

Does Russia have a food safety crisis?

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Abstract. Unsafe food is a global problem and occurs in every country to varying degrees. This article suggests a policy process framework to understand the food safety problem in Russia. At first glance Russia does not appear to have a food safety crisis because it is not similar to developing countries or China. Most of Russia's food is safe for public consumption. And yet, the persistence of falsified and adulterated food, phony production facilities, and the scope of bad actor activity might be termed a crisis because these incidents continue to exist despite government efforts to eradicate those problems. In particular, the scope and persistence of bad actor activity have to be troubling considering the considerable legal, administrative, and manpower resources that have been invested in food safety. In short, it might be argued that Russia has a crisis because the regulatory state is not fulfilling policy goals. The purpose of this article is to work through the food safety crisis question in Russia. The applied policy process approach entails four steps: goal setting, policy design, allocation of resources, and implementation. The process-oriented framework reveals successes and shortcomings in Russia's food safety policy. On the positive side, policy adjustments have led to a decline in food counterfeiting and falsification. At the same time, the bad actor problem persists. Shortcomings in each step of the policy process are identified and discussed.

Key words: food security, food insecurity, regulatory state, agricultural production, food safety, policy process

Introduction

One of the most important challenges to global food security is unsafe food. The World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization include food safety as an element of food security, but the two concepts are not the same. Food security is concerned with sufficient levels of daily caloric intake, while food safety relates to food that will not make a person sick without regard to levels of consumption. The differences between these two concepts play out in food policy. Food security policy aims to increase availability and access to food for a healthy life. Food safety policy aims to make food safe. Food safety affects every consumer on a daily basis and directly affects the health and well-being of the population. It makes little sense to talk about levels of food consumption if food is unsafe.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), unsafe food containing harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites, or chemical substances causes more than 200 different diseases. The causes of foodborne illnesses depend on which stage they occur in the production-processing-consumption cycle. Food may become unsafe due to the way it is produced or handled during food production and processing, during storage, during transportation over long distances, during marketing and retail stages, and during preparation and consumption. Foodborne diseases may result from ignorance, neglect, accident, underdeveloped sanitation systems, or poor choices by consumers at home. Food safety, therefore, is a multidimensional issue that transcends time, space, and location.

Problems surrounding food safety affect hundreds of millions of people each year. Around the world, an estimated 600 million people become ill after eating contaminated food, resulting in 420,000 deaths every year (WHO, 2022b). The WHO estimates that 125,000 children under 5 years of age die from a foodborne illness each year (WHO, 2015). Diarrheal diseases are a major culprit, responsible for more than one-half of global foodborne diseases, causing 550 million people to become ill and 230,000 deaths every year (WHO, 2015). Developing countries are most likely to experience food safety problems. Africa has the largest regional percentage of foodborne illnesses, where hygienic standards and sanitation levels are very low, access to clean water is problematic, and modern methods of food storage (refrigeration, electricity) may be irregular. High levels of that illness from unsafe food strain hospital systems, especially in nations that already have underdeveloped health care. Countries that develop reputations for unsafe food may experience lower levels of foreign tourism.

Unsafe food creates a cycle of disease and malnutrition. Unsafe food impacts cohorts of the population low- and middle-income nations that are already vulnerable: infants, small children, the elderly, and immuno-compromised individuals. Moreover, unsafe food leads to economic losses from lower productivity and medical expenses, which are estimated at \$110 billion USD annually in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2022a: 9). Thus, food safety is arguably *at least as* important to food security as levels of food consumption or daily caloric intake. If food is unsafe, calories consumed per day are irrelevant.

Unsafe food—contaminated food—can sicken or even kill those who consume it. To meet the global challenge of safe food, the WHO adopted a ‘Global Strategy for Food Safety’ in 2002 (WHO, 2002). This strategy advocated transitioning from reactive product testing to proactive science-based management. The strategy supported international cooperation to reduce hazards in food systems and improve detection, management, and communication about foodborne illnesses. The 2002 strategy was followed by a strategic plan for food safety for 2013–2022 (WHO, 2013), and a third strategy for food safety that

runs 2022–2030 (WHO, 2022a). The 2022–2030 strategy aims to establish a harmonized framework for food legislation among nations; establish an institutional framework to coordinate national food control systems; develop and implement standards and guidelines; strengthen compliance, verification and enforcement; and establish emergency response systems (WHO, 2022a). The 2022–2030 strategy is integral to meeting the food security goals defined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals that run 2016–2030. Thus, as the world's population increases to 10 billion people by 2050 (Suziki, 2019), solving the world's hunger problem entails more than increasing food production and consumption.

Russia does not occupy a significant position in the literature on food safety, which is to say that food safety is an understudied aspect of Russia's food policy and food security. But food safety is no less important in Russia than it is in any other country. The question that this article addresses is whether Russia has a food safety crisis. By crisis we do not have in mind the systemic problems that stem from a low level of development. Developing countries lack clean water, have shortages of refrigeration, and have inadequate sanitation during storage, processing, and transportation. We also do not put Russia in the same category as China, where several very serious food safety incidents have occurred (Yasuda, 2018: 6). For example, in 2008 a baby milk scandal killed six infants and sickened another 300,000 children (Donnellon-May, 2024); in 2010, waste oil was found to be used in food preparation; and during 2007–2015 rice was found to be contaminated with heavy metals (Bozzini, Sicurelli, 2021: 341–342). In 2011, pork was contaminated by a substance that poisons the cardiovascular system (Yasuda, 2018: 1). In 2013, more than 6,600 diseased pork carcasses floated in Shanghai's main water ways (Dead pigs in Shanghai River, 2013). In 2014, a widespread rotten meat scandal attracted international attention (Gough, 2014). Even after the adoption of food safety laws and policies, the problem has not disappeared. In 2024, another food oil scandal erupted when it was found that the company that transported edible oils had not cleaned their trucks for years, made possible by inadequate government monitoring and regulation (Liu, Tang, 2025). A few months later, farm workers and merchants were discovered to have soaked goji berries in a banned substance and sprayed them with illegal additives to enhance their color (Donnellon-May, 2024). These types of incidents explain why consumers' trust in domestically produced food in China is so low (Kendall et al., 2019).

The purpose of this article is to work through the food safety crisis question in Russia. That macro question may be broken into subsidiary sub-questions: 1) Does Russia have a regulatory crisis regarding food safety? This question asks whether the regulatory system in food safety is effective. 2) Does Russia have an institutional crisis in food safety? This question asks whether the institutions have

the capacity, authority, and resources to effectively fulfill their roles. 3) Does Russia have a public health crisis in food safety? This question asks whether food safety policy and institutions are protecting public health. 4) Does Russia have a public policy crisis in food safety? This question asks whether the policy process is effective to meet food safety goals. The answers to these questions are discussed further in the Conclusion

The state of knowledge

We start with the question why the unsafe food problem exists before proceeding to review schools of thought about food safety. One reason why unsafe food exists relates to a country's level of development. Foodborne illnesses may occur in any country, but are most common in the developing world, where unsanitary water, a lack of knowledge about sanitation, a shortage of refrigeration, and unclean storage and processing facilities are prevalent. Low- and middle-income nations in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Sahara Africa account for 41% of the world's population, but 53% of foodborne illnesses and 75% of food illness-related deaths (Jaffe et al., 2019). Food safety in developing countries is important because foodborne diseases lead to lower IQ and stunting in children. Stunting, in turn, is associated with chronic childhood diseases that carry over to adulthood; increased risk of not completing school; lower adult earning potential; and lower productivity (Vipham, Chaves, Trinetta, 2018: 17). In short, problems associated with food safety start in childhood and can continue throughout the rest of the person's life.

Unsafe food also comes from industrial agriculture. In developed nations, factory farming creates unsanitary conditions that pose threats to human health. The use of chemicals during production and processing of food raises the risks that exposure to pesticides and food additives can cause illness in humans. Animals are fed compound feed, corn, and animal parts that cause diseases in livestock (Pollan, 2006: 65–84). To combat diseases that are caused by unhealthy feed, livestock are raised on a diet of antibiotics that may be passed to humans through their meat, creating resistance to antibiotics in humans (LyMBERY, Oakeshott, 2014: 135–159). Chickens are raised in cramped, unsanitary conditions where diseases can easily spread (LyMBERY, Oakeshott, 2014: 27–38, 187–196). At chicken processing plants, the processing lines move so fast that diseased animals are difficult to identify and remove, which means that they enter the food supply (Schlosser, 2023: 11–25). Therefore, foodborne illnesses occur as a byproduct of industrial agriculture.

A third source for unsafe food occurs in both developed and developing states. Many foodborne illnesses are caused by inadequate hygienic and sanitation practices at home. The undercooking of meat

products is a particular hazard. The United States is considered to have safe food and refers to its food system as the “safest in the world”. Yet, in 2025 an estimated 9.9 million people suffered from a foodborne illness, leading to 53,000 hospitalizations and 931 deaths in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 2025). The United States Department of Agriculture places annual estimates much higher at 48 million people sickened — nearly one in six people — and 3,000 deaths from foodborne illnesses (US Department of Agriculture, 2025). Most of the fatal cases occurred in the home and were related to improper preparation or handling of food.

A final reason why unsafe food exists is due to manmade causes. One manmade cause is outright fraud by bad actors. Fraud refers to a food product being sold as something that it is not, in other words, selling an imposter. Food fraud occurs in nearly every country. The main consequence of imposter food is that consumers pay for something that is not what they thought they were buying, although in some instances the substituted product can be dangerous to human health (Olmstead, 2016). Another manmade cause includes adulteration, or counterfeiting, which refers to contents of a product being falsified. Counterfeiting entails deliberate falsification of a product through additives, the substitution of one content for another, or the use of contents that are not disclosed. This type of activity is very common and occurs across a wide range of food and drink products. The common link between types of manmade causes is greed.

Different schools of thought about food safety exist. One school of thought looks at food safety as a regulatory problem. This approach considers the efficacy of government oversight and emphasizes food safety standards, inspection, and quarantine. This school of thought sees the rise of a regulatory state and argues that technological underdevelopment leads to weakened regulatory monitoring (Liu, 2010). A second school of thought examines the origins of food safety rules. Some scholars emphasize foreign influences while others consider domestic sources. China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2002, for example, necessitated new rules about food safety in order for its food exports to be competitive. China’s 2009 Food Safety Law was heavily influenced by food safety laws in the European Union, although institutional arrangements and China’s macro-governing framework were quite different which made the fit problematic (Yasuda, 2018: 189). On the other hand, domestic origins of regulation of food safety have evolved in China since 1949 when industrial ministries held regulatory power. In the post-1993 period, regulatory institutions became independent of the firms being regulated (Liu, 2010; Liu, Mutukumira, Chen, 2019).

A third school of thought looks at trust in food safety and its broader linkages to societal trust. From a political perspective, trust in food safety affects how people feel about their leaders. In China, President Xi asserted that if the Communist Party continued to mis-

handle the food safety issue, the Chinese people would lose trust in the Party and question whether it was capable of governing (Yasuda, 2018: 2). Trust also relates to economic markets. Specifically, when societal conditions are stable, trust in economic institutions is influenced by cultural values, but during periods of social change, trust in food is related to their performance in a market environment (Berg et al., 2005).

While these schools of thought are distinct, they have in common a focus on policy outcomes, a method that is useful but incomplete. The outcome approach presents binary choices: a state has safe food or it does not. The binary is possible because the definition of food safety is too broad and vague. What exactly does it mean for a country to be “food safe”? Is it 100% of all food? Is it 90%? Is there a threshold for the number of people who get ill from unsafe food each year? Unlike food self-sufficiency, which has a quantitative threshold that acts as a guide (Clapp, 2017), food safety has none. Outcomes are obviously important, but outcomes do not reflect the complete story. An alternative analytical approach considers states’ capability, an approach that emphasizes the policy process. A process-oriented approach deconstructs state capability and investigates the fulfillment of the criteria that define state capability. State capability is explored in more detail in the following section.

An alternative approach: The policy process

We have established that food safety is a component of food security; that food safety is an important public policy issue; and that food safety has different causes. How are we to understand states’ ability to deal with their food safety problem? A common approach looks at outcomes and draws broad conclusions whether a specific country has safe food or not. That approach is limited in that it does not tell the analyst much about how the outcome came to be. An approach that looks only at outcomes does not inform the analyst about the policy process, strengths and weaknesses in the policy process, and about state capability.

Alternatively, a policy process framework may be utilized, the purpose of which is to shift the discussion from outcome to process and from outcome to state capability. The policy process framework entails four separate but complementary steps: 1) the definition of goals; 2) the design of policy; 3) the allocation of resources; 4) the implementation of policy (Andrews, Prichett, Woolcock, 2017). Together, these steps inform the analyst about state capability. The policy process framework provides insight into which steps of the policy process are efficacious and which are not. The analyst using the process-oriented framework is interested in which of four steps in the policy process are satisfied. Is the policy challenge unresolvable, or

are steps in the policy process not adequately fulfilled? Are the goals not clearly defined? Is the design inadequate? Are sufficient resources allocated? Is implementation effective? Once the process analysis is completed, the analyst is positioned to understand the policy outcome. Further, a policy process framework not only allows the analyst to understand state capability, it also permits comparison of state capability over time, identifying periods of stronger or weaker capability.

The fulfillment of the four steps in the process makes a positive outcome (goal attainment) likely but is not guaranteed. There are three possible results from the process-oriented analysis. 1) All steps are fulfilled and a positive outcome is attained. 2) All steps are fulfilled but policy goals not met because some policy challenges are irresolvable. 3) One or more steps in the policy process are not fulfilled and policy goals are not met.

The policy steps

The first step in the policy process concerns *defining goals*. Once basic goals are defined, choices must be made about how to achieve those goals. For example, one choice is whether to let the market be the primary driver of food policy or whether to pursue a state-led model. How interventionist and regulatory will the state be? How much control over wholesale and retail markets will the state have? Which enforcement mechanisms will be used and how strong should they be? Other fundamental choices must be addressed and the choices that are made will shape the process to achieve policy goals.

A second step entails *policy design*. This step speaks to what policy will look like. This step reveals which actors in the food system have influence into the policy process, and the strength of that influence. Policy design is affected by different actors, from the household to the large agrifirm, each with different levels of influence and access to policymakers. Other factors impact the policy design for example, by geographical differences. Design is affected by the efficacy and competence of local governance and external factors such as the international environment. A well-designed policy will integrate these factors, transforming heterogeneity into a uniform regulatory system.

After basic choices about policy goals and the design of policy are decided, the third step is the *allocation of resources*. Policymakers must deal with constraints when allocating resources. The allocation of resources contains two parts. The first part concerns the resources that are available; the quality of those resources; and the quantity of those resources. Resources are defined broadly and may include natural resources, political resources, economic resources, financial resources, personnel resources; or leadership as a resource. The second part concerns the political process in which different interest groups compete for the distribution of resources. Access to decision-makers and interest groups' influence is not equal for all interests. Access

and influence are not equal for all policymakers either. The allocation of resources, therefore, reflects access, influence, and ultimately, power within the system. Ideally, resources are directed to the most capable actors and sectors in pursuit of policy goals.

A fourth step is the *implementation* of policies. This step speaks to the utilization of the resources that have been allocated (Andrews, Prichett, Woolcock, 2017: 11–14). This step looks at state capability — the powers of implementation and the obstacles and barriers to implementation. Two sets of factors are relevant to state capability. On the positive side, the quality of administration and oversight, and effective levers of enforcement are important. On the negative side, resource wastage, corruption, non-compliance, and mission drift are considered.

Taken together, these four steps in the policy process go far in determining whether a policy outcome will be positive, that is, the policy goal will be achieved. Fulfilling those four steps may not result in goal attainment because some policy challenges are difficult or even impossible to resolve. Even if a state defines goals, designs policy, devotes resources, and implements its policy, it still may not achieve its policy goal because some policy challenges are irresolvable no matter what else happens. However, a positive outcome is impossible if the four steps are not fulfilled. In other words, fulfillment of the four steps of the policy process provides a chance for success but does not guarantee success.

Fulfillment of the four steps makes it *likely* that the policy outcome will meet the intended goal, but there is *no* guarantee because some policy challenges are irresolvable or require multinational efforts. One (or more) of those four steps could go awry. There are numerous variations that illustrate this point, but for example, policy goals may be defined but policy design is lacking; policy goals are defined and policy is designed, but insufficient resources are allocated; policy goals are defined, policy is designed, and resources are allocated, but implementation is insufficient. There are other variants, but the basic point is that a lot can go wrong that directly impinges on state capability.

Furthermore, regional, sectoral, or specialized political interests or their agents may exert influence on one or more of the steps enumerated above and bend policy toward their desired outcome (Winders, 2009). Three variants arise: 1) The state resists interest group influence and pursues policy goals defined by the state. This variant sees an autonomous and neutral state. 2) State policy becomes an amalgam of influences from different actors, with no one actor or interest group being dominant. This variant sees the state as non-autonomous and not neutral. 3) An actor or interest group obtains a dominant position in the policy process and is able to influence the definition of policy goals, the allocation of resources, and the course of policy implementation. This variant also sees the state as non-autonomous and

not neutral, instead it is used as a vehicle of control by a single actor. This third variant is referred to as state capture. State capture is defined as ‘the process of obtaining, or capturing, state regulatory authority without democratic authorization’ (Bracking, 2018: 170). Another definition sees members of the business community and/or political elite take control over parts or functions of the state and use its resources for the benefit of the group while harming the public good (Fazekas, Toth, 2016: 322). Because state capture reduces accountability, it is often associated with a rise in corruption.

In conclusion, fulfillment of the four policy process steps is a necessary but insufficient condition for a positive policy outcome. The likelihood of a positive outcome for *resolvable* policy challenges is greatly enhanced if the aforementioned four steps are fulfilled. For *unresolvable* challenges, even the fulfillment of the four steps is unlikely to result in a positive outcome. The takeaway is that policy is crafted and shaped by many variables; policy does not magically happen.

Policy instruments

States have different instruments, or levers, to achieve policy goals, and these instruments can be grouped into categories. There are *policy* levers, which are expectations for specific actions by personnel in a hierarchical bureaucracy. This lever would include the expectation of compliance and administrative discipline. There are *resource* levers, which refers to the marshalling of human or productive resources. There are *financial* levers that create incentives for material gain. There are *coercive* levers, which refer to the use or threat of physical, legal, or psychological coercion toward a person or persons to get desired action. At the opposite end of the spectrum from coercive levers are levers of *vision or aspiration*. This lever motivates desired behavior by creating a vision of an appealing future if certain behaviors are performed. Over time, levers may grow in strength or may erode, depending on other variables such as the willingness of the leader to utilize that lever, the power and legitimacy of the leader, available resources, and the policy issue.

The policy process and Russian food safety

By the beginning of Putin’s third term as president in 2012, levels of consumers’ food consumption were rising, yet the country had only a very loosely regulated food safety system. Food safety policy was amorphous. In 2010, as part of the recovery from the 2008–2009 financial crisis, former President Dmitry Medvedev instructed state agencies to lessen their oversight of businesses to create a pro-business environment that would provide economic and psychological stimuli for

higher production. Subsequently, mandatory safety certification of food was ended, replaced by a requirement that producers and processors proclaim that their food products met quality standards. Medvedev's instruction established self-regulation that continued for several years.

A critical juncture occurred following the introduction of Russia's countersanctions in August 2014. Competition from high-quality Western brands declined after Russia imposed its food embargo. The food import ban was followed by a recession in 2014–2015 due to the collapse of oil prices. These two events created pressures to lower production costs at the same time that government oversight was weakened. As a result, Russia's domestic food safety worsened as Russian companies cut corners and rushed to take over market share that had been held by Western firms. Russian companies offered low prices by using cheap substitutes and even dangerous additives. Fake food hit Russian shelves, evidenced by the importation of oysters from Belarus, a landlocked nation. Counterfeiting became rampant for all kinds of dairy products, sausage, and other food categories. Product testing revealed shockingly high content falsification rates in the early period after countersanctions: 36 of 46 brands of cheese and butter; 7 of 33 brands of sausage; 13 of 23 brands of red caviar; and 4 of 10 bottled mineral water brands (Hobson, 2016). The state responded with a massive increase in state regulation of food safety to combat the food safety problem.

This section applies the process-oriented analytical framework to Russian food safety. Food safety is a case study of bifurcated state capability. The policy impetus for food safety was top down and did not originate as a grassroots movement whereby consumers demanded protection from unsafe food. Nor did food safety policy originate from corporate actors in the food system. Instead, the state defined policy goals and utilized different policy instruments even in the face of private sector resistance over costs and complications during the introduction of bar-coding and tracing.

Policy goals

Russia's 2020 Food Security Doctrine — the basic document that guides food policy and food security policy — defines three pillars of food security: adequate levels of food consumption; national and regional food self-sufficiency as defined by production levels; and safe food. Western academic attention has been devoted to the politics of Russia's food security (Azarieva, Brudny, Finkel, 2023), and to the political economy of Russia's food security and self-sufficiency (Wegren, Nikulin, Trotsuk, 2018). These publications describe attempts to secure adequate levels of food consumption through increased production.

One problem is that the Food Security Doctrine is imprecise in terms of defining the policy goal of safe food. Food security for an

individual is quantified at 2,100 calories per day. National food self-sufficiency has a threshold of 85% of food produced domestically. But safe food is not quantified and not specified. The 2020 version of the Food Security Doctrine contains text relevant to food safety. Point 2 (subpoint a) defines food security as the guarantee of physical and economic availability of safe food to every citizen (Government of the Russian Federation, 2020). Point 16 refers to the “strategic goal” of providing safe and accessible food to the population. Point 17 (subpoint 3) identifies physical and economic accessibility for an assortment of safe foodstuffs as a component of national food security. But specification of what food safety is, is lacking. Russia’s various state standards (GOST) for products are more specific but are quality and use standards rather than policy goals. Thus, from the beginning Russia was confronted with a rather amorphous policy goal of safe food without a concrete definition of what that meant.

Policy design

The policy design created national requirements that register, certify, bar-code, trace, and conduct laboratory tests for a wide variety of raw and processed food products. The *Mercury* system monitors raw materials and the production process, and *Chestny znak* [Honest Sign] controls the quality of the final product during its movement from the manufacturer to the retail store. The *Mercury* system began to operate in January 2018 as an electronic veterinary system to streamline the collection of information about raw and processed agricultural products. From July 1, 2018, the *Mercury* system introduced mandatory electronic certification for the entire lifecycle of a meat product, for example, from when an animal leaves the farm to slaughterhouse, or when meat leaves a processing plant. The intent was to ensure that no meat products without electronic certification would end up in retail stores. The introduction of the *Mercury* system was not without problems. At the beginning, small farms reported difficulty connecting to the *Mercury* system and remote farms in rural areas had no physical means of connecting due to the absence of the internet (Vorotnikov, 2018).

Complementing the *Mercury* system, a federal state information system was introduced called *VetIS* [Veterinary Information System] to which cattle and pigs are to be registered in a program called *Khorriot*. The *VetIS* system requires registration of animals and links veterinary services, manufacturers, and retailers, providing real-time data on animal diseases, treatments, and product movements. The *Khorriot* system encompasses the registration of livestock and poultry on farms and traces them once they leave the farm.

Mandatory registration began on September 1, 2024, for cattle, pigs, horses, and poultry raised by farm organizations. In addition, cattle were to have ear tags that would allow them to be tracked

throughout their journey from farm to slaughterhouse. Starting September 1, 2024, private farmers were required to register their livestock. By March 2025, almost 16 million cattle, 561 million poultry, and nearly 25 million pigs had been registered in *Khorriot* (Vetandlife.ru, 2025b). The registration of breeding animals began in 2025 for cows and horses, continuing into 2026 for pigs and poultry. Imported breeding animals must be registered as well. The registration process for breeding animals became mandatory on March 1, 2026, and is to be completed by January 1, 2027. In 2025, the head of *Rosselkhoz nadzor* [Russian Agricultural Supervision], Sergei Dankvert, proposed that animal registration in *Khorriot* should be required to receive state financial support (Vetandlife.ru, 2025b). This requirement became a reality in 2026.

These registration systems created a vast regulatory regime to oversee food from farm to store shelf. The three main organizations are *Rosselkhoz nadzor*, *Rospotrebnadzor* [Russian Consumer Supervision], and *Roskachesto* [Russian Quality System], whose functions overlap although *Roskachesto* has more an informational function rather than enforcement agency. *Rosselkhoz nadzor* is the primary organization to enforce policy and it has broad powers over domestic raw food, processed food, retail food, food imports, food exports, and even conducts inspections of foreign food processing facilities. However, it could be argued that policy design is insufficient, despite the fact that registration is required nationwide throughout all regions in Russia.

Although Russia's food safety policy is national and the regulatory system is vast, there are loopholes in policy design. The *Mercury*, *Khorriot*, *Chestny znak*, and *VetIS* systems target agricultural organizations and retail networks. Mostly outside the systems are private farmers and individuals who engage in personal subsidiary farming. Individual entrepreneurs and household producers are supposed to register their livestock but are not included in the certification, barcoding, tracing, and testing processes. The danger from this exclusion was evidenced by the outbreak of pasteurellosis — a bacterial infection that spreads from animal to animal — in the Novosibirsk Region in March 2026 on household farms that did not have veterinary certification and the animals were not registered in the *Khorriot* system (Chiragova, 2026). The outbreak occurred in five districts in the region and led to the culling of livestock in nearly 200 households at a cost exceeding 5.7 million rubles (TASS, 2026c). Moreover, plant products, eggs, milk, honey, and berries from personal subsidiary farms are not in the coding, tracing, or testing system. While most production from personal subsidiary farms is self-consumed, there is a percentage that is sold at urban markets without any assurance of it being safe. Only a small percentage of food from this sector is re-tailed, but that food which is sold is not traced or tested for adulteration, counterfeiting, or safety.

Further, private farmers, who are responsible for registering their livestock in the food safety system, have high rates of non-compliance. Private farmers are supposed to register their livestock in the *Khor-riot* system, but many do not. In addition, non-animal products from private farmers are not registered, bar-coded, or traced. Plant products from private farmers only enter the tracing system if the farmer participates in the aggregator program whereby farmers sell their produce to a farm organization and it becomes responsible for meeting safety standards.

While it is understandable why the state's food safety policy design may have difficulty regulating private farmers and individuals who engage in personal subsidiary farming, this exclusion is important. Therefore, while the policy design includes farm organizations, processors, and retailers, it excludes at least 29% of animal husbandry products and 22% of plant products in Russia (Rosstat, 2025: 382). This design flaw is partially compensated by the fact that consumers buy a large percentage of their food at retail stores which are in the *Chestny znak* system while the percentage of food bought at urban markets, which are not in *Chestny znak*, has declined. Another design flaw is that the *Chestny znak* system is not used for food deliveries to schools, hospitals, and kindergartens. Counterfeit food has appeared more frequently in these locations where the consumers are children and sick people, in other words, the most vulnerable segments of the population.

Finally, the policy design has created a regulatory state, but Russia's food system is so vast that the different parts are not well integrated among federal, regional, and local levels. This situation creates problems in implementation and efficacy. The first aspect of vastness pertains to the number of food producers. Russia's food system consists of thousands of producers of different sizes who have varying degrees of commercialization. As noted above, individual and household food producers are included in the regulatory system to different degrees. The second aspect is simple geography. Russia is an enormous country, which means that there are literally hundreds of different food markets, each with different resources and constraints. A similar size problem exists in China, where 'resolving interests under a common framework of governance becomes exponentially difficult at each increasing level of scale given the food system's heterogeneity' (Yasuda, 2018: 5). The point is that it is enormously difficult to bring the heterogeneity of local food markets, spread out over vast spaces, into a uniform food system that can be effectively regulated. The third aspect is the number of products that must be regulated by food safety rules. Tens of thousands of different products are produced each year. Production, production volumes, and production practices vary significantly from region to region, thereby making it difficult to design a uniform regulatory system.

The policy process approach allows us to understand possible re-sourcing shortcomings, whereas an outcome-based analysis would not be as revealing. Financial resources are allocated to food safety, although it could be argued based on available evidence that financial resources are insufficient to the tasks assigned. The budgets for *Rospotrebnadzor* and *Roskachesto* are not published, but in 2024 the budget for *Rosselkhoz nadzor* was less than 4% of the total budget for the Ministry of Agriculture at R18.8 billion (Ministry of Agriculture, 2025: 5–7). Moreover, while the range of products that are certified, bar-coded, traced, and tested is ever-increasing, monetary resources for *Rosselkhoz nadzor* have actually *decreased* relative to other expenditures made by the Ministry of Agriculture (Table 1).

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Table 1. State financing for Rosselkhoz nadzor

Year	Allocation from revised consolidated budget (billion rubles)	Rosselkhoz nadzor budget as % of MinAg budget
2018	13.7	6
2019	16.9	6.4
2020	15.9	6.3
2021	16.5	5.4
2022	15.4	3.8
2023	18.2	4.4
2024	18.8	3.7

Sources: Ministry of Agriculture of the Russian Federation, various years

The table shows that even though budgetary allocations have increased from R13.7 billion in 2018 to R18.8 billion in 2024, the allocation to *Rosselkhoz nadzor* has decreased as a percentage of the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture. Financing for *Rosselkhoz nadzor* during 2024 was the lowest since 2018 as a percentage of the ministry's expenditures. This revelation is not to say that food safety has become less of a priority, but it does mean that other projects have received relatively more financing.

Legal and administrative resources are also utilized to enforce food safety policy. Administrative and legal penalties are given to bad actors, including revoking licenses to operate. Bad actors who cheat are fined and have their production confiscated. In June 2021, a law established fines for officials at R5,000–R10,000 and companies from R50,000–R100,000, plus confiscation of the product or products. Officials who are repeat offenders have their fines doubled. In addition, production facilities are shut down, certification of product safety is withdrawn, and licenses to operate are canceled. In extreme cases, vi-

olators are referred to local prosecutors. Food safety violations in the form of product falsification constitute criminal activity. The head of the state agency *Rosselkhoznadzor*, Sergei Dankvert, has for several years called for criminal penalties instead of mere administrative fines when food products are falsified (Vetandlife.ru, 2025a).

Policy implementation

The regulatory state adopts rules and regulations and enforces them. Arguably, the most important aspect of the policy process is implementation, without which goal attainment is impossible. Food safety policy is implemented through the *Mercury*, *Khorriot* and *VetIS* systems which include registration, certification, bar-coding, tracing, and testing a wide variety of raw and processed food products, as well as live animals.

For retail food stores, the *Chestny znak* system was approved in 2020 and began to operate in 2021. It uses a bar-coding system (QR codes) that traces food in retail stores to ensure that products are registered and have not expired. Bar-coding allows a product to be traced from origin to retail sale, thus introducing accountability if food safety is violated. Products that are not registered in the system are blocked from sale at the cashier. Bar-coding of dairy products began in January 2021, followed by mandatory bar-coding for cheese products and ice cream starting on June 1, 2021. During 2022–2023, mineral water, tobacco, beer, non-alcoholic drinks, and caviar were required to be bar-coded. Non-alcoholic beer was included in the *Chestny znak* system in September 2024. All types of packaged drinks were to be bar-coded starting October 1, 2024.

The list of raw and processed food commodities that are to be registered and bar-coded is constantly expanding. In early 2026 it was announced that bar-coding of cookies, gingerbread, marmalade, marshmallows, oriental sweets, wafers, chocolates, nuts, and other sweets had begun in Russia. Further, starting September 1, 2026, bar codes will be required for breakfast cereals, honey, pasta, and instant potatoes. Bar-coding has been expanded to include dietary supplements containing fats and oils. In veterinary medicines, labeling is expanding to include certain types of antiparasitic medications and gastrointestinal medications for animals. Mandatory registration in the system has also begun for manufacturers and importers of certain types of grocery products: cereals, pasta, flour and dough mixes, porridge, muesli, instant potatoes, and honey in consumer packaging (TASS, 2026b). Starting December 1, 2026, bar-coding will become mandatory for flour, including mixtures for baking, cereals, and dry mixes for soups and porridges. Manufacturers of these products must be registered in the *Chestny znak* system (The Dairy News, 2026d).

Recently, *Rosselkhoznadzor* has increased oversight over veterinary drugs and vaccines (Makeev, 2026). This development is impor-

tant because domestically produced veterinary drugs continue to gain market share within Russia. In early 2026, it was reported that domestic veterinary drugs accounted for 78% of the supply within Russia (The Dairy News, 2026b). Registration is also expanding for animals. Starting March 1, 2026, all breeding farms in Russia — breeding bulls and aquaculture — were to be registered. The system includes a catalog of animals for sale and a registry of breeding achievements. Also on March 1, 2026, manufacturers and wholesalers of veterinary drugs were required to have *Chestny znak* labeling codes. Agricultural organizations, retail veterinary pharmacies, and veterinary clinics were required to accept these codes and withdraw the codes from circulation upon sale or use on the farm (Likarchuk, 2026).

The implementation of bar-coding and tracing improves food safety in three ways. First, testing supports GOST standards, and the range of products with GOST standards is also expanding. Second, bar-coding gives consumers information to make informed decisions. Consumers with the *Chestny znak* application on their phones can find information about the product and its lineage. An estimated 35 million consumers use the *Chestny znak* system, which entails downloading an app on their phone and checking that a product is registered in the system (TASS, 2026a). Third, bar-coding allows a product to be traced so that if a food safety problem does arise, the source can be identified and addressed in a timely manner, thereby preventing uncontrolled spread. Bar coding also has a financial element. The government is able to track food sales and make sure that taxes are paid on sales revenue. In 2024, Deputy Prime Minister and head of the Ministry of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov, claimed that since bar-coding began in 2021, it brought tax revenues totaling more than R471 billion to the federal budget (RIA News, 2024).

Despite its benefits, the implementation of food safety policy is significantly affected by corruption. The integrity of *Rosselkhoz nadzor* inspectors and veterinarians who certify animals is central to the efficacy of food safety policy. However, corruption among *Rosselkhoz nadzor* inspectors is widespread, who use their positions to extract payments for verification and certification of food safety. Veterinarians also occupy an important role in food safety. Their responsibilities are to inspect animals and the conditions surrounding the raising and transport of livestock and certify their safety. Veterinarians are also well positioned to extract payments for animal inspections that did not occur and for certification that should not have been made.

Discussion

The implementation of policy through the *Mercury*, *Khorriot*, *Chestny znak*, and *VetIS* systems led to a decline in counterfeiting and falsification of food products. While there is general agreement about

improvement in Russia's food safety, there is no consensus by how much. After August 2014, a flood of illegitimate dairy products appeared in the Russia food market (Food Processing Technology, 2015). A 2018 inspection of milk and dairy products in retail stores by *Rosselkhoz nadzor* and *Rospotrebnadzor* found that cheaper contents were substituted in a significant number of cases. For cheese products, palm oil and vegetable fats were substituted for milk fat. In a 2018 inspection, 20% of milk, 36% of butter, and 62% of cottage cheese was counterfeit (Keep food safe, 2018). *Rosselkhoz nadzor* in 2019 found that 24% of dairy products had ingredients different from what was printed on their labels. According to the research conducted in 2019 by *Soiuzmoloko* [National Union of Milk Producers], 39% of dairy products were falsely labeled (Foreign Agricultural Service, 2020). The most frequent violations were found in cheese, butter and sour cream. In 2019, *Rosselkhoz nadzor* tested thousands of samples of milk and cheese products and found 6.6% had safety violations, a number which steadily declined to 2.6% in 2022. During 2023, the *Chestny znak* system claimed that the percentage of counterfeit dairy products had declined from 30% to 10% (The Dairy News, 2023). In that same year, the Ministry of Trade and Industry claimed that dairy violations were down by more than 76% (The Dairy News, 2024a). In June 2024, the *Chestny znak* system claimed that falsified dairy products fell from 30% to less than 1% (The Dairy News, 2024b). Nonetheless, regional variation suggests that the problem has not disappeared. In Sverdlovsk during 2025, *Rosselkhoz nadzor* inspected 205 cafes and restaurants and found that 122 (59%) were not registered in the *VetIS* system, which meant that ingredients for their dishes did not undergo sanitary inspections and therefore the safety and quality was unknown (The Dairy News, 2026a).

Can we conclude that the goal of safe food in Russia has been achieved? The answer is that there is a bifurcated outcome. Significant progress toward safer food has been made and falsification of food has declined, but it is not possible to say that 100% of food is free from falsification and counterfeiting. In fact, it would be unreasonable to expect complete attainment of the food safety goal because, as discussed above, multiple steps of the policy process have deficiencies. At best, fulfillment of all four steps is a necessary but not sufficient condition for goal attainment.

Regarding how safe Russia's food is, there are arguments on both sides. On the positive side, in 2025 there were more than 1 million companies registered in the *Chestny znak* system, including a 33% increase in participation during 2025, which shows that system is becoming more widely accepted. Manufacturers, importers, distributors, and retailers are participating in the system. More than 2.6 billion documents are processed in the system each year, and in 2025 more than 135 million products were checked, all of which shows that the regulatory state is active (TASS, 2026a).

On the negative side, bad actors continue to cheat, producing and selling food that may be counterfeit or even dangerous to human health. In 2025, laboratory tests by *Rosselkhoz nadzor* found that almost 18% of dairy products on shelves was counterfeit, an increase over the 12–14% during 2022–2024 (RIA News, 2026). Second, not only is counterfeit food still on shelves, the problem of food safety also remains enormous. During 2025, *Rospotrebnadzor* blocked more than 330 million units of dairy products from sale. The good news is that the expired products were detected, but the bad news is that *Rospotrebnadzor* conducted more than 25,000 inspections and found violations in 95% of those inspections (The Dairy News, 2026c). Another food safety agency, *Roskachestvo*, tested dairy products over a ten-year period (2016–2025) and found falsification had increased from its 2019 low of 4% (Litvinova, 2026). The continuation of the bad actor problem also reflects the fundamental difficulty in resolving the food safety conundrum: greed and the quest for higher profit cannot be extinguished.

Conclusion

In Russia's food safety policy, deficiencies and shortcomings were identified in the articulation of policy goals, in policy design, in the allocation of resources, and in policy implementation. The answers, therefore, to the questions posed about a food safety crisis in Russia are as follows.

1) Does Russia have a regulatory crisis regarding food safety? The answer is yes and no. Russia's regulatory state adopts rules, implements those rules, and enforces those rules for food safety. Evidence was presented to show that Russia has performed well in the adoption of rules and regulations. However, the regulatory state struggles to deal with the vastness of the food system. Russia's vastness encompasses the number of producers and their sizes, the number of products, and geographical variance whereby state regulations are difficult to enforce in the thousands of regional food markets. Regulatory enforcement (in the form of inspections and testing) covers only a small fraction of food products. Policy is implemented, but corruption by food inspectors and veterinarians undermines intended policy goals.

2) Does Russia have an institutional crisis in food safety? The answer is yes and no. Food safety institutions have the authority to fulfill their roles. At the same time, there are shortcomings in resource allocation. The evidence clearly suggests that food safety goals are under-resourced in manpower and finances. With regard to financial resources, the budget of *Rosselkhoz nadzor* has declined relative to other projects funded by the Ministry of Agriculture. Ironically, the expansion of state regulation of food safety through the inclu-

sion of more commodities in *Chestny znak* makes budgetary shortfalls more glaring.

3) Does Russia have a public health crisis in food safety? The answer is no. On the whole, food safety policy and its institutions are protecting public health, evidenced by a decrease in the incidence of unsafe food since 2018. Systemic, national level data are not published on the extent of foodborne illnesses, but available evidence does not suggest a problem on the scale of China or even the United States.

4) Does Russia have a public policy crisis in food safety? The answer is yes and no. On the yes side, deficiencies in the regulatory state and the persistence of the bad actor problem suggest that the unsafe food problem will never go away. Greed and the quest for profit can never be fully extinguished will never disappear. In some regions and for some products, the unsafe food problem remains significant. The persistence of unsafe food suggests a crisis because public policy and the regulatory state cannot solve this problem. The crisis is that the problem endures and the policy goal cannot be attained. Moreover, as the regulatory state expands the number and scope of products that are to be registered, certified, and traced more opportunities to falsify and adulterate food exist. In this regard, vastness is necessary but also carries inherent problems. The no side cites evidence that shows nearly two-thirds of consumers in Russia prefer domestically produced food and trust in domestic foodstuffs is increasing (New-retail.ru, 2025).

Whereas an outcomes approach does not offer much guidance as to necessary corrective actions, the policy process framework is more useful. The good news for Russia's policymakers is that shortcomings in the policy process can be corrected. The policy goal of safe food can be made more specific and concrete, with clear markers to measure progress. The policy design can be revised to encompass more food producers. The level of financial and other resources can be increased. Implementation could be aided by criminalizing the falsification and adulteration of food, a step that might change the cost-benefit calculation by bad actors. Similarly, *Rossel'khoznador* inspectors and veterinarians who accept bribes could face mandatory prison sentences. Would these measures guarantee success? Maybe not. Greed is hard to extinguish. But if these or similar measures were adopted, it is likely that food safety would be further enhanced and policy goals would be closer to fulfillment.

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Можно ли о говорить о кризисе продовольственной безопасности в России?

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Аннотация. Небезопасные продукты питания — глобальная проблема, которая в той или иной степени затрагивает каждую страну. В статье предложен подход к пониманию проблемы продовольственной безопасности в России, основанный на концепции государственного регулирования. На первый взгляд в России

не наблюдается кризис продовольственной безопасности, аналогичный ситуации в развивающихся странах или Китае: большая часть продуктов питания в России безопасна для потребителей. Однако сохраняются такие явления, как продовольственный фальсификат и подделки, нелегальное производство и значительные масштабы деятельности недобросовестных производителей и поставщиков — в совокупности они формируют кризис, поскольку сохраняются, несмотря на усилия правительства по их искоренению. В частности, масштабы и устойчивость деятельности недобросовестных лиц не могут не вызывать беспокойство, учитывая значительные правовые, административные и кадровые ресурсы, брошенные государством на обеспечение продовольственной безопасности. Иными словами, можно говорить о наметившемся в России кризисе продовольственной безопасности, потому что главный ее гарант — государство — пока не решило поставленные в этой сфере задачи. Цель статьи — проанализировать проблему кризиса продовольственной безопасности в России на основе применения концепции государственного регулирования как включающего четыре последовательных этапа: постановка целей, разработка мер по их достижению, распределение ресурсов и реализация мер. Предложенный процессуальный подход позволяет показать успехи и ограничения российской модели обеспечения продовольственной безопасности: к положительным моментам можно отнести корректировку решений, что позволило снизить долю подделок и фальсификата на рынке продовольствия, однако сохраняется проблема его недобросовестных участников. В статье обозначены и описаны ограничения, возникающие на каждом этапе государственного обеспечения продовольственной безопасности в России.

Ключевые слова: продовольственная безопасность, продовольственный кризис, регулирующее государство, сельскохозяйственное производство, безопасность продуктов питания, государственное регулирование