for the incumbent president (Putin), effectively excluding his previous terms from the limit. This allows Putin to run for re-election in 2024 and 2030, theoretically enabling him to stay in power until 2036. This clause, known as the "zeroing-out clause" (*обнуление сроков*) was widely criticized as paving the way for Putin's lifelong rule.³⁸

During the communist era, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) did not have formal term limits for its supreme leader—whether that leader held the title of General Secretary of the Communist Party (the de facto head of state) or Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (the nominal head of state). Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev were all lifelong rulers of the USSR. Their tenure was uninterrupted until death, with minimal internal accountability, which has brought significant disaster to Russia.

To avoid this, Article 81(3) of Russia's 1993 Constitution (Original Version) states that "One and the same person may not be elected President of the Russian Federation for more than

³⁷ The Constitution of the Russian Federation (2020 Version) 2020 art 81.3.

³⁸ 'Russian lawyers, writers, journalists and scientists have signed an appeal against the amendments to the Constitution [Российские юристы, писатели, журналисты и ученые подписали обращение против поправок в Конституцию]' (*RFI*, 16 March 2020).

two consecutive terms.”³⁹ With the new amendment, Putin no longer needs to play the back-and-forth power game with Medvedev—he can now remain in power indefinitely, all within the bounds of the constitution.

2.2.2 Presidential Power over the Separation of Power

The constitutional amendments strengthened presidential powers, expanding the president’s control over the legislative and judicial branches. The president's increasing powers over the other branches of power have been constitutionalized. The general description of the presidency has been altered, adding an additional mediator role in supporting ‘civil peace and harmony in the country’.⁴⁰ Moreover, the president now has the authority to remove judges from office (including constitutional court judges) by introducing a proposal to the upper house.⁴¹ The president also has enhanced power to appoint regional prosecutors.⁴² In addition, the president has new constitutionally entrenched appointment power over critical oversight institutions such as the Audit Chamber.⁴³ Finally, the president has increased constitutional power over the legislature. This includes more power to dissolve the lower house of Parliament (Duma) as well as the authority to appoint thirty members of the upper house of

³⁹ The Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993 Version) art 81.

⁴⁰ The Constitution of the Russian Federation (2020 Version) art 80.2.

⁴¹ *ibid* 83.

⁴² *ibid*.

⁴³ *ibid*.

Parliament (Federation Council) of which seven can be lifetime appointments.⁴⁴

2.2.3 Reconstruction of National Identity and Constitutional Value

The amendments add several elements about expressions of Russian national and constitutional identity. They first entrench constitutional protectionism by inserting text supporting an exclusionary, nationalist form of Russian identity. This draws on growing rhetoric about Russia's unique civilizational identity grounded in history. They emphasize Russia's thousand-year history, and its traditional ideals and beliefs. Russian is the language of the 'state-forming nation' (although other ethnic groups will have equal rights, in view of the country's multicultural identity). Russia will defend the rights and interests of ethnic Russians living in other countries.⁴⁵ To do this, these provisions link Russian identity more tightly with its imperial past, explicitly declaring Russia to be the successor state to the Soviet Union, protector of historical truth about the defenders of the Fatherland, and responsible for ensuring patriotism in children's education.⁴⁶ Other provisions emphasize the importance of Russia's Orthodox religious identity, a belief in God, and defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman.⁴⁷ Finally and the most important, additional provisions declare Russians to be the 'state-forming' people and emphasize the need for Russia to provide

⁴⁴ *ibid* 95(2).

⁴⁵ Martin Russell, 'Constitutional Change in Russia: More Putin, or Preparing for Post-Putin?' (Think tank of European Parliament 2020) PE 651.935 3.

⁴⁶ The Constitution of the Russian Federation (2020 Version) art 67.

⁴⁷ *ibid*.

support to its ‘compatriots’ overseas in the protection of Russian cultural legacy. The new amendments also re-politicize history and education, tasking the Russian state with protecting ‘historical truth’⁴⁸ and ensuring that patriotic education is guaranteed to children.

Russia's 1993 Constitution, with its declarations of universal human rights, reads very much like that of any other European country.⁴⁹ The foundational chapters of the Russian Constitution were originally adopted to break free from protectionism (associated with the Soviet past). Key foundational provisions therefore proclaim the ‘universally recognized principles and norms of international law and binding international treaties’ above legislation. Chapter 2 of the Russian Constitution includes a long list of ‘inalienable’ individual rights that are to be guaranteed ‘according to the universally recognized principles and norms of international law and according to the present constitution’. These rights include the right to equality, life, dignity, liberty, personal privacy, and inviolability of the home that closely approximate international human rights norms.⁵⁰ The constitutional amendment marked yet another departure by Russia from international norms in this regard.

2.3 Comparison and Conclusion

Despite the significant differences between the political systems of Russia and China, as well as their distinct approaches to authoritarianism, the latest constitutional amendments in both

⁴⁸ *ibid* 67(3).

⁴⁹ Russell (n 45) 3.

⁵⁰ Partlett (n 36) 328.

countries exhibit notable similarities.

First, both China and Russia have institutionalized personalist rule at the constitutional level.

While China has long been considered an authoritarian state, and Russia's democracy has been widely questioned, their existing constitutions at least nominally established democratic structures distinct from their communist past.

For the term limit, historically, Putin circumvented constitutional term limits by temporarily assuming the role of Prime Minister while Dmitry Medvedev served as President—though Putin undeniably remained the country's supreme leader. Similarly, in China, Jiang Zemin retained control over supreme power after stepping down as President and General Secretary by remaining Chairman of the Central Military Commission for a period. Even after leaving that position, Jiang continued to exert influence through his faction's dominance in the Politburo Standing Committee, particularly via Zhou Yongkang, the then-Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission. Although these maneuvers were widely criticized as undermining democracy, they at least maintained a façade of adherence to democratic procedures. Following the constitutional amendments, both Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin enabled the possibility of lifelong rule through unlimited re-election. In a normative sense, this is now constitutional.

For the ruling party, prior to the constitutional amendment, although the Constitution did not explicitly affirm it, the CPC was in practice the unchallengeable ruling party. The amendment legally formalized the Party's position as standing above the Constitution. Although Putin's

grip on power is not as institutionalized or dominant as that of the Chinese Communist Party, he has consistently sought to position himself as an unshakable force within Russia's political system. When Putin first came to power, his political influence had not yet fully monopolized Russian politics. In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, led by Gennady Zyuganov, was defeated by Yeltsin and Putin respectively, but still secured 40.7% and 29.5% of the vote⁵¹, which demonstrating its substantial political presence at the time. Founded in 2001, United Russia quickly became the vehicle of support for Putin, consolidating elites and bureaucrats under one party. It functions not as a classic ideological party, but as a "party of power"⁵²—an administrative extension of the Kremlin that ensures loyalty and electoral success. While United Russia's status as ruling party is not constitutionally guaranteed as Chinese model, the Constitution's structure and its selective application—especially after the 2020 amendments—ensure that the institutional playing field is deeply unbalanced. In essence, the Constitution creates a "managed democracy"⁵³, where the illusion of competition coexists with entrenched one-party dominance, deeply reflective of authoritarian constitutionalism in form and practice.

Second, both China and Russia have become increasingly closed in terms of values and ideology. In the immediate post-Cold War period, many saw democratic constitutions as

⁵¹ United States Congress Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Report on the Russian Presidential Elections, March 26, 2000* (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2000) 5.

⁵² Martin Russell, 'Russia: Political Parties in a "Managed Democracy"' (European Parliamentary Research Service 2014) PE 545.703 1.

⁵³ *ibid.*

mechanisms for protecting minority rights and integrating with post-Cold War supra national institutions and international law. Constitutions were viewed as part of a new world order in which ‘state values’ were being replaced by ‘human values’.⁵⁴ Consequently, many new constitutions opened the domestic system to international human rights norms which would protect the individual from the actions of majorities.⁵⁵

The foundational chapters of the Russian Constitution were originally adopted to break free from protectionism (associated with the Soviet past). Key foundational provisions therefore proclaim the ‘universally recognized principles and norms of international law and binding international treaties’ above legislation.⁵⁶ Chapter 2 of the Russian Constitution includes a long list of ‘inalienable’ individual rights that are to be guaranteed ‘according to the universally recognized principles and norms of international law and according to the present constitution’.⁵⁷ These rights include the right to equality, life, dignity, liberty, personal privacy, and inviolability of the home that closely approximate international human rights norms.⁵⁸ Although the Chinese Constitution does not provide strong textual protections for fundamental rights, constitutional amendments before 2018 had gradually expanded rights protections. Notably, the 2004 constitutional amendment explicitly incorporated "the

⁵⁴ Louis Henkin, ‘Human Rights and State “Sovereignty”’ (2014) 25 Georgia Journal of International & Comparative Law 31, 31.

⁵⁵ Partlett (n 36) 329.

⁵⁶ The Constitution of the Russian Federation (2020 Version) art 15.

⁵⁷ *ibid* 17.

⁵⁸ *ibid* 19–25.

protection of human rights" into the Constitution, establishing it as a positive obligation of the state.

Clearly, after their most recent constitutional amendments, both China and Russia have shifted away from this trend, moving toward a more restrictive approach to rights and governance.

Third, both China and Russia are promoting Mnemonic constitutionalism. Mnemonic constitutionalism' as a form of legal governance that encompasses, yet transcends, pure measures against genocide denialism and statutory memory laws. The heading of constitutionalism replicates the idea that government can and should be limited in its powers, and that its authority or legitimacy depends on its observation of these limitations. Mnemonic constitutionalism in this regard places the authority and legitimacy of a state into the boundaries of a certain historical paradigm, whereas current and future attitudes and behaviors of state actors derive from and are limited by moral lessons of the past. Within mnemonic constitutionalism, the historical past becomes the foundation of collective identity prescribed by either the national constitution itself, or by legal provisions which traditionally shape the substructure of national constitutional law, such as citizenship laws or statutes shaping collective identities by virtue of imposing specific understandings of the historical past.⁵⁹ Over the last few years, except the constitutional amendment, Russia has passed a whole range of memory laws- both punitive and non-punitive in kind- to entrench a very particular

⁵⁹ Uladzislau Belavusau, 'Mnemonic Constitutionalism and Rule of Law in Hungary and Russia' 18.

interpretation of the Great Patriotic war events that frames Russia “as the liberator of Central and Eastern Europe and to obscure the Soviet-Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939.”⁶⁰ A similar dynamic can be observed in China. The CPC has long labeled historical narratives that deviate from the official line—particularly those concerning the Party's own history—as “historical nihilism (历史虚无主义).” Officially promoted stories of wartime heroes are frequently met with public skepticism. In response, China enacted the Law on the Protection of Heroes and Martyrs in 2018, which criminalizes challenges to officially sanctioned heroic narratives. In June 2025, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the victory in World War II, *Guangming Daily*, a state-affiliated newspaper, published an article asserting that the Chinese Communist Party was “undoubtedly the mainstay” of the War of Resistance Against Japan. The article called for resolute opposition to claims that the Party “avoided direct confrontation,” and dismissed views such as “70% of its efforts were spent on expansion, 20% on political maneuvering, and only 10% on actual resistance” as malicious distortions.⁶¹

How is this change reflected in the analytical framework of Chapter Two?

Factor “Government powers are effectively limited by the legislature” of the WJP Rule of Law Index measures the extent to which those who govern are bound by law. It comprises the means, both constitutional and institutional, by which the powers of the government and its

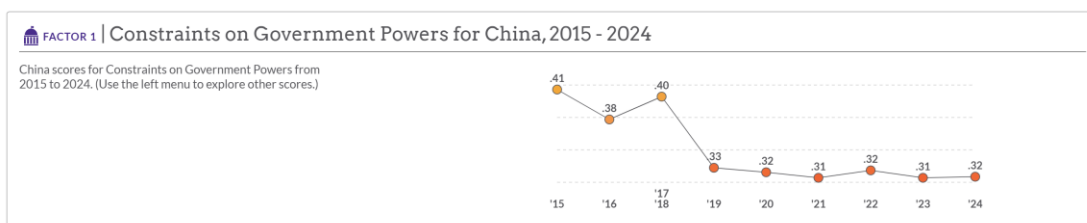
⁶⁰ Anastasiia Vorobiova, ‘Education as Indoctrination: Mnemonic Constitutionalism and History Teaching in Russia’ [2023] *Verfassungsblog* 1.

⁶¹ Xu Zhimin, ‘A Rightful Pillar of the Nation: Reaffirming the Role and Status of the Chinese Communist Party in the War of Resistance Against Japan [当之无愧的中流砥柱——再谈中国共产党在抗日战争中的地位与作用]’ *Guangming Daily* (11 June 2025) 11.

officials and agents are limited and held accountable under the law. It also includes non-governmental checks on the government's power, such as a free and independent press.

Subfactor “Government powers are effectively limited by the legislature” measures whether legislative bodies have the ability in practice to exercise effective checks on and oversight of the government.⁶²

According to the WJP Rule of Law Index, following the 2018 constitutional amendment, China's rule of law ranking saw a steady decline—from 76th place in 2018 to 98th in 2021, where it has hovered ever since. Among the components of China's score, the most significant drop occurred in the indicator “Constraints on Government Powers,” which fell from 100th in 2018 to 133rd in 2021. This decline was largely driven by the sub-indicator “Government powers are effectively limited by the legislature,” which dropped from 60th in 2018 to 113th in 2019, reaching a historic low of 134th in 2024. In contrast, China's rankings in other indicators declined only slightly, and in some cases, even showed improvement. It is evident that the decline in China's Rule of Law Index following the constitutional amendment is primarily concentrated in the “Constraints on Government Powers” indicator—particularly in its sub-indicator, “Government powers are effectively limited by the legislature.”



⁶² ‘WJP Rule of Law Index’ (n 15).

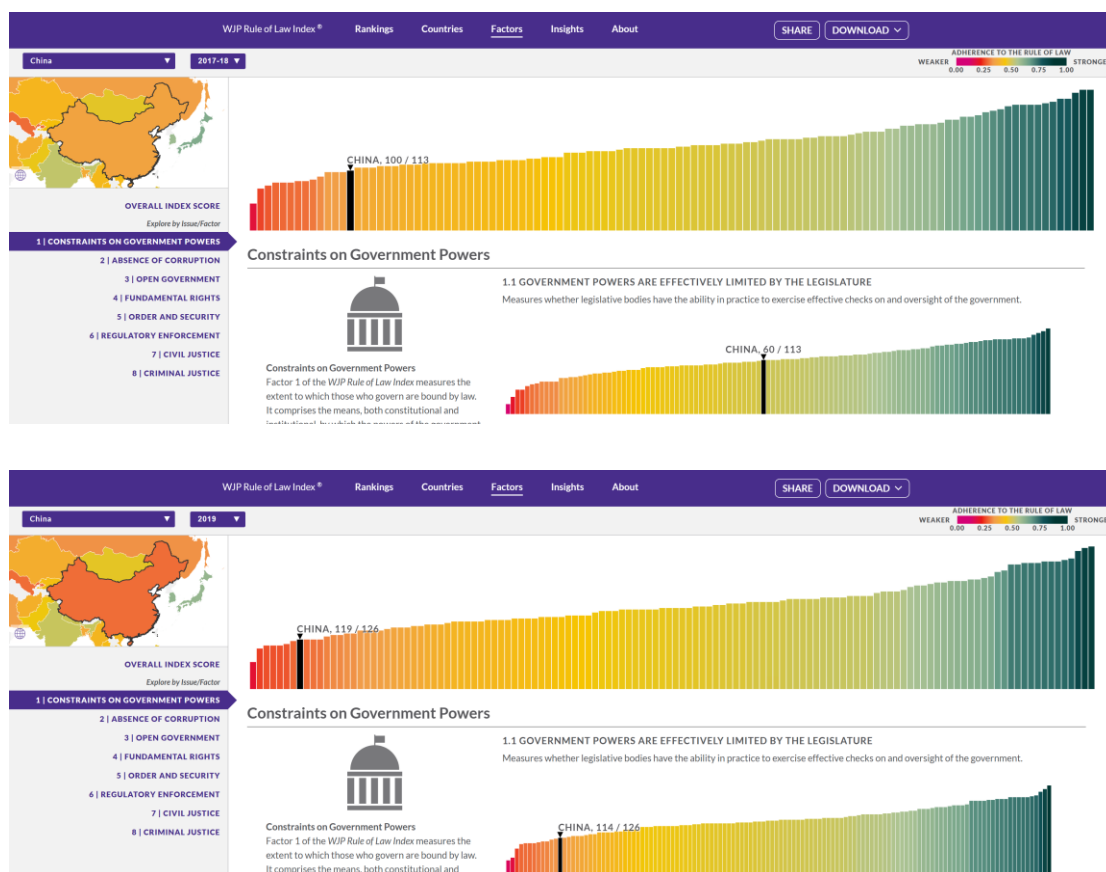


Figure 5. China’s WJP Rule of Law Index Rank by All and Sub Factor 1⁶³

Similarly, according to the WJP Rule of Law Index, Russia’s rule of law ranking also declined sharply following its 2020 constitutional amendment, falling from 94th in 2020 to 113th in 2024. Among the components of Russia’s score, the most significant drop occurred in the “Constraints on Government Powers” indicator, which fell from 115th in 2020 to 129th in 2021. Its sub-indicator, “Government powers are effectively limited by the legislature,” dropped from 119th in 2020 to 133rd in 2021, reaching a historic low of 135th in 2024.

⁶³ *ibid.*

Russian Federation Overall Rule of Law Score Over Time, 2015 - 2024

Russian Federation scores for overall rule of law from 2015 to 2024. (Use the left menu to explore other scores.)

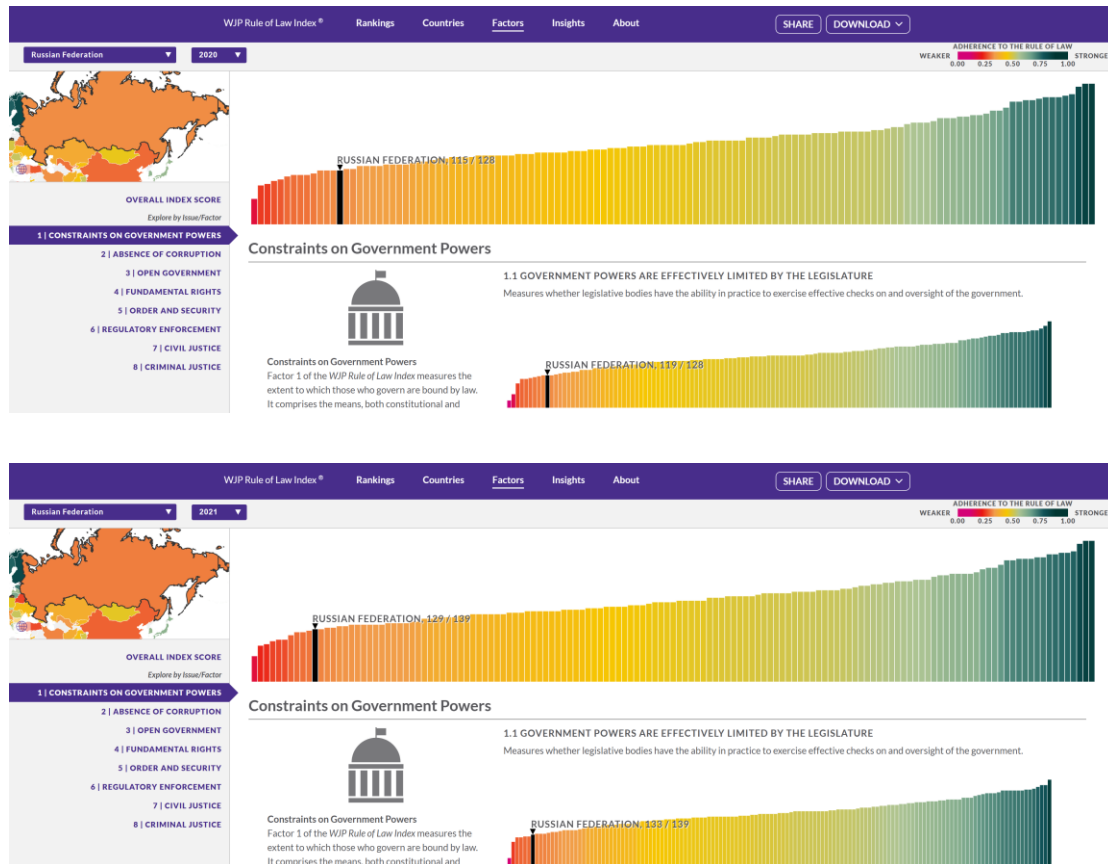
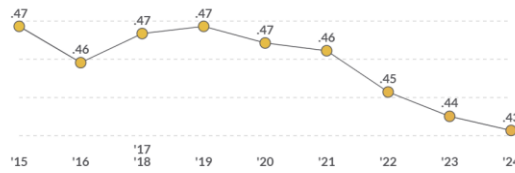


Figure 6. Russia's WJP Rule of Law Index Rank by All and Sub Factor 1⁶⁴

These developments, when viewed alongside the analysis in Chapter Two, reveal a shared reality: the most recent constitutional amendments in both Russia and China have made their constitutions more authoritarian, further removing institutional constraints on government power. However, aside from this shift, the overall state of the rule of law in both countries has

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

remained relatively stable. As their constitutions become more authoritarian, they also increasingly reflect the actual dynamics of political power—ironically becoming less sham in the process.

These changes are also reflected in Figure 2, the constitutional spectrum. As the constitutions of both countries move toward a more candid representation of their authoritarian systems, they shift rightward along the X-axis and downward along the Y-axis.

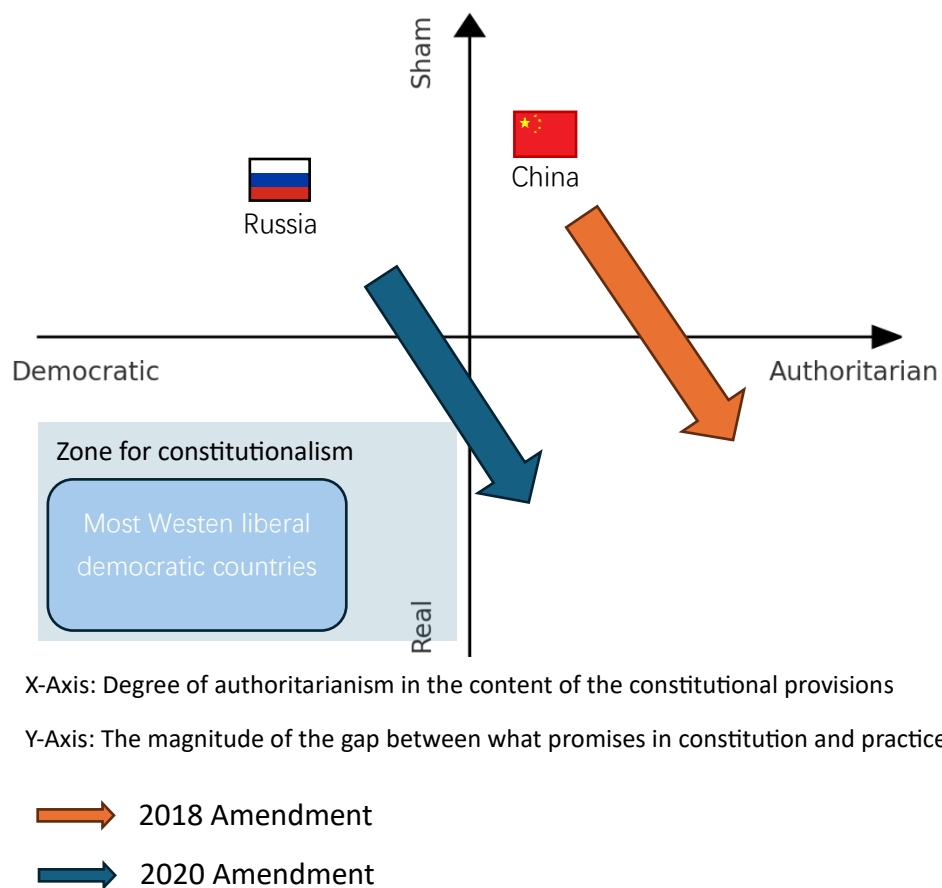


Figure 7. The Trend from Democratic Sham Constitution to Real Authoritarian Constitution⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Made by author

CHAPTER 3. REASONS FOR THE AUTHORITARIAN TURN IN CONSTITUTIONAL TEXTS

For the sake of analysis, I adopt the premise that authoritarian states act rationally—that is, the authoritarian turn in constitutional texts serves the interests of the regime itself.

Although there is often a significant gap between the actual political operations of authoritarian states and their constitutions, maintaining a superficially democratic constitution is not useless.

An authoritarian state would only abandon a superficially democratic constitution if the benefits of doing so outweigh those of maintaining it—or if the benefits of maintaining such a facade are steadily diminishing, or even turning into liabilities.

In most cases, these superficially democratic constitutions include provisions for civil rights and constraints on public power, but they lack mechanisms to enforce them. This may respond to a sense that the constitution needs to look complete and to fit in the global scripts that define the basic formal elements, but without risk of costly constraints.⁶⁶ So authoritarian regimes can exploit the ambiguities within the constitution, interpreting it in ways that serve their interests and justify their rule. But a constitution, after all, is not a work of literature, it cannot be entirely filled with vague and ambiguous language. A very central function of formal rules including constitutions is simple coordination. All regimes need institutions and

⁶⁶ Ginsburg and Simpser (n 10) 7.

need to coordinate on what institutions will play what role. Laying out the structures of government facilitates their operation because it prevents continuous renegotiation. A written constitutional text can thus minimize conflict over basic institutions for any regime.⁶⁷

Although constitutions in authoritarian states rarely succeed in effectively restraining public power, they still play a role in defining how the system operates by setting out formal structures and procedures.

The ambitions of Putin and Xi Jinping appear to go beyond the gray areas of the constitution—they seek to break through term limits altogether. Based on the disastrous legacy of lifelong rule under the Soviet Communist Party and Mao Zedong, both the Russian Constitution and China’s 1982 Constitution originally set clear term limits for national leaders. Before the 2020 amendment, Article 81, Paragraph 3 of the Russian Constitution stated that the President of the Russian Federation serves a six-year term and that the same person may not hold the office for more than two consecutive terms. Similarly, prior to the 2018 amendment, Article 79 of China’s 1982 Constitution stipulated that the President of the State shall not serve more than two consecutive terms. Setting aside their motivations for seeking long-term rule, it is clear that their actions directly conflicted with the explicit provisions of the constitution. Given that neither leader was willing to abandon the pursuit of extended terms in office, failing to amend the constitutional text would have placed their continued rule in direct conflict with the constitution itself—clearly undermining the

⁶⁷ *ibid* 3.

constitution's role as a framework for institutional order. Of course, I cannot definitively prove the counterfactual—namely, how severe the negative consequences would have been had the two countries *not* taken these actions and instead allowed the constitution's function as a framework for institutional order to erode. However, the fact that both regimes proceeded with the constitutional amendments suggests that, in the minds of their leaders, preserving the constitution's role as an organizing framework for political authority was of greater importance. Even if the amendments sparked short-term controversy, reinforcing the institutional logic and legal structure around extended terms was seen as the more strategic choice.

Furthermore, constitutions are also advertisements; they seek to provide information to potential and actual users of their provisions. As authoritative statements of policy, constitutions can also play a role in signaling the intentions of leaders within the regime to those outside of it. These audiences might be international— from the very beginning, written constitutions have been adopted in part to signal capacity to engage on the international plane. Or the audiences may be domestic, consisting of the population that will be subject to the constitution.⁶⁸ As Donald Clarke once said, the constitution may be the least important document in the Chinese legal system, but this does not imply that it has no political importance.⁶⁹ Since 1982, the Chinese Communist Party has amended the document four

⁶⁸ *ibid* 6.

⁶⁹ Donald C Clarke, 'Puzzling Observations in Chinese Law: When Is a Riddle Just a Mistake?', *Understanding China's Legal System* (2003) 103.

times, each time to provide signals of ideological legitimacy to particular voices within the party. For example, in 2004, the constitution was modified to include the “Three Represents” theory of Jiang Zemin, including explicit mention of the “advanced productive forces” in society, a euphemism for capitalists. The party of the people now represents the rich too. Such symbolic changes may simply confirm policy developments that have already taken place, but their elevation to the level of the constitution signals their authoritative victory within the ideological debates of the party. The meaning for international audiences is that China is open for business; for domestic audiences, it signals that getting rich is not only glorious, as Deng Xiaoping said, but politically acceptable as well.⁷⁰

This institutional function is aimed at both domestic and international audiences. In fact, both Russia and China have long used the façade of constitutional democracy to justify their authoritarian rule to the international community. However, by the time of their recent constitutional amendments, the effectiveness of such justifications had significantly diminished. China amended its constitution in 2018, during a period of intense trade conflict with the United States. At the time, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went so far as to declare in his later speech, *The Future of China and the Free World*, that China’s new authoritarianism posed a threat to the U.S. economy, to freedoms, and to the future of liberal democracies around the world.⁷¹ For Russia, since 2014, the relationship between Russia and

⁷⁰ Ginsburg and Simpser (n 10) 7.

⁷¹ Michael Pompeo, ‘Communist China and the Free World’s Future’ <<https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/>> accessed 30 April 2025.

the West has undergone a profound deterioration, marked by deepening mistrust, geopolitical rivalry, and economic disengagement. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 triggered a sharp break, leading to Western sanctions and the suspension of Russia from the G8. It can be said that even before the constitutional amendments, the Western-led international community had largely come to regard Russia and China as “authoritarian states” and strategic rivals. As a result, the benefits of using superficially democratic constitutions to project an image of democracy to the world had already diminished almost entirely.

For the domestic populations of both countries, although the constitutional amendments sparked controversy, the constitution still serves a normative function. Authoritarian constitutions can also shape social norms and public preferences. As Albert Hirschman put it, “a principal purpose of publically proclaimed laws and regulations is to stigmatize antisocial behavior and thereby to influence citizens’ values”.⁷² A monarchical constitution, for example, could potentially buttress the social acceptability of kingly rule, while a constitution that protects free speech might, over time, foster an attitude or norm of tolerance for diversity of opinion.⁷³ Although the latest constitutional amendments in both countries sparked significant controversy domestically, these texts have ultimately become legally effective constitutions. At the same time, both governments have actively defended the legitimacy of the amendments through education and propaganda. Over time, this may subtly increase

⁷² Albert O Hirschman, *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays* (Harvard University Press 1992) 146.

⁷³ Ginsburg and Simpser (n 10) 12.

public acceptance of a more authoritarian system, especially among the younger generations.

Beyond the highly visible issue of term limits, both countries also addressed matters of ideology in their latest constitutional amendments. Comparatively, Russia placed greater emphasis on historical tradition, while China focused more on consolidating the current leadership's ideological framework. Nonetheless, both approaches reflect the ideological disadvantage these countries face in the context of international competition. Whether or not Russia and China can be considered allies, they have both clearly become major rivals—or even enemies—of Western powers. Many scholars argue that a new Cold War effectively began after the Trump administration launched a trade war against China during his first term. Although localized conflicts like the war in Ukraine—and the potential for a Taiwan Strait conflict—have emerged, a full-scale global war remains unimaginable for now. As a result, alongside economic warfare, ideological warfare has inevitably become another critical battleground. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia abandoned communism and for a time embraced Western liberalism. However, under Putin's increasingly authoritarian rule, there has been diminishing tolerance for liberal ideology. Opposition groups have caused trouble for the Putin regime, including anti-war protests in 2022 and even the emergence of anti-government armed groups near the borders. Although many of these groups may not be directly tied to liberal ideology, the symbolic association of liberalism with being “pro-Western” and “anti-Putin” is something the Putin government is clearly unwilling to tolerate. Further, following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia was expelled from the Council of

Europe. As of September 16, 2022, Russia ceased to be a party to the European Convention on Human Rights. Consequently, the European Court of Human Rights no longer has jurisdiction over applications from Russia concerning events occurring after that date.⁷⁴

China's constitutional amendments reflect an assertive attempt to construct a new ideological orthodoxy centered around Xi Jinping's personal doctrine. This ideological entrenchment is partly a response to growing tensions between China and the liberal international order. Since the early 2000s, China had maintained a dual strategy of economic integration with the global capitalist system while preserving internal ideological ambiguity. However, in the wake of escalating strategic rivalry with the United States—especially after the 2018 trade war—Chinese leadership increasingly perceives liberal values such as multiparty democracy, press freedom, and judicial independence not merely as foreign imports but as existential threats to regime stability. In response, the Chinese state has intensified its efforts to marginalize liberal discourse in academia, media, and civil society. The constitutional affirmation of Party leadership as “the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics” further codifies this ideological shift. It reduces space for legal reform and pluralistic interpretation by making Party supremacy not just a political reality but a constitutional mandate. This signals to domestic and international audiences alike that China no longer seeks to mimic liberal democratic forms, but instead aims to legitimize its unique political model as

⁷⁴ ‘Russia Ceases to Be Party to the European Convention on Human Rights’ (*Council of Europe*, 16 September 2022) <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/russia-ceases-to-be-party-to-the-european-convention-on-human-rights>>.

ideologically self-sufficient and globally competitive.

In 2013, the CPC launched an internal ideological education campaign across various Party committees, featuring a documentary produced by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences titled *"Twenty Years After the Fall of the Party and the State: Russians Speak Out."* The purpose of this film was to serve as a cautionary tale, warning against repeating the fate of the Soviet Communist Party. The documentary identified the failure in the ideological domain as the most critical factor behind the collapse of the Soviet Union and its ruling party.⁷⁵

Furthermore, in October 2024, the Chinese Communist Party stated in an official document that it would “implement the Social Sciences Innovation Project and build an independent knowledge system for China’s social sciences.”⁷⁶ It emphasized that social science research in China must “fully integrate Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era across all fields and aspects of philosophy and social sciences, ensuring that the development of social sciences always follows the correct direction.”⁷⁷ From these two developments before and after the constitutional amendment, it is evident that under Xi Jinping's leadership, the Chinese Communist Party is deeply concerned about the threat posed

⁷⁵ ‘Organizing Study Sessions to Watch the Educational Documentary “Twenty Years After the Collapse of the Soviet Party and State: Russians Speak Out” [组织学习观看《苏联亡党亡国 20 年祭——俄罗斯人在诉说》教育专题片]’ (*The Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China*, 3 July 2012) <https://www.spp.gov.cn/dj/xxjl/201207/t20120703_54133.shtml> accessed 20 May 2025.

⁷⁶ ‘The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform and Advancing Chinese-style Modernization [中共中央关于进一步全面深化改革 推进中国式现代化的决定]’ <https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202407/content_6963770.htm> accessed 6 June 2025.

⁷⁷ ‘How to Understand the Construction of an Independent Knowledge System in Chinese Philosophy and Social Sciences [如何理解构建中国哲学社会科学自主知识体系]’ *Xinhua News Agency* (10 October 2024) <https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202410/content_6979097.htm> accessed 6 June 2025.

by Western values to the regime. What it fears is not any specific ideology from a particular country, but rather the broader normative framework of liberal democratic values. In fact, the CPC is unwilling even to fully accept today's international standards. Although the Chinese government signed the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on October 5, 1998, and has repeatedly stated its intention to implement the treaty, the State Council has never submitted it for ratification, and the National People's Congress remains unable to approve it.

Another important reason is that, in the context of a new Cold War with the West, both countries felt the need to shift the unfavorable dynamics they faced in the domain of cognitive and information warfare.

The constitutional amendments in both countries can not only be interpreted as attempts by Putin and Xi Jinping to secure longer terms in order to realize their political ambitions, but also as a form of strategic preparation for potential instability. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the West has imposed a series of sanctions, leading to a deterioration in Russia's economic situation. While the Kremlin implemented measures to stabilize the macroeconomy, growth remains weak. After Xi Jinping came to power, China maintained several years of economic prosperity. This was largely due to two key factors: the continued role of the real estate sector as a pillar of the economy, and the government's increased investment in infrastructure along with loose monetary policies that supported growth. However, China's leadership understood this kind of prosperity was unsustainable.

CHAPTER 4. LIMITATIONS

This paper faces a series of limitations:

First, in analyzing the authoritarian shift in the constitutional texts of China and Russia, this thesis adopts the assumption that these regimes act rationally—that is, they make constitutional choices that serve to consolidate power, stabilize governance, or maximize regime survival. This assumption serves as a useful methodological tool, enabling structured analysis of institutional change within a rational-choice framework. However, it must be acknowledged that this premise does not necessarily align with the complex realities of authoritarian governance in practice. In both China and Russia, political decision-making has become increasingly personalized, with major constitutional and policy shifts often reflecting the will of a single leader—Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia—rather than the outcome of collective deliberation among institutionalized interest groups or elite factions.

This personalization of power has profound implications. It undermines the internal logic of authoritarian resilience theory, which emphasizes mechanisms such as elite consensus, intra-party bargaining, and technocratic governance. Instead, the centralization of authority in the hands of one leader heightens the risk of arbitrary and impulsive decision-making, unmoored from long-term strategic planning or broad-based regime interests. Indeed, some decisions taken by these leaders appear not only misaligned with public welfare but also potentially self-destructive for regime stability. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, widely perceived

as a personal geopolitical gamble by Putin, triggered sweeping international sanctions, military overextension, and growing domestic unrest—outcomes that significantly weakened Russia's global position and arguably undermined the long-term viability of Putin's rule. Similarly, in China, the sudden and uncoordinated abandonment of the zero-COVID policy in late 2022—following years of stringent lockdowns—resulted in widespread social disorientation, overwhelmed health systems, and a severe blow to public trust. The abrupt reversal, made without transparent deliberation or public preparation, underscored the extent to which policy in China is now shaped less by institutional logic and more by the strategic calculations, and miscalculations, of the central leadership. As Stein Ringen has pointed out, the Chinese state is 'trivial', with no genuine purpose except to perpetuate itself indefinitely - something he believes is likely to continue.⁷⁸

Second, the decision-making processes in China and Russia are notoriously opaque, posing significant challenges for scholars and analysts attempting to assess constitutional or political developments based on primary or firsthand sources. In both systems, key political decisions—such as constitutional amendments, leadership transitions, or strategic shifts in ideological orientation—are made within closed elite circles, often without transparent debate, public consultation, or legislative scrutiny. In China, the highest levels of decision-making occur within the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo and its Standing Committee, bodies that operate in secrecy and rarely publish transcripts or deliberative records. Similarly, in

⁷⁸ Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (1st edn, Hong Kong University Press 2016).

Russia, decision-making is concentrated within the presidential administration and security apparatus, with the formal institutions of parliament and the judiciary playing largely subordinate roles. This lack of transparency means that scholars must often rely on indirect indicators—such as official speeches, state media narratives, symbolic constitutional changes, or shifts in legal language—to infer underlying political motives and strategic calculations. Moreover, the suppression of dissent, restrictions on academic freedom, and tight control over information flows further limit access to alternative perspectives or critical evaluations from within these countries. This may even influence the effectiveness of WJP Rule of Law Index, as an important data source of the index coming from interviews of people. As a result, much of the analysis regarding constitutional change, authoritarian consolidation, or regime ideology must navigate between the lines of official discourse and be grounded in comparative inference, rather than direct empirical observation.

Third, constitutional change is a highly politicized process. Empirically, both countries are currently confronting profound internal and external challenges. Russia is entangled in a prolonged and costly war in Ukraine, which has led to unprecedented international isolation, crippling economic sanctions, and increasing signs of domestic fatigue and elite dissatisfaction.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, China is experiencing one of its most severe economic slowdowns in decades, with stagnant growth, declining consumer confidence, a real estate crisis, record youth unemployment, and increasing tensions between the central government

⁷⁹ Andr  k  G  bor, ‘The Question of the International Isolation of the Russian Federation’ (2024) 12 *Nemzetbiztons  gi Szemle* 149, 149.

and private enterprise. These challenges not only threaten economic stability, but also weaken the very performance-based legitimacy upon which much of the Chinese Communist Party's domestic authority has historically rested. As an academic paper, it is neither practical nor meaningful to engage in political forecasting. However, it must be acknowledged that the political futures of both countries are marked by considerable uncertainty—especially given the age of their respective leaders, Putin and Xi Jinping. This uncertainty also affects the reliability of any analysis that draws conclusions based on present political realities.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored a remarkable and consequential development in China and Russia: the shift from sham democratic constitutions—texts that outwardly resemble liberal democratic frameworks but are disregarded in practice—toward constitutions that explicitly institutionalize authoritarian rule and are increasingly enforced. Through a comparative analysis of China and Russia, this study has demonstrated that both countries, despite their different historical and institutional backgrounds, have moved along a similar trajectory: from mimicking democratic constitutionalism to codifying and implementing personalist and illiberal rule through constitutional amendments.

Traditionally, classifications of constitutions have mostly been one-dimensional—such as labeling them as sham constitutions or authoritarian constitutions. However, such classifications can lead to confusion when trying to accurately characterize a particular constitution. By introducing a two-dimensional framework—with one axis representing the content of the constitution and the other representing the gap between constitutional provisions and political reality—we can more clearly define the nature of a constitution, especially in the context of authoritarian states. Although both Russia and China are authoritarian in political practice, their constitutions differ significantly in form. Russia's constitution maintains the appearance of a democratic system, while China's constitution explicitly enshrines a more authoritarian one-party rule. In terms of constitutional text alone, Russia's constitution appears more democratic than China's. However, given the equally

repressive political realities in both countries, Russia's constitution can be seen as more disingenuous—because it promises a more democratic system that does not exist in practice.

For the recent change, empirically, the 2018 amendment in China and the 2020 amendment in Russia marked key inflection points. In China, the abolition of presidential term limits, the constitutional affirmation of CPC leadership, and the inclusion of Xi Jinping's eponymous doctrine redefined the political order to center not only on the Party but also on the person of the leader. In Russia, the "zeroing-out" clause that resets Putin's term limits, expanded presidential powers, and a redefined national identity rooted in orthodoxy and historical revisionism reflect a similar personalization and ideologization of constitutional order.

Analytically, this transformation can be mapped using a two-dimensional framework that considers (1) the degree of authoritarianism embedded in the constitutional text and (2) the extent to which the constitution is enforced in practice. While Russia's pre-2020 constitution appeared more democratic in form, it was often circumvented, rendering it more "sham" than real. In contrast, China's constitution was always more authoritarian in content, but increasingly consistent with the political reality—making it more "real" despite its undemocratic nature. After their respective amendments, both constitutions moved closer to what this thesis terms "real authoritarian constitutions": legal instruments that are both enforced and openly autocratic in content.

Importantly, this trend signals a broader transformation in authoritarian constitutionalism.

Today's authoritarian regimes no longer find it strategically necessary to mimic liberal

constitutional norms to the same extent as in the post-Cold War era. Instead, they are openly challenging liberal legalism by embedding alternative values—national identity, ideological supremacy, and historical narrative control—within their highest legal texts. While these constitutions remain authoritarian, they are no longer deceptive. Rather, they are becoming instruments of ideological consolidation and institutional entrenchment.

In sum, the trend from sham democratic constitutions to real authoritarian constitutions in China and Russia marks a turning point in authoritarian governance—one that demands both critical scrutiny and conceptual innovation in the study of comparative constitutionalism.

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