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Subjective Well-Being of Russians in 1960–2025: Problem Statement

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Abstract: Until the 1990s, Russians' well-being was measured almost exclusively in material terms – GDP, income, food, living space, etc. An equally important aspect – subjective well-being, the degree to which a person enjoys their life – was absent from these assessments. This is measured using two indicators: happiness and life satisfaction. The proportion of respondents experiencing happiness is taken as the level of happiness in society at the time of the survey, while the proportion satisfied with life is taken as the level of life satisfaction. The first measurements of Russians' subjective well-being date back to 1960–1961, 1980, and 1986; they have been systematically conducted from 1989 to the present by various sociological centers. However, none of them has constructed a unified time series of indicators, even for the period 1989–2025. The surveys conducted for the same years give such different results that statistical criteria do not allow us to combine them into a single series and draw well-founded conclusions about the level and dynamics of happiness and life satisfaction. The author comes to conclusions, that in the post-war period, the level of subjective well-being grew and reached a maximum in the 1960–1970s; then it declined until the early 1990s; from the second half of the 1990s, it grew and reached its peak in 2017–2019; in 2020–2025, it was on a plateau. Before 1985, the share of happy and satisfied with life exceeded 50 %, in the 1990s it fell below 50 %, in 2000–2025 it exceeded half, in 2005–2010 it reached the level of 1980–1984, and in the following years it constantly exceeded it. To fruitfully continue studying the issue of happiness in 20th-century Russia, it is necessary, firstly, to expand the information base by incorporating other sources; secondly, to carefully identify the reasons for the discrepancies in the results of various projects; and thirdly, to construct a single, homogeneous dynamic series of happiness and life satisfaction for the period 1960–2025.

Keywords: auxology, life satisfaction, well-being measurement methods, standard of living, happiness assessment

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Субъективное благополучие россиян в 1960–2025 годах: постановка проблемы

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Аннотация: Вплоть до 1990-х гг. благополучие россиян измерялось почти исключительно в материальном аспекте – ВВП, доходы, питание, жилплощадь и т.п. В оценках отсутствовало не менее важное – субъективное благополучие человека, то, насколько ему нравится жизнь, которую он ведет. Оно измеряется с помощью двух показателей – ощущения счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью. Доля людей среди респондентов, переживающих состояние счастья, принимается за уровень счастья в социуме на момент опроса, а доля удовлетворенных жизнью – за уровень удовлетворенностью жизнью. Первые измерения субъективного благополучия россиян относятся к 1960–1961, 1980, 1986 гг., систематически они проводились с 1989 г. до настоящего времени различными социологическими центрами. Но ни один из них не построил единого временного ряда показателей даже за 1989–2025 гг. Проведенные опросы дают для одних и тех же лет настолько различные результаты, что статистические критерии не позволяют объединить их в единый ряд и сделать обоснованные выводы об уровне и динамике счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью. Автор приходит к выводу, что в послевоенный период уровень субъективного благополучия рос и достиг максимума в 1960–1970 гг.; затем до начала 1990-х гг. снижался; со второй половины 1990-х гг. рос и достиг апогея в 2017–2019 гг.; в 2020–2025 гг. находился на плато. До 1985 г. доля счастливых и удовлетворенных жизнью превышала 50 %, в 1990-е гг. опустилась ниже 50 %, в 2000–2025 гг. превышала половину, в 2005–2010 гг. достигла уровня 1980–1984 гг., а в последующие годы его постоянно превышала. Для плодотворного продолжения изучения проблемы счастья в России XX в. необходимо, во-первых, расширить информационную базу за счет привлечения других источников, во-вторых, тщательно определить причины расхождения результатов различных проектов, в-третьих, построить единый однородный динамический ряд уровня счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью за 1960–2025 гг.

Ключевые слова: аукология, удовлетворенность жизнью, методика измерения благополучия, жизненный уровень населения, оценка счастливости

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Introduction

Relevance. Before the 1960s, the well-being of populations and the effectiveness of state institutions and policies that governments pursued in Russia and abroad were assessed primarily based on objective economic and social indicators: gross domestic product (GDP), personal income, social infrastructure, life expectancy, housing conditions, consumption, inflation rate, etc. Despite the multidimensionality, such analyses covered almost exclusively material aspects of living standards of Russians and other peoples. People's well-being was effectively measured by how full their refrigerators were, how

many suits they had, how many square meters of living space they owned, their body mass index, the status of ethnic minorities, etc.¹ These criteria important, but insufficient. The analyses omitted the individual, their happiness and life satisfaction, even though the concept of happiness has been a part of everyday, literary, and philosophical vocabulary since ancient times. Table 1 contains the objective indicators of Russia’s development during the Soviet period.

Table 1

Changes in the main indicators of the RSFSR well-being in 1917–1990 according to official statistics*

Indicators	1917	1928	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990
Population, million	91.0	103.2	110.1	102.1	119.0	130.1	138.1	142.5	147.7
Gross domestic product per capita (1917) = 1	1.0	–	6.4	11.6	25.2	44.8	69.8	81.1	88.1
Gross agricultural output per capita (1917) = 1	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.5	1.7	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7
Gross industrial output per capita (1917) = 1	1.0	1.8	10.3	19.4	47.2	93.0	152.2	174.3	191.1
Production of consumer goods per capita (1917) = 1	1.0	1.5	4.6	6.6	12.4	29.2	44.6	51.3	49.8
Living space per person, sq. m.	8.2	6.7**	6.6**	8.0**	8.5	10.9	13.5	15.0	16.4
Literacy, %	43.0	67.3	91.6	95.0	99.1	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.8
Average years of education per person, years	1.1	1.5	3.4	5.4	6.1	7.0	7.9	8.8	8.9
Average life expectancy, years	29.1	44.3	49.9	53.4	66.8	67.9	67.5	67.7	69.2
Real income of the USSR population per capita (1917) = 1	1.0	–	1.2	3.1	4	6.1	8.7	10	11.1
Years of birth	1916–1920	1926–1930	1936–1940	1946–1950	1956–1960	1966–1970	1976–1980	1981–1985	1986–1990
Height of men aged 18 and older, cm	168.7	167.5	170.4	173.8	175.4	176.5	176.9	176.9	177.4

Source: Mironov, B.N. “Standard of Living in Soviet Russia according to Traditional and Alternative Indicators,” *Modern History of Russia* 15, no. 4 (2025): 905.

* Cost indicators in comparable prices.

**1926, 1939, 1949.

Ten key indicators clearly show that Russians’ material conditions of life improved until the last year of Soviet power. However, they do not show whether people have become happier. During the Soviet period, this question seemed unnecessary or absurd to many, as it was traditionally believed that if living standards rise, then people become happier, and vice versa. “In 1961, at the Moscow House of Scientists during a discussion of the results of the first population survey in the USSR (conducted in September 1960), the purpose of the survey to determine how the population assessed the dynamics of the standard of living was met with

¹ B.N. Mironov, “Epochal Enhancing of the Biological Status of Russia’s Population in the 19th – 20th Centuries with Modern Auxology,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 24, no. 3 (2025): 460, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2025-24-3-427-447>; B.N. Mironov, “Everyday Anti-Semitism in the USSR,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 23, no. 2 (2024): 216–231, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2024-23-2-216-231>; B.N. Mironov, “Standard of Living in the USSR in Russian and Foreign Historiography,” *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History* 70, no. 2 (2025): 541–567, <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu02.2025.216>

bewilderment by economists. One of well-known economists said: “Why find out public opinion about whether the standard of living has increased or decreased, if the Central Statistical Office of the USSR conducts budget surveys and has accurate data on this issue?”² As modern sociological surveys show, many people believe that, due to the low standard of living and lack of freedom, Soviet citizens essentially could not possibly be happy. Some professional researchers also share this view. “For most people born and raised in the Soviet Union, the subject of happiness caused skepticism. For them, happiness is too abstract a concept that can’t be measured, and therefore it is unmanageable and uncontrollable, so it is on the periphery of life goals. During their Soviet childhood, the word “happiness” was rare. Instead, they were often told to work and study hard... At the height of the communist regime, Russians were among the most miserable people on Earth.”³

Elaboration of the problem. It was Pitirim Sorokin that drew attention to the insufficiency of material indicators of well-being back in 1918; he proposed to include the indicator of happiness in the system of assessing social achievements: “All criteria of progress, no matter how diverse they may be, in one way or another imply and should include the principle of happiness.”⁴ P. Sorokin’s words were considered almost 40 years later. In the 1960–1970s, an anthropological shift occurred in the social sciences and humanities, which led to a rethinking of social development priorities and a persistent interest in people’s subjective well-being. The phenomenon of happiness became a relevant object of study in sociology, economics, social psychology, political science, and linguistics. In science and politics, happiness began to be viewed as an individual social goal, the achievement of which constitutes the meaning of human life, and a criterion for a nation’s social health, and as an indicator of success and effectiveness of state institutions. The study of subjective well-being gained widespread support from government agencies, which began to consider it a key goal for the development of a welfare state and an important means of winning votes. As of 2018, approximately 20 countries use subjective well-being statistics in political decision-making⁵.

In the 1980–1990s, within the social sciences, a special research direction emerged that studied happiness and life satisfaction using empirical methods. Over the past 40 years, this direction has entered the mainstream in the social sciences. As of April 7, 2026, the World Database of Happiness recorded 17.879 publications, the number of which increases annually by more than 800⁶. The first place in terms of the number of works is occupied by Americans, as the direction originated in the US. Among the 399 most significant studies (by the number of citations), their proportion as of 2022–2023 was 33.5%. Russians who

² Yu.K., “V statisticheskoi sektsii Moskovskogo doma uchenykh [In the statistical section of the Moscow House of Scientists],” *Vestnik Statistiki*, no. 6 (1961): 83.

³ G.A. Krasnova, “Schast’e po-sovetski: kak eksperiment vremen SSSR vliiaet na nas segodnya [Happiness, Soviet Style: How a Soviet-era Experiment Affects Us Today],” in *ForbesLife*, accessed April, 20, 2026, <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/472027-scast-e-po-sovetski-kak-eksperiment-vremen-sssr-vliiaet-na-nas-segodna>

⁴ P.A. Sorokin, “Sotsiologicheskii progress i printsip schast’ia [Sociological progress and the principle of happiness],” in P.A. Sorokin, *Chelovek. Tsivilizatsiia. Obshchestvo* (Moscow: Politizdat Publ., 1992), 511.

⁵ E.A. Kamalov, E.D. Ponarin, “National Pride and Subjective Well-Being of Russians,” *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*, no. 1 (2020): 184–185, <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.1.08>

⁶ R. Veenhoven, “World Database of Happiness,” Erasmus University Rotterdam; Happiness Economics Research Organization, accessed December 25, 2025, <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

joined the study of the problem of happiness later accounted for 7%, which in fact secured them a place in the top three countries⁷.

In Russian science, interest in the issue of happiness has also been growing recently. As of 2022, in the Russian scientific electronic library eLibrary there were 1.677 publications containing the keyword “happiness.” Philologists, who study the theme of happiness in fiction, rank first, followed by sociologists and economists⁸. We have not yet encountered professional historians among researchers of subjective well-being, even though statistical data on subjective well-being in the USSR appeared in the 1960s.

Studying society through the prism of people’s subjective well-being, especially from a historical perspective, is of enormous scientific and practical interest, because to feel satisfied with life, it’s not the objective conditions of existence that are incomparably more important, but how comfortable and happy a person feels with them. The new perspective reveals many new things in social relations, and in the behavior of individuals and social groups. “Happiness and even a good mood have a significant impact on health and life expectancy, mental health, sociability, as well as responsiveness and altruism. A good mood affects thinking ambiguously: it fosters creativity but leads to less profound thinking”⁹, said renowned English psychologist Michael Argyle. It should be added that happy people, as a rule, are politically loyal, strengthen the legitimacy of power, behave more sensibly and practically, and think about the common good more than unhappy people do, because they have something to lose¹⁰.

The purpose of the study is to assess the dynamics of Russians’ subjective well-being in 1960–2025. It is based on the respondents’ self-analysis of their situation, the results of which are recorded through questionnaires and interviews. The methodology is based on three principles.

1) A person’s self-assessment of the level of happiness is the only adequate measure. Neither an external observer nor objective goods they possess can assess their happiness. The only way to do so is to ask them about it.

2) The level of happiness is assessed by measuring positive emotions and the extent of life satisfaction.

3) The answer to the question of whether a person is happy or satisfied with life is a summarized, global assessment of all aspects of their existence.

This approach has both strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment of subjective well-being does not consider differences in understanding of happiness and life satisfaction by other respondents; it considers only the fact of a being happy/unhappy and satisfied/dissatisfied. Thanks to this, neither the definition nor the measurement procedures for psychological well-being are tied to time, specific living conditions, or the content of people’s activities, and the indicators remain comparable. Numerous studies have revealed strong links between self-assessments of subjective well-being and indicators of somatic and mental health, success in various areas of life, and other variables characterizing a person’s well-being. The proportion of people who are happy and satisfied with their lives calculated on the basis of self-assessments (“Do you feel happy in general?” and “Do you

⁷ L.S. Skachkova, “Subjective measurement of quality of life: theoretical and applied aspects,” doc. diss., Moscow State University, 2025, 101.

⁸ G. Krasnova, *Schast’e po-sovetski* [Happiness, Soviet Style] (Moscow: BOMBORA Publ., 2024).

⁹ M. Argyl, *Psikhologiya schast’ia* [The Psychology of Happiness] (Moscow: Piter Publ., 2003), 33.

¹⁰ B.N. Mironov, “On the Illegitimacy of the Soviet Power,” *Modern History of Russia* 12, no. 1 (2022): 8–38, <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu24.2022.101>

feel satisfied with your life in general?") is recognized by most researchers as the best proxy indicators of happiness and satisfaction. It provides an overall assessment of the psychological well-being of society and allows comparing indicators in different periods, between different regions, societies and social groups¹¹.

The new mainstream also has its opponents, mainly from among economists. They doubt *the very possibility* of reliable measurement of subjective well-being using a survey and deny the expediency of using subjective assessments. In response to critics, it has been pointed out that in sociological, psychological, and political science research that surveys and self-assessment have long been successfully used to analyze even the most complex and intricate issues. Furthermore, the practice of assessing subjective well-being provides remarkable examples for solving economic problems.

The key concepts of the study are subjective well-being, feeling of happiness, and life satisfaction. Subjective well-being is most often understood to the extent to which a person enjoys their life. However, scientific literature lacks a single view on which features of subjective well-being people consider and how they evaluate them. Academic studies with ambitious goals use a broader understanding of subjective well-being, including a wide variety of indicators: social optimism, concepts of the past and future, the value system, the assessment of the state of affairs and ongoing changes in the country, perceptions of existing social problems, self-assessment of social status, consumer activity, and others. In applied research, the assessment of well-being considers the emotional component – joy and other positive emotions from living life and the cognitive component – the assessment of achieved results, success, and implementation of goals. The emotional component refers to an individual's self-assessment of what they feel and experience at a given moment in time, whereas the cognitive component refers to a person's self-assessment of how their needs and aspirations are met. That is, in one case, it is an assessment of the experience of happiness at a given moment in time, while in the other case it is an assessment of what has been achieved. The former assessment measures the level of happiness, and the latter – the level of life satisfaction¹².

The proportion of respondents experiencing a state of happiness is taken as the level of happiness in society at the time of the survey, while the proportion of those satisfied with life is taken as the level of life satisfaction. These indicators differ in the number, and how they reflect different aspects of well-being. Despite this, within a single society, they generally correlate positively at both the individual and society levels, although in some cases, even the directions of their dynamics differ¹³. Indicators of subjective well-being depend on both an

¹¹ Analytical review of the evolution of understanding of subjective well-being in global and Russian science, see: M. Argyl, *Psikhologiya schast'ia*, 9–33; D.A. Leontiev, "Happiness and Well-Being: Toward the Construction of the Conceptual Field," *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*, no. 1 (2020): 14–37, <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.1.02>; E.N. Osin, D.A. Leontiev, "Brief Russian-Language Instruments to Measure Subjective Well-Being: Psychometric Properties and Comparative Analysis," *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*, no. 1 (2020): 117–142, <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.1.06>

¹² A.M. Almakaeva, N.V. Gashenina, "Subjective Well-Being: Conceptualization, Assessment and Russian Specifics," *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*, no. 1 (2020): 4–13, <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.1.01>; M. Argyl, *Psikhologiya schast'ia*, 34–67; L.S. Skachkova, "Subjective measurement of quality of life," 76–84; E. Diener, E.M. Suh, R.E. Lucas, H.L. Smith, "Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress," *Psychological Bulletin* 125, no. 2 (1999): 276–302.

¹³ R. Inglehart, R. Foa, C. Peterson, C. Welzel, "Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981–2007)," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 4 (2008): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00078.xp>

individual's personal characteristics (gender, age, education, social status, political and ideological orientation, and others) and the state of society (economic, political, and social) at the time of the survey. In cross-country comparisons, they also depend on the cultural codes of individual societies. In recent decades, when measuring subjective well-being, the question of life satisfaction has been used much more frequently than that of happiness.

The information and empirical base of the research is primarily the data from four Russian and one British web archives containing the results of studies on Russians' subjective well-being:

- the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) (<https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/indeks-schastja-monitoring>);
- the Levada Center (LC), a non-governmental research organization in Russia which in 2016 was recognized a foreign agent (<https://www.levada.ru/>);
- the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), an independent Russian sociological service (<https://fom.ru/>);
- the Russian Monitoring Survey of the Economic Situation and Health of the Population of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (RMEP) (<http://www.hse.ru/rhms> and <https://rhms-hse.cpc.unc.edu>);
- the British non-profit electronic portal “Our World in Data” (OWID)¹⁴.

Some data for international comparisons were borrowed from international web archives: the World Database of Happiness¹⁵, the World Values Survey¹⁶, the European Values Study¹⁷, the European Social Survey¹⁸, the Eurobarometer¹⁹, the Gallup World Poll²⁰, and the European Quality of Life Surveys²¹.

Methodology and methods of research. In scientific research, from the very beginning, the subject of happiness and life satisfaction has been interdisciplinary, attracting the considerable interest of philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, historians, psychologists, geneticists, and scholars of other related disciplines. Moreover, it has been a cross-country subject, as it has become part of the many cross-country comparative studies initiated by international organizations²². Therefore, the conceptual basis of our study is theoretical and methodological approaches to happiness from sociological, philosophical, psychological, and economic perspectives.

¹⁴ E. Ortiz-Ospina, T. Acisu, M. Roser, “Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>. The materials are available on the website Our World in Data (OWID), a non-profit electronic portal that publishes openly accessible data on global problems of humanity.

¹⁵ World Database of Happiness, <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

¹⁶ World Values Survey Official Website, accessed February 21, 2026, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

¹⁷ European Values Study Official Website, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

¹⁸ European Social Survey Official Website, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

¹⁹ “Eurobarometer: The EP and the Expectations of European Citizens. European Parliament,” EuroParl, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/beheard/eurobarometer>. Monitoring data from other parts of the world can be found on the official website of the Global Barometer: Global Barometer Surveys, accessed February 24, 2025, <https://www.globalbarometer.net/>

²⁰ Gallup World Poll. Gallup Official Website, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.gallup.com/services/170945/worldpoll.aspx>

²¹ “European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS). European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. 2017. December 7,” EuroFound, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/europeanqualityoflifesurveys>

²² A.M. Almakaeva, N.V. Gashenina, “Subjective Well-Being,” p. 7.

Various methods were used in the article. When collecting information, traditional analysis of documents and survey were used; when processing empirical data – statistical groupings, correlation and factor analysis using the application software packages SPSS Statistics 23.0 and Statistica 13 were utilized; and in the general analysis systemic, structural-functional, comparative, inductive, hypothetico-deductive, typologization, and other general scientific methods were used.

Russian concept of happiness

Concepts of happiness have national characteristics, as they are influenced by cultural context, national mentality, traditions, and the historical past²³. Therefore, before analyzing the data on the dynamics of happiness in Russia, it is appropriate to answer the question: what is understood by happiness in academic and everyday language, and what Russian respondents understood by happiness when answering the survey questions.

The meaning of the word “happiness” has changed little over time. In the “Dictionary of the Russian Language of the 11th–17th Centuries,” “happiness” is defined as: 1) good fortune, 2) fate, destiny, 3) well-being, 4) assistance; the word “happy” is defined as: 1) prosperous, 2) fortunate, accompanied by success, 3) contributing to good fortune, success²⁴.

In the “Dictionary of the Russian Academy of 1789–1794,” “happiness” means: 1) “luck, lucky chance, fortunate occurrence; 2) well-being, prosperity”; “happy” means: 1) successful; 2) enjoying happiness; one favored by happiness²⁵.

The Academic Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language which was being compiled by the Academy of Sciences in 1891–1930 was never completed. V. Dal’s “Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language” compiled in 1861–1863 had four editions. The last edition, revised and significantly expanded, was published in 1912–1914. However, the meaning of the word “happiness” remained unchanged: 1) “fate, destiny; 2) chance, a desired surprise, talent, luck, success; 3) prosperity, well-being, bliss.”²⁶

In the explanatory dictionaries of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the word “happiness” had similar meanings: 1) a state of highest satisfaction with life, a feeling of deep contentment and joy experienced by someone; 2) success, good fortune; 3) fate,

²³ A.V. Andreenkova, “Cross-National Differences in Level of Happiness in the Post-Soviet Countries: A Comparative Analysis,” *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*, no. 1 (2020): 316–339, <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.1.13>; M. Argyl, *Psikhologiya schast’ia*, 208–232; I.A. Dzhidaryan, *Predstavlenie o schast’e v rossiiskom mentalitete* [The concept of happiness in the Russian mentality] (St. Petersburg: Aletyia Publ., 2001); Other opinions were also expressed: R. Venhoven found that Russians understand happiness in the same way as respondents from other countries, and are not inclined to underestimate indicators of their subjective well-being due to cultural characteristics: R. Veenhoven, “Are the Russians as unhappy as they say they are?” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 111–136, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1011587828593>

²⁴ *Slovar’ russkogo iazyka XI–XVII vekov* [Dictionary of the Russian language of the 11th – 17th centuries.], issue 29 (Suleg – Tolmizhe) (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 2011), 109–111.

²⁵ *Slovar’ Akademii Rossiiskoi 1789–1794: v 6 tomakh* [Dictionary of the Russian Academy of Sciences 1789–1794: in 6 volumes] (Moscow: Moskovskii gumanitarnyi institut imeni E.R. Dashkovoi Publ., 2006), 940–943.

²⁶ V.I. Dahl, *Tolkovyiy slovar’ zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka v 4 tomakh* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language in 4 volumes] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’sтво inostrannykh i natsional’nykh slovarei Publ., 1955), 371.

destiny; the word “happy” had the following meanings: 1) one who experiences happiness, joy; 2) one who brings happiness, joy, well-being; full of happiness, joy; 3) one who is favored by happiness, luck, success; 4) one who brings or has brought happiness, luck²⁷.

Thus, over the past five hundred years the meaning of the word “happiness” and its derivatives in the Russian lexicon of different generations has changed little – it has centered around bliss, good fortune, and a joyful state of mind. This suggests that for nearly a thousand years, Russians have understood happiness in the same way, and when they answered and still answer the question “Are you happy?”. They mean, in the words of Vladimir Dal, “well-being, prosperity, earthly bliss, the desired everyday life, free from grief, unrest, and anxiety; peace and contentment; in general, everything desired, everything that comforts and satisfies a person, according to their convictions, tastes, and habits.”²⁸ Despite this, the feeling of happiness in different eras and among different people has been generated by a wide variety of circumstances, events, and actions, and in everyday language it has been objectified and expressed in different ways. If we could ask our ancestors “What do you think happiness is?”, we would receive contradictory answers, but they all would have a common denominator: they spoke about what caused a feeling of joy and fullness of life, a feeling of high satisfaction.

In the context of our article, we are primarily interested in how happiness and being happy are understood in public consciousness and in everyday life. Sociological surveys provide the following information (Table 2).

Table 2

What does “happiness” mean to you? (open-ended question, up to three possible answers), %*

Empirical indicators of happiness	March 2010	March 2011	March 2023
Family well-being	26	28	24
My health and that of my loved ones	19	17	21
Well-being in private life	11	14	6
Material well-being	9	12	13
Well-being of children and grandchildren	8	10	19
A stable peaceful life, free of stress and problems, having prospects	8	10	10
Spiritual harmony, inner peace	8	5	–
A good job, doing something I love	6	5	22
Freedom of choice, the opportunity to do what I want and the way I want	4	5	4
The best, positive things	4	4	–

²⁷ *Slovar' russkogo iazyka* [Dictionary of the Russian language] (Moscow: Russkii iazyk Publ., 1988), 319–320; S.I. Ozhegov, *Slovar' russkogo iazyka* [Dictionary of the Russian language] (Moscow: Russkii iazyk Publ., 1989); *Sovremennyyi tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka* [Modern explanatory dictionary of the Russian language] (St. Petersburg: Norint Publ., 2007), 814–815; T.F. Efremova, *Novyi slovar' russkogo iazyka. Tolko-slovoobrazovatel'nyi* [New Dictionary of the Russian Language. Explanatory and Word-Formation]. Moscow: Russkii iazyk Publ., 2001, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://rus-yaz.niv.ru/doc/dictionary-efremova/fc/slovar-209-43.htm#zag-114706>

²⁸ V.I. Dahl, *Tolkovyi slovar'*, 371.

Table 2, ending

Empirical indicators of happiness	March 2010	March 2011	March 2023
World peace, the absence of war	3	4	–
Happiness of loved ones	2	4	–
Having my own housing	1	2	8
Not being alone, having true friends	1	1	8
Overall life satisfaction	–	–	20
I live in Russia, the country has risen from its knees, I have a good president	–	–	8
Miscellaneous	3	3	5
Difficult to answer	21	13	10
Total	134	137	178

Sources: VCIOM. URL: <https://bd.wciom.ru/survey/arhivarius/questions/3cbb5ed6-3a5f-4e54-9689-96b3f0f03382/total/35280920-4b54-423a-a0f8-7b33800d81ff> (2010); VCIOM. URL: <https://bd.wciom.ru/survey/arhivarius/questions/d50968a5-9eab-4505-b0d0-e33cac1e484c/total/cf977a5a-d522-4a01-a5e8-02829224f2cd> (2011); VCIOM. URL: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/indeks-schastja-monitoring> (2023) (access date: January 28, 2026).

* Representative samples of 1,600 people among the population of both sexes aged 18 years and older.

We group the happiness indicators into seven clusters based on the survey data for 10 years (2012–2022). The obtained results indicate the stability of not only the list, but also the hierarchy of indicators (Table 3).

Table 3

If you feel like a happy person, please say why? (open-ended question, no more than 5 answers, top 7 meaningful answers are presented), %

Empirical indicators of happiness	IV.201	IV.2013	IV.2014	XI.2015	XI.2016	VII.2017	XI.2018	XI.2019	XI.2020	III.2021	IV.2021	V.2021	I.2022
My health and life and those of my loved ones	12	9	11	12	13	21	21	22	24	25	27	25	26
Overall life satisfaction	10	16	11	11	13	14	8	12	10	12	16	13	24
Having children	17	16	17	18	20	14	15	12	18	21	22	25	20
Having a family, family well-being	21	26	30	20	20	32	33	29	34	26	24	24	19
A good job	7	11	13	8	14	13	15	13	20	17	18	19	17
Availability of housing	2	2	4	4	2	7	7	7	7	7	9	10	10
Good financial situation	2	3	4	4	5	6	9	8	10	9	8	9	10
Total	71	83	90	77	87	107	108	103	123	117	124	125	126

Source: VCIOM. URL: <https://bd.wciom.ru/>, database VCIOM-Navigator (access date: January 28, 2026).

S.G. Vorkachev conducted a deep linguistic analysis of Russians’ popular perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes of happiness in the 2000s. He interviewed 220 informants and used data collected from several dozen newspaper, radio and television interviews that contained answers to the following questions: 1) “What is happiness in your opinion?” and

2) “How do you imagine it?”²⁹ The analysis of the collected information revealed that in everyday consciousness, happiness is the “desired present moment,” and “its essential features are priority elements of the life ideal: factors that form the “cause or causes of happiness.” In most responses, happiness is defined through a combination of features significant in a respondent’s personal experience for the emergence of the emotion of happiness. There predominate responses of an epicurean nature – happiness as the absence of physical and moral suffering, as peace, serenity, idleness, the absence of worries and illnesses, and confidence in the future. There are three times fewer responses of a hedonic nature – happiness as an abundance of diverse pleasures that bring positive emotions, such as: “Happiness is when a person feels good in all respects”; “Happiness is love.” A little behind come responses in which the main sign of happiness is the presence and fulfillment of desires that bring joy to life and fill it with meaning: “Happiness is the fulfillment of desires.” Next, in order of decreasing frequency are the following responses: love and care for loved ones (“Happiness is when people need you”) and good relationships in the family (“Happiness is a tight-knit family”); goal setting and goal achievement (“Happiness is when you have a goal and you are getting closer to it”) and freedom as a way of personality realization and the opportunity to choose one’s own destiny; harmony and agreement with oneself and outside world, communication and mutual understanding (“Happiness is communication, it’s when you understand and are understood”); the opportunity for self-realization and to live up to one’s calling in life (“Happiness is when a person has achieved success”). It could also mean, on the fringes are having money and material goods (“Happiness is when you have everything you want”). In short, in the interpretation of happiness there predominate bliss, good fortune, and a peaceful state of mind³⁰. As one can see, the surveys of 36,000 respondents conducted in 2012–2023 and an in-depth semantic analysis of the responses of 220 informants in 2000–2003 yielded similar results, which indicates their high validity.

When a person fills out a questionnaire or gives an interview, they can consciously control and censor their answers; thus, they may hide some information or say something that does not correspond to their actual perceptions. This is especially true for answers to intimate questions, which undoubtedly include “how do you understand happiness?” It is associative dictionaries of the Russian language created through free association experiments that provide an opportunity to obtain an true answer to the question about happiness. The experiment was conducted using a written questionnaire with native Russian speakers. Each informant received a questionnaire and responded automatically to a suggested word, saying the first word that came to mind. The time limit for completing the questionnaire was 10 minutes. This procedure makes it possible to uncover the semantic connections between words that objectively exist in the psyche of a native speaker and to learn how a person understands happiness on a subconscious level, without conscious control, since a subconscious mind works automatically and operates with images and emotions, rather than logic.

All associative dictionaries are based on a mass survey of native speakers, and the respondents’ answers are given exactly the way they were recorded in the questionnaires. We use two dictionaries: the Russian regional associative dictionary and the Slavic

²⁹ S.G. Vorkachev, *Schast’e kak lingvokul’turnyi kontsept* [Happiness as a linguacultural concept] (Moscow: «Gnozis» Publ., 2004), 82–92.

³⁰ Ibid., 165–166.

associative dictionary. The former was compiled based on the results of the mass associative experiment conducted in 2008–2013 with 5.434 native Russian-speaking students (equal numbers of males and females) studying in common specialties at various universities of the European part of Russia. The latter summarized the results of the experiment conducted from 1998 to 1999 with 500 native Russian-speaking students aged 18–25 studying mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, economics, philosophy, theology, philology, psychology, law, journalism, and pedagogy.

The Russian regional associative dictionary revealed 32 associations with the word “happiness” (frequency of use is shown in *italics*) occurring more than once: joy *67*; there is *54*; love *48*; my *17*; family *16*; big *15*; life *13*; luck *11*; smile, good *10*; money *8*; health *6*; live, feeling *5*; good, light *4*; in the family, fun, dream, not in money, freedom, radiance, sun, hurray *5*; children, light, laughter, meaning of life, state, calm, and smiles *2*. There were found 20 associations for the word “unhappy”, with a frequency of mention more than once: poor *21*; sad *15*; grief *12*; sadness, tears *7*; failure, *6*; miserable *5*; pity, lonely *4*; sick, stupid, death, fate, wretched *3*; poor thing, bitter, moron, unlucky, unloved, and loss *2*³¹.

The Slavic associative dictionary recorded 50 associations with the word “happiness” (frequency of use is shown in *italics*) occurring more than once: there is *74*; love *59*; joy *49*; grief, my *23*; misfortune *20*; big *16*; live *13*; there is, it can’t help but be *11*; family, good *8*; money, there is no, huge *7*; good *6*; trouble, luck *5*; there is a lot, on earth *4*; there will be, fun, eternal, in love, it can’t help but be, love, light, bright *3*; bliss, there was, at home, in the family, far away, long-awaited, must be, home, friends, live, it is great, people, peace, find, not in money, it exists, wonderful, it came my way, domestic, laughter, I want, and it’s good *2*³².

The semantic concepts of everyday consciousness about happiness obtained through a mass associative experiment are characterized by their fragmentary nature, inconsistency, vagueness, and ambivalence. However, when formulating their understanding of happiness and answering the question of whether they are happy, a person expresses their beliefs about the ideal of life, meaning of life and their innermost life values by passing a self-control of consciousness. However, the information obtained is of extreme value for understanding social life and human behavior, especially when a person also answers the question of whether they are happy or unhappy.

Indicators of subjective well-being in the USSR

We attempted to summarize the available statistical data on the level of subjective well-being. Interestingly, the first data on the USSR date back to 1960–1961 – it was in the 1960s that European researchers began actively studying the issues of well-being and happiness. In May 1960, based on the letters department of Komsomolskaya Pravda, renowned Russian sociologist B.A. Grushin founded the Institute of Public Opinion of Komsomolskaya Pravda (IOM KP, 1960–1985) – the first sociological center in Russian history aimed at studying public opinion through mass surveys. In August–September 1960,

³¹ N.V. Ufimtseva, G.A. Cherkasova, *Russkii regional'nyi assotsiativnyi slovar': (Evropeiskaia chast' Rossii). Ot stimula k reaktsii* [Russian regional associative dictionary: (European part of Russia). From stimulus to reaction] (Moscow: Moskovskaia mezhdunarodnaia akademiia Publ., 2018), 134–135, 241.

³² E.F. Tarasov, *Slavianskii assotsiativnyi slovar': russkii, belorusskii, bolgarskii, ukrainskii* [Slavic associative dictionary: Russian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian] (Moscow: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi lingvisticheskii universitet Publ., 2004), 232–234.

the IOM conducted an all-Union survey on the topic of “Dynamics and Problems of the Population’s Standard of Living,” and in January-March 1961, on the topic of “What is Today’s Youth Like?” The former survey included 1.399 people, the latter – 17.546 Komsomolskaya Pravda readers. The program for both studies was developed by B.A. Grushin and V.V. Chikin; they also supervised fieldwork and manual data processing. The goal of both surveys was to assess the population’s attitudes toward the socio-economic reforms underway in the country and “measure them at the level of people’s subjective feelings.”³³ The questionnaire contained no specific questions about subjective well-being. However, the answers allowed B.A. Grushin to conclude as follows: “Undoubtedly, the general psychological tone of the country’s population was positive and quite high.” This was the first and primary goal of the survey – to measure the subjective feelings of the masses related to the dynamics of their material well-being; the measurements conducted showed that the overwhelming majority of people were undoubtedly satisfied with their lives and were in high spirits... According to the survey, the awareness of improving living conditions is not only dominant in comparison with all others (stability or deterioration of these conditions), but also is universal and ubiquitous... It is certain that that the aforementioned high psychological tone characteristic of the overwhelming majority of the nation and associated with people’s satisfaction with their already accomplished (“in recent years”) existence is also accompanied by high optimism regarding the future.”³⁴ B.A. Grushin was confident that life satisfaction closely correlated with the standard of living and corresponded to the proportion of the respondents who noted its improvement; they amounted to 73.2% of the 1.399 respondents. It is possible to agree with him.

The results of the second study confirmed the conclusions of the first one. The survey confirmed the highly positive emotional and psychological tone of the absolute majority of the respondents. The question “Do you like your generation, are you satisfied with its deeds?” was often interpreted by respondents as “Do you like your own life, are you satisfied with it?”. As a result, positive assessments of their peers correlated almost 100% with people’s satisfaction with their personal lives³⁵. Since 83.4% of the 17.446 respondents assessed their generation positively, the level of life satisfaction could have reached 83.4%. However, B.A. Grushin believed that “in fact, the number of people satisfied with their lives in the survey was even higher, since many moderate and strong critics of Soviet youth also felt excellent.”³⁶

It is important that the subjective well-being assessments of the two surveys are in general agreement. 73.2% of those satisfied in the first survey are from the entire adult population of the USSR, whereas 83.4% in the second survey mainly referred to the younger part of the population (under 30), who were more optimistic and assessed their generation more positively than respondents over 30. Thus, among those aged 18–22, 86.3% approved of their generation, while among those aged 23–30, the figure was 78.4%. Among the respondents under 30, 75.8% were satisfied with their situation, while among those over 30, the figure was 71.2%³⁷.

³³ B.A. Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniia. Zhizn' 1-a. Epokha Khrushcheva* [Four Lives of Russia in the Mirror of Public Opinion Polls. Life 1. The Khrushchev Era] (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia Publ., 2001), 112.

³⁴ Ibid., 125, 138–140.

³⁵ Ibid., 189–190.

³⁶ Ibid., 178.

³⁷ Ibid., 125, 178.

After the IOM was closed in 1965, the study of subjective well-being was suspended. It was only in 1971 that it was resumed in Leningrad under the leadership of B.M. Firsov (until 1984) at the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research of the USSR Academy of Sciences and in Moscow under the supervision of I.T. Levykin at the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences. B.M. Firsov, who had thoroughly studied Western experience in public opinion research in the USA, England, and France during numerous foreign internships, and conducted surveys of Leningraders according to the patterns of Western sociology, using the same standard questions and scales for measuring subjective well-being³⁸. In 1980, 1986, 1990 I.T. Levykin conducted a series of all-Union surveys devoted to the lifestyle of Soviet people, which included a question about how the life of the respondent was going in general – these data were presented by O.L. Barskaya and G.L. Voronin. From their articles, it can be concluded that in 1980–1986, a three-option scale was used: good, satisfactory, and bad. Satisfaction with life was assessed by the first option, i.e. without a neutral second option; in 1990 there was a 4-point scale without a neutral option³⁹.

Renowned American sociologist R. Inglehart, who was the Academic Director of the HSE Laboratory for Comparative Social Research in 2010–2020, repeatedly cited life satisfaction indicators for the Tambov region in 1981, 1986, and 1990 expressed as the proportion of satisfied individuals and as points on a 10-point scale. This data have been used multiple times by other laboratory staff as well⁴⁰.

The available data show a picture of declining life satisfaction in the USSR in 1960–1990 (Table 4).

Table 4

Level of life satisfaction in the USSR in 1961–1990

Years	Percentage of satisfied people		
	Leningrad	Tambov region	USSR
1960–1961	–	–	73–83
1981	61	76*	53**
1986	60	70	48
1990	40	–	17

* 1982 г.
** 1980 г.

³⁸ B.M. Firsov, “ ‘...About myself and my differences of opinion...’ ” *Teleskop: Observations of the Everyday Life of Petersburgers*, no. 1 (2005): 12–17. In 1977, while interning at the Gallup Institute in Princeton, Firsov passed an exam to George Gallup with flying colors.

³⁹ O.L. Barskaya, “Sotsial’noe samochuvstvie kak pokazatel’ obraza zhizni [Social well-being as an indicator of lifestyle],” in *Sotsiologicheskie metody izucheniia obraza zhizni* (Moscow: Institut sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniia Akademii Nauk SSSR Publ., 1985), 86–94; G.L. Voronin, V.Ya. Zakharov, P.M. Kozyreva, “ ‘Who lives well in Russia?’ 1994–2013 Monitoring survey,” *Sociological Journal*, no. 1 (2016): 36, 40, <https://doi.org/10.19181/socjour.2016.22.1.3918>

⁴⁰ R.F. Inglehart, R. Foa, E. Ponarin, Welzel C. “Understanding the Russian Malaise: The Collapse and Recovery of Subjective Well-Being in Post-Communist Russia,” Higher School of Economics. Series WP BRP 32/SOC/2013 ‘Basic research program working papers series: Sociology.’ (2013): 15, accessed April 17, 2026; R. Inglehart, *Kul’turnaia evolyutsiia. Kak izmenyaiutsya chelovecheskie motivatsii i kak eto menyaet mir* [Cultural Evolution: How Human Motivations Change and How It Changes the World] (Moscow: Sotsium Publ., 2020), 224–229. It is not reported who and how obtained these data, the sample size and standard error.

It is most likely that this data accurately reflected at downward trend in subjective well-being, and the significant differences in the indicators are explained by different questionnaires and scales. To determine the reliability of these data, it is necessary to find the survey materials in the archives and conduct a thorough source analysis, by taking into account the questionnaire, measurement scale, sample representativeness, sample size, and standard error of the mean.

In 1989, regular measurements of subjective well-being began to be conducted in Russia, including in the international context in 1998–1999. The collected data provide a picture of changes in the level of happiness and life satisfaction in 1989–2025 both for individual regions and Russia as a whole (Table 5).

Table 5

Proportion of people happy and satisfied with life in Russia in 1989–2025, according to various sources (percentage of all respondents)

Years	VCIOM	LC ⁴¹	FOM	RMEP	OWID	VCIOM-1*	VCIOM-2*	LC ⁴¹	FOM	RMEP
	Proportion of happy people, %					Proportion of those satisfied with life, %				
1989	42	42						7		16
1990	44	42			52			8		17
1991	60	58						10		23
1992	42							7		16
1993	44				47			10		17
1994		46						11		14
1995					51	21		11		14
1996					50	31		10		12
1997	49							14		12
1998	51	50			50			11		12
1999		49						11		15
2000								17		18
2001								21		24
2002								30		34
2003		73					31	22		32
2004	74				48	47		25		37
2005	75					52	42	26		38
2006			52		70	53	43	30		38
2007			56			52	28	33	56	41
2008	73	71	55			57	33	35	62	43
2009	71					54	46	32		45

⁴¹ The Levada Center is an organization recognized as a foreign agent in Russia.

Table 5, ending

Years	VCIOM	LC ⁴¹	FOM	RMEP	OWID	VCIOM-1*	VCIOM-2*	LC ⁴¹	FOM	RMEP
	Proportion of happy people, %					Proportion of those satisfied with life, %				
2010	74		56		68	53		38	61	46
2011	67				76	55	27	38		49
2012	77	78	60	84			37	41		53
2013	79		64	85		62	40	35		53
2014	77		63	85	73		46	38		52
2015	82	68		85		65	51	33		50
2016	82	76	61	85			46	31		50
2017	86	77		86	84		46	38		52
2018	83	74	45	86		67	51	42	44	51
2019	84		52	87		69	53	36	42	53
2020	81		55	86		61	52	38	45	52
2021	83			87		65	52	41		52
2022	82	81		87	79	67	54	45		53
2023	83		64	88		72	55	50	60	57
2024	80		59	88	79	69	55	51	61	58
2025	79		63	92		67	53	50	61	61
1989-2025	70	63			64	57		28		37
2004-2025	75	75	58	87	72	60	45	38	55	49
Коэф. корр.**	1.00	0.95	-0.26	0.17	0.80	1.00	0.78	0.92	-0.22	0.94

* The data collected by VCIOM from various questionnaires.
** Pairwise correlation coefficient between the data of VCIOM and other sources.

Table 5 presents the results of the surveys conducted by four leading Russian sociological centers in 1989–2025, as well as the data on Russia available on the British non-profit electronic portal OWID⁴². VCIOM⁴³, LC⁴⁴ and FOM⁴⁵ collected data using

⁴¹ The Levada Center is an organization recognized as a foreign agent in Russian
⁴² E. Ortiz-Ospina, T. Acisu, M. Roser, “Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>. The materials are available on the website Our World in Data (OWID) <https://ourworldindata.org> – a non-profit electronic portal that publishes openly accessible data on global problems facing humanity.
⁴³ VTsIOM, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/schaste-v-rossii-monitoring-16042025>. Since May 2024, the monthly dynamics of the indicator have been shown on the website: <https://wciom.ru/ratings/index-schastja>. Levada Center (The Levada Center is an organization recognized as a foreign agent in Russian), accessed February 6, 2026, <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/26/17369/>
⁴⁴ Public Opinion. Yearbook, accessed February 19, 2026 (The Levada Center is an organization recognized as a foreign agent in Russia), <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/26/17369/>.
⁴⁵ Since 2003, the FOM has been implementing the “GeoRating” mega-survey project, conducted approximately every three months. The questionnaire includes questions on happiness and life satisfaction. Surveys are conducted in 65–69 regions of the Russian Federation, home to approximately 90% of the country’s adult population. The total sample size is approximately 34,500 people. In each region, 500 respondents are surveyed from a representative sample. The margin of error for each region did not exceed 5.5%, and

personal interviews (face-to-face or by telephone), typically from a sample of 1,600 people representative of the urban and rural population aged 18 and older. The standard error of the mean share of people happy or satisfied with life in a sample of 1,600 respondents did not exceed 3.5%, with the confidence probability of 95% for indicators close to 50%⁴⁶. Russian monitoring has been conducted annually from 1994 to the present. It includes from 8.259 to 18.569 informants annually; the standard error of the share of happy and satisfied people does not exceed 1% with the confidence probability of 95%⁴⁷.

Using VCIOM data as a basis for comparison, the discrepancies between the *average* happiness indicators from the five sources range from –5 to +23 percentage points (hereinafter, pp), and in some years they reached –9% and +38 pp. The happiness level according to VCIOM is 3–4 pp *higher* than the LC⁴⁸ indicators and 2–5 pp higher than the OWID indicators, 5 pp *lower* than the RMEP indicators, and 23 pp lower than the FOM indicators. All dynamic series have gaps; the most complete VCIOM series lacks data for 7 of the 37 years.

The discrepancies between the happiness indicators of VCIOM, LC⁴⁸ and OWID insignificantly exceed the permissible statistical error; the Student t-test is slightly above the norm. The samples can be hardly considered homogeneous. The discrepancies between the indicators of the FOM and other sources significantly exceed the permissible error; the Student t-test demonstrates the heterogeneity of the sample of the FOM and other sources. The assessment of the synchronicity in the fluctuations in the proportion of happy people across years using the correlation coefficient reveals significant consistency between the data of VCIOM, LC⁴⁸ and OWID, and a lack of consistency between the data of VCIOM, FOM, and RMEP. The minimum and maximum happiness indicators according to VCIOM, LC⁴⁸ and OWID almost always fall on the same years, while according to the data of VCIOM, FOM, and RMEP, they fall on different years, and therefore the dynamics according to different sources are presented differently. As Table 1 shows, the number of happy and satisfied people in the same years according to the data of different centers diverged significantly, although all five-time series in 1989–2025 show an upward trend.

Therefore, *mechanically* combining the data of VCIOM, FOM, and RMEPiZN on happiness levels into a single dynamic series is incorrect. The data of VCIOM, LC⁴⁸ and OWID can be combined, but with great caution and possible adjustments.

A similar picture emerges from a summary of available data on life satisfaction in Russia for 1989–2025 (Table 3). Differences between average life satisfaction indicators according to various sources and questionnaires ranged from 8 to 22%, and in some years, as much as 32 pp. The satisfaction level according to VCIOM-1 was 18 pp *higher* than

for the overall results, it was 1%. Unfortunately, the terms of access to the “GeoRating” data have changed repeatedly, and they are currently completely confidential, that is they are shared only with the client. We were able to copy data for nine years on happiness and 13 years on life satisfaction. As of April 11, 2026, the FOM website contains data for 2013, 2018–2026, accessed February 6, 2026, file:///D:/!%20work/00%20Документы_2025_10_22_213гб/01%20STATFILES_09.10.2025/01%20Счастье_мат_анализ/ФОМ/Самооценка%20благополучия%20россиян%20_%20ФОМ.html

⁴⁶ The true value of the average proportion of happy people in the general population (in society as a whole) lies within the interval: the average percentage of happy people in the sample plus or minus the standard sampling error. The samples are random, stratified, multistage, with quotas based on socio-demographic parameters.

⁴⁷ National Research University Higher School of Economics. Russian Monitoring of the Economic Situation and Population Health of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE). 1994–2024 (RLMS_HH_1994_2024_rus_v5), <https://www.hse.ru/rlms/spss>

⁴⁸ The Levada Center is an organization recognized as a foreign agent.

the indicators of VCIOM-2, 22 pp higher than the indicators of LC⁴⁸, 12 pp higher than the indicators of the FOM, and 8 pp higher than the indicators of the RMEP. The temporal series from LC⁴⁸ and RMEP have no gaps. VCIOM-2 has the largest number of gaps – 17 out of 37 years. The discrepancies in life satisfaction levels between all sources are so large that all samples cannot be considered homogeneous, as confirmed by the Student t-test. The synchronicity in year-over-year changes in the data of all sources, except the FOM, is significant. Despite this, the minimum and maximum fluctuations in the indicators often occur in different years. However, all five-time series show an upward trend. Therefore, *mechanically* combining the data of the five sources on satisfaction levels into a single time series is statistically incorrect.

What explains the discrepancies in subjective well-being assessments in different sources? The answer to this question requires specialized analysis and space to present its results. Therefore, this article can only identify the main reasons for the discrepancies, while the next one may explain how and why they occur.

The reliability of the survey results depended on the sincerity of answers and the accuracy of data processing. Both aspects can be verified to a certain extent for the post-Soviet period, as special surveys of respondents and interviewers were conducted to assess the accuracy of collected data.

As for the Soviet era, there is evidence that when collecting data sometimes there was a lack of anonymity, and there was control over the selection of respondents.

When measuring happiness and satisfaction, sociological centers (both Russian and foreign) formulated questions differently and used different questionnaires and scales, which led to significant discrepancies in results⁴⁹.

The frequency of surveys, or at least the publication of their results, varied significantly between centers. Surveys were often conducted or published once a year, in many cases twice, and very rarely for most months. During turbulent years, subjective well-being levels changed rapidly and in high frequency, and a single measurement was insufficient.

When conducting surveys, the objectivity of the results was influenced by the questions which preceded the questions about happiness, as well as people's mood during the self-assessment of their subjective well-being, and even the weather.

For a long time, people's well-being was essentially measured by material criteria. In Russia this situation was until the 1990s. The analysis lacked people's subjective well-being. However, for a person to feel satisfied with life, it's not the material conditions of their existence that matter more, but how comfortable and happy they feel in them.

In applied research, subjective well-being refers to how much people enjoy their life. Well-being is measured using two indicators: happiness and life satisfaction. The former (affective) reflects a person's emotional state now, whereas the latter (cognitive) reflects a long-term and rational view of subjective well-being. The emotional indicator measures the balance of a person's positive and negative emotions, while the cognitive indicator measures a person's self-assessment of quality of life. The proportion of respondents experiencing happiness is taken as the level of happiness in society at the time of the survey, and the proportion of those satisfied with life is taken as the level of life satisfaction. These indicators reflect different aspects of well-being and therefore vary in size.

⁴⁹ A.A. Shirokanova, "Trends of subjective well-being in Russia: 1998–2018," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Sociology* 13, no. 1 (2020): 4–24, <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu12.2020.101>

Systematic assessments of the subjective well-being of the Russian population began in 1989. Large-scale data is also available for 1960–1961, 1980, and 1986. Unfortunately, not a single sociological center provides a single continuous time series of indicators for Russia, even for 1989–2025. All available data taken together *theoretically* make it possible to reveal the dynamics of the level of happiness and life satisfaction. However, the surveys conducted give significantly different results both in terms of the level of well-being and the direction of its dynamics. The discrepancies between the indicators are so significant (from -5% to +32%) that mathematical and statistical criteria do not allow integrating data of different sources into a single dynamic series. For now, it can be assumed with considerable probability that in the post-war period the level of subjective well-being grew and reached a maximum in the 1960–1970s; then, until the early 1990s it declined; in the second half of the 1990s it increased again until 2017–2019 and reached a plateau in 2020–2025. Before 1985, the share of people happy and satisfied with life exceeded 50% but fell below 50% in the 1990s. In 2000–2025, the share of happy people exceeded 50%, and around 2003–2005 it exceeded the pre-perestroika level. The proportion of people satisfied with life reached the 1980–1984 level around 2005–2010 and consistently exceeded it in subsequent years. Cyclical patterns are evident, but with an upward trend⁵⁰.

These approximate data on the level of subjective well-being certainly contradict the statement that “at the height of the communist regime, Russians were among the most miserable people on Earth.”⁵¹ In the 1960–1970s, the proportion of people happy and satisfied with life in Russia probably amounted to 70–80% (Table 4). In 1973 (the earliest data), in the countries of the European Union the share of people satisfied with life was 79%, and in 1984 the share of satisfied people was 78%, including in France – 72%, Spain – 70%, Italy – 67%, Greece – 64%, Portugal – 55%, and the share of happy people was 88%, including in Germany – 79%, Spain – 78%, Italy – 76%, and in miraculous Japan – 77%⁵². After the profound crisis of the 1990s, when Russians’ subjective well-being plummeted, a recovery ensued, and toward 2025 their well-being was improving and gradually approaching the European Union levels.

Thus, Russia’s level of subjective well-being was lower, albeit only slightly, than that of the world’s most economically developed countries. This example clearly demonstrates that the rich are not always happier than the poor, because, as the science of happiness has established, there is no direct, strong correlation between wealth and happiness. According to the so-called Easterlin paradox, at the *individual* level, during surveys wealthier people are more likely than less well-off people to report higher levels of subjective well-being, even though happiness is not an absolute privilege of the rich and is not concentrated in affluent neighborhoods. However, at the *national* level, a rise of average income does not automatically lead to a systematic increase in the average level of happiness in society. For example, in the United States, from the 1940s to the 1970s, incomes of citizens increased significantly, while the average level of happiness, according to surveys, remained virtually unchanged. The reason is that people quickly adapt to the rise in living standards, and new benefits cease to bring long-term satisfaction. According to the

⁵⁰ B.N. Mironov, “Cyclic Concepts of Russian History in Modern Historiography,” *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History* 68, no. 1 (2023): 130–158, <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu02.2023.108>

⁵¹ G. Krasnova, *Schast’ e po-sovetski*.

⁵² E. Ortiz-Ospina, T. Acisu, M. Roser, “Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” Our World in Data, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction#findings-from-eurobarometer>; <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-people-who-say-they-are-happy?tab=line>

international rankings of 2010–2025, poor citizens of Latin American countries (Jamaica, Costa Rica, Mexico, and others) surpassed wealthy Western Europeans in terms of happiness⁵³.

Conclusion

Researchers of the issue of happiness are aware of the discrepancies in the data of various sources and have an understanding of the main reasons, which are primarily methodological. One of them is the lack of data equivalence, due to the unrepresentative nature of some samples and differences in the measurement scales used in different projects. This can be compared with measuring water temperature on the Celsius scale, on the Fahrenheit scale, on the Rankin scale, and in Kelvin; the length of an object can be measured in centimeters, inches, feet, and yards. To accurately compare the results, the different units of measurement should be converted to a common denominator, i.e., one should convert a temperature to Celsius, or length to millimeters.

Researchers use different methods to address the issue of comparability. Some analyze short periods, others only trends, others use data of one of reputable centers, and others avoid studying dynamics and limit themselves to the geography of happiness.

In our opinion, to fruitfully continue studying the issue of happiness in Russia, it is necessary, firstly, to expand the information base by incorporating other sources, secondly, to thoroughly understand the reasons for the discrepancies in data of different studies, and thirdly, to construct a single homogeneous series of happiness and life satisfaction for the period of 1960–2025. When constructing such a series, it is optimal to base the calculations on surveys conducted by the same sociological centers using the same questionnaires and scales over a long period. In Russia, such a center for assessing happiness is VCIOM (All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center), and for assessing life satisfaction is – the Russian Monitoring of the Economic Situation and Health of the Population. Gaps in dynamic series can be interpolated using a regression equation or they can be filled with information from another source that is similar in scale and methodology through conversion.

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⁵³ R. Easterlin, "Building a Better Theory of Well-Being." *Economics and Happiness: Framing the Analysis*, no. 29 (2005): 29–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199286280.003.0002>

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