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HAPPINESS IN THE SOVIET REGIME AND POST-SOVIET ERA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

This article examines how the transition from socialism to capitalism in Russia has reshaped both the structural foundations and subjective meaning of well-being. The collapse of the Soviet Union provides a unique empirical setting in terms of empirical research, enabling us to explore how citizens who experienced both regimes evaluate their happiness, security, and freedom in radically different institutional contexts. Using original survey data collected in several Russian regions, the study combines theoretical perspectives from the capabilities approach, political economy, and the sociology of emotions to analyze the relationship between material circumstances, personal agency, and social cohesion. Quantitative methods, including logistic regression and cluster analysis, are employed to identify the main determinants of self-reported happiness and to reveal different socio-economic profiles within the population. By connecting classical theories of justice and development (Sen, Nussbaum, Rawls) with contemporary debates on inequality and subjective well-being, the research situates post-socialist Russia within a broader discussion on how institutional transformations affect life satisfaction. Well-being is conceptualized not merely as material prosperity or subjective happiness but as a multidimensional construct encompassing security, autonomy, and relational stability. The article also contributes to comparative research on post-socialist societies by offering an empirically grounded framework for understanding how freedom and stability function as interdependent rather than opposing dimensions of human flourishing. Ultimately, the study aims to move beyond dichotomous evaluations of

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socialism versus capitalism by proposing instead a more nuanced analysis of how individuals negotiate well-being in contexts of systemic change.

Keywords: well-being, happiness, freedom, security, post-socialist transition, Russia

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Despite extensive research on well-being, little is known about how large-scale systemic transformations affect people's perceptions of what constitutes a good life. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a unique opportunity to study such transformations: within a single generation, millions of citizens experienced a radical shift from a planned socialist economy to a market-oriented capitalist system. This transition fundamentally restructured employment, social protection, and everyday life, redefining both the material and moral foundations of well-being. While much of the existing literature compares well-being across countries and cultures, few studies examine how it changes within one society undergoing institutional upheaval. Russia is a particularly valuable case in point, as the tension between stability and freedom, and between equality and opportunity continues to influence how individuals evaluate their lives. Understanding how people who lived through both systems perceive their happiness and well-being offers insight into the legacy of socialism and the broader question of how political and economic regimes shape subjective life satisfaction.

Building on previous research into subjective and objective well-being (Diener, Suh 1997; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000), this study examines how the transition from socialism to capitalism has reshaped both the structural conditions and the subjective meanings of living well in Russia. The research addresses the key question of how political and economic transformations influence individuals' perceptions of happiness and well-being across two distinct regimes: the Soviet regime and post-Soviet era? An earlier version of this study was published as a preliminary working paper (Chakravorty 2019), which presented descriptive comparisons without theoretical framing or econometric analysis. This article builds on previous work by introducing a multidimensional theoretical framework, regression and cluster analyses, and a more rigorous interpretation of well-being determinants. The study's relevance lies in its ability to bridge three analytical domains. First, it applies theories of capabilities and social justice (Sen 1999; Rawls 1971) to the post-socialist context, where equality and security were prioritised over freedom and choice. Second, makes a contribution to the political economy of well-being (Frey, Stutzer 2002; Piketty 2014) by examining how systemic inequality and institutional

change affect life satisfaction beyond income levels. Third, it engages with sociological approaches that link well-being to identity, social trust, and perceived stability (Clark et al. 2017; Ryff 1989; Guriev, Tsyvinski 2012).

By combining these perspectives, the article clarifies how Russian citizens interpret happiness and well-being amid enduring tensions between freedom and security, and equality and opportunity — tensions which continue to define the post-Soviet social experience.

Theoretical Framework

The study of well-being has evolved from moral philosophy into an interdisciplinary field integrating economic, sociological, and psychological aspects of human life. Adopting a multidimensional analytical framework, this article views well-being as the dynamic interaction between resources, freedoms, social structures, and individual meaning. From this perspective, three complementary theoretical traditions provide a foundation for analysing well-being in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

The first tradition, with its roots in moral philosophy, conceptualizes well-being as a matter of individual fulfillment and reflective choice. Griffin's (1986) theory of informed desire that a person would endorse upon critical reflection. This theory highlighs self-awareness and autonomy as being central to a good life. This individualist view, however, does not account for the structural conditions that enable such reflection and choice. The second strand of thought, which is institutional in nature, is most notably represented by Sen's (1977, 1979, 1999) capabilities approach and Nussbaum's (2000) list of central human capabilities. This approach shifts the focus from subjective preferences or material goods to the real freedoms and opportunities that people have to live lives that they value. Within this framework, economic resources are instrumental rather than constitutive: what matters for well-being is the capacity to transform resources into meaningful activities through access to health, education, political participation, and social inclusion, rather than wealth itself. This theoretical shift is particularly relevant when analysing systemic transitions such as the shift from socialism to capitalism, where it is institutional guarantees rather than income that determine citizens' quality of life.

The third component of the framework addresses the social and psychological aspects of well-being. Empirical studies demonstrate that economic inequality and institutional trust significantly impact life satisfaction. Clark et al. (2017) show that income inequality explains only a small proportion of variation in happiness. In contrast, Guriev and Tsyvinski (2012) describe post-Soviet Russia as an 'economy of inequality', where the concentration of power and wealth has eroded collective security and trust. These findings suggest that subjective well-being depends not only on material conditions but also on

social cohesion and perceived fairness — factors that are deeply embedded in political and cultural contexts. At an individual level, Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being expands the analysis to include self-acceptance, purpose in life, personal growth, and autonomy. This illustrates how individuals interpret stability, change, and identity within their own life narratives.

Taken together, these perspectives provide an analytical lens through which well-being can be understood as a multi-layered construct linking objective resources, institutional structures, and subjective meanings. This article applies this framework to explore how Russian citizens who experienced both the Soviet and post-Soviet regimes conceptualize happiness and well-being — and how they balance the enduring tension between security, equality, and freedom that defines their lived experience.

Context of Transition: From Collective Security to Individual Risk

The transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era brought about significant changes to the institutional foundations of well-being. Under the Soviet system, the state guaranteed employment, housing, healthcare, and education, embedding well-being within a framework of collective security and social equality (Cook 2013; Froumin, Remorenko 2012). Despite its inefficiencies and bureaucratic rigidity, this model gave citizens a sense of predictability and belonging, where personal welfare depended on the stability of social institutions.

However, the transition of the 1990s replaced this structure with a market-based economy grounded in individual responsibility and competition. Economic liberalization and rapid privatization dismantled state guarantees, producing sharp rises in inequality (Novokmet et al. 2018) and weakening the social safety net (Popov 2007). The Gini coefficient rose from 0.24 in 1989 to over 0.40 in the early 2000s (World Bank 2015), reflecting the emergence of new elites and the increased vulnerability of among lower-income and rural groups (Gerry, Papadopoulos 2018).

These institutional shifts reshaped not only material living conditions but also the moral economy of everyday life. The meaning of well-being shifted from stability and collective provision to freedom, choice, and risk. While some citizens gained autonomy and access to new opportunities, others experienced insecurity and loss of status (Guriev, Tsyvinski 2012). Over time, political consolidation and the partial restoration of state control in the 2000s improved economic stability, albeit at the expense of shrinking civic freedoms (Treisman 2011).

In this evolving context, well-being became a negotiation between security and opportunity, and between memories of collective guarantees and the reality of individual risk. Understanding how people balance these dimensions is crucial for analysing subjective well-being in post-Soviet Russia, where the

legacies of socialism and capitalist inequalities continue to coexist in everyday life. Against this backdrop, the present study uses a mixed methods approach to explore how citizens who experienced both systems perceive their well-being, which factors they associate with happiness, and how freedom and security interact to shape these perceptions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a comparative quantitative research to analyse how systemic transformations from a socialist to a capitalist regime have shaped both the structural conditions and subjective meanings of well-being. The analysis focuses on individuals who personally experienced both systems, enabling a direct comparison of self-reported happiness, security, and perceived freedom in two distinct institutional contexts. The central research question guiding the study is: how do people who lived through the Soviet and post-Soviet periods evaluate their well-being, and which factors — material, social, or psychological — best explain their happiness in each system?

Data Collection and Sampling

Primary data were collected through a structured survey designed to capture multiple dimensions of well-being, including material conditions, perceived security, family relationships, and freedom. The questionnaire included 16 closed-ended questions and 18 indicator variables, developed in reference to existing literature on subjective and objective well-being (Sen 1999; Diener, Suh 1997; Nussbaum 2000). Each item was designed to measure a particular aspect of life satisfaction, such as income adequacy, access to healthcare, perceived fairness, and the ability to achieve personal goals.

The survey was primarily conducted in the Krasnoyarsk region under the auspices of the Department of Economics, at the Institute of Economics, Management, and Environmental Studies of Siberian Federal University. Data collection was carried out by a team of 40 economics students, who served as field enumerators under the supervision of a faculty coordinator. All students received prior training in survey administration and ethical research procedures. As the university attracts students from across Russia, additional responses were also collected in the following regions: Altayskiy Kray, Irkutskaya Oblast, Kemerovo, the Republic of Tuva, the Republic of Khakassia, and Zabaykalskiy Kray. This geographical diversity enhanced the regional representativeness of the dataset, although it was not designed to be nationally representative.

As there was no formal sampling frame of eligible respondents, convenience sampling was employed. Participants were required to be aged 60 or over and to have managed a household during the Soviet period, ensuring that they

could meaningfully compare their experiences across the two systems. Using motivated student researchers who were familiar with the local context contributed to the reliability and authenticity of responses. Data collection took place in November and December 2016. Data enumerators (students) conducted face-to-face interviews with respondents using a survey questionnaire. We arranged some Focus Group Discussions (FGD), which provided us with qualitative information. The FGDs were conducted to develop our own insights.

After data cleaning, which involved removing incomplete or inconsistent responses, the final dataset comprised 307 valid observations. While the sample is not nationally representative, it provides valuable exploratory evidence on generational perceptions of happiness, security, and well-being during systemic transformation in Russia.

Variables and Measures

The dependent variables were binary indicators of self-reported happiness:

- happier_sov = 1 if respondents reported being happier in the Soviet period;
- happier_curr = 1 if they reported being happier in present-day Russia.

Independent variables included measures of:

- material well-being (income, savings, adequacy of income, access to benefits);
- social and relational factors (family bonds, intergenerational care, community ties);
- psychological and functional aspects (goal achievement, self-reported health, sense of security, perceived freedom).

Data on income, savings, and access to benefits were collected in absolute monetary terms, while most relational and psychological indicators were recorded as binary variables (1 = yes, 0 = no). The variable capturing the importance of freedom, including choice over food, clothing, spending, lifestyle, and economic activities, was measured on a three-point ordinal scale (1 = not very important, 2 = important, 3 = very important). This operationalization ensured comparability between the Soviet and post-Soviet indicators, and allowed both material and subjective dimensions of well-being to be integrated into the regression and cluster analyses.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis was conducted using a three-stage design that combined descriptive, inferential, and exploratory methods.

1. The descriptive analysis summarized the distributions of key indicators and compared subjective assessments of happiness, security, and material well-being across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This stage provided an overview of general trends and cross-period contrasts between periods.

2. Logistic regression analysis was then used to identify the main predictors of happiness under each regime. Separate models were estimated for the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts using a stepwise selection method with a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. Model diagnostics, including the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test, pseudo R^2, Area Under the Curve (AUC), and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), confirmed that the models demonstrated adequate fit, good predictive power, and no evidence of multicollinearity or specification errors.
3. Cluster analysis was then applied to identify distinct socio-economic profiles of well-being within the sample, distinguishing between groups that valued stability and collective welfare, and groups that emphasized freedom and material opportunity. This exploratory procedure revealed persistent socio-economic stratification within the population.

All statistical and econometric analyses were performed using *Stata* versions 15 and *Stata* 19, while *Excel* was used for initial data management. NVivo software supported the qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses through a structured coding procedure. Together, these methods ensured analytical rigor and enabled triangulation between quantitative indicators and qualitative interpretations of well-being.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample is non-representative. Secondly, there is a potential influence of nostalgia bias among older respondents. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Nevertheless, the data provided a grounded empirical perspective on how lived experiences of socialism and capitalism influence subjective perceptions of happiness and well-being.

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive Results

Material and Economic Dimensions

Quantitative indicators of material well-being paint a complex picture rather than showing a simple preference for one system over the other. The majority of respondents (70.5%) rated the quality of consumption and food in the Soviet period as higher than it is today, whereas only 8.2% thought it was lower. This perception reflects confidence in state regulation and collective provision rather than purely material abundance. Although the post-Soviet market offers greater variety, respondents associate it with inequality and a decline in trust in product quality — a pattern that is consistent with the findings of other studies on post-socialist satisfaction (Clark et al. 2017).

Further revealing perceived differences in security are savings and income assessments. Around 41.5% of respondents reported saving more during the Soviet

period, whereas 37.9% save more now. Similarly, 59.8% believe that their current income allows them to maintain their former standard of living, while 39.5% disagree. These responses suggest that economic liberalization created new opportunities, but also greater differentiation in outcomes: for some, prosperity increased, while for others, the loss of guarantees outweighed the benefits of choice.

This ambivalence is reflected in living standards and health indicators. While two-thirds of respondents viewed their living standards as higher today, over half (55.2%) considered their health to be better in the Soviet era. According to Sen (1993), terms, functioning — the ability to achieve one's goals — was perceived as stronger during the Soviet period (67.3%) than it is now (57.9%), emphasizing the ongoing importance of stability and predictability for subjective well-being. Figure 1 illustrates these differences in perceived functional capabilitybetween the two regimes.

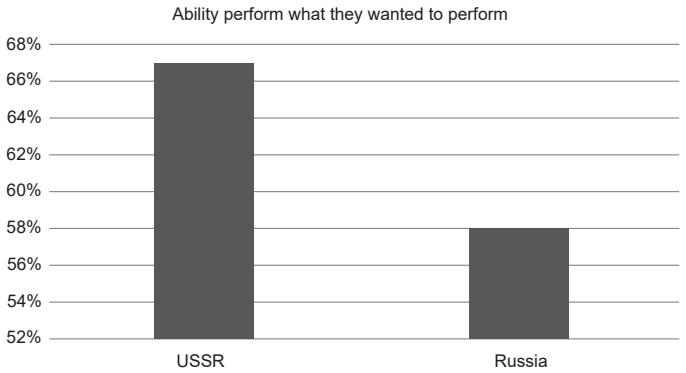

Figure 1. Ability to perform desirable things in USSR and present capitalist Russia
Source: Authors' own survey data.

Figure 1 shows that a higher proportion of respondents reported being able to pursue and accomplish valued activities during the Soviet period. This pattern suggests that institutional stability and collective guarantees enhanced people's sense of agency during this period, whereas in the post-Soviet context, this capability depends more on individual resources and economic conditions.

Social and Institutional Dimensions

Social and intergenerational factors continue to play a key role in how respondents interpret well-being. While over half (55.2%) reported being more optimistic about their children's career prospects in the Soviet era, only 8% considered education to be better today. These findings point to a perceived loss of institutional reliability, with the disappearance of guaranteed pathways linking education, employment, and social mobility (Guriev, Tsyvinski 2012).

Family relations also emerged as a significant source of happiness: 67.7% believed that family bonds were stronger under socialism, whereas only 15%

considered them to be stronger today. This likely reflects the collectivist rhythms and shared responsibilities that were characteristic of Soviet life, and which contrast with individualization of the post-Soviet era. These results illustrate that well-being is not only tied to individual success, but also to the perceived strength of social cohesion and trust in collective systems. Figure 2 illustrates respondents' perceptions of the strength of family bonds across the two regimes.

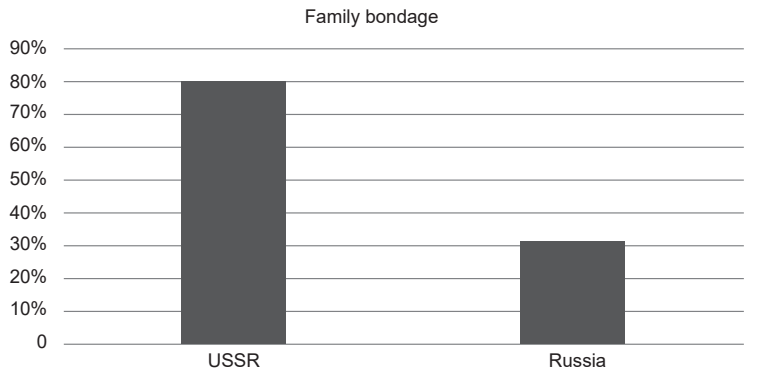

Figure 2. Family bondage in USSR and present capitalist Russia
Source: Authors' own survey data.

Figure 2 shows that two-thirds of respondents associated the Soviet period with stronger family ties and greater interdependence. This pattern reflects the collectivist nature of Soviet social organisation, in which shared routines and mutual reliance shaped everyday experience. In contrast, the post-Soviet era is characterized by increasing individualization and weaker informal support networks.

Freedom, Security, and Subjective Well-Being

Of the two core components of well-being in Sen's (1988) framework, Freedom and security generated the most ambivalent responses. Although 68.4 % of respondents agreed that freedom increases happiness, 77.1 % simultaneously felt more secure in the Soviet era. This highlights that, in principle, freedom is valued, but it only yields happiness only when accompanied by economic stability and predictable social conditions. Figure 3 illustrates how respondents perceive the influence of how greater freedom in contemporary Russia on their happiness.

Figure 3 shows that, although most respondents associate freedom with greater happiness, a significant proportion do not experience it as such. This pattern suggests that freedom only enhances well-being only when economic and social conditions allow individuals to exercise it meaningfully. This supports Sen's (1999) argument that it is capabilities, rather than freedoms in isolation, that determine life satisfaction.

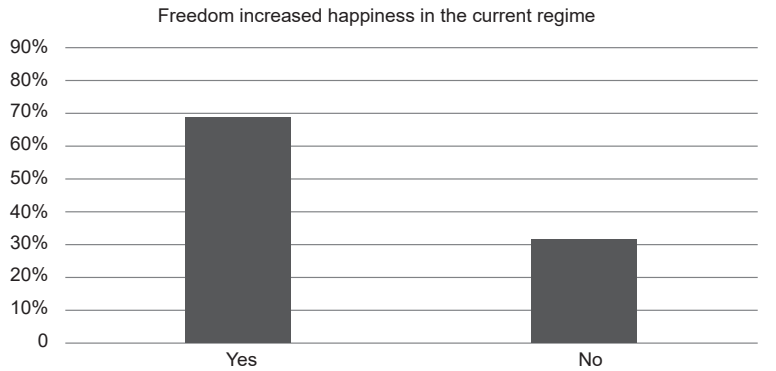

Figure 3. Increased freedom enjoyed in present capitalist Russia has increased happiness or not
Source: Authors' own survey data

The respondents who described themselves as happier in contemporary Russia most often cited freedom, choice, and opportunity (around 38% each), whereas those who preferred the Soviet era referred to security, stability, and certainty (around 56%). Figure 4 illustrates respondents' perceptions of personal security under the two regimes.

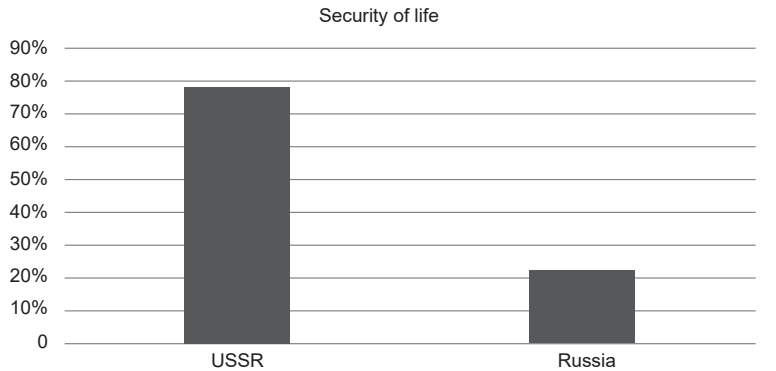

Figure 4. Security of life and livelihood
Source: Authors' own survey data

Figure 4 shows that a clear majority (77%) felt more secure under the Soviet system, whereas only around a quarter associated greater security with the present era. This discrepancy underscores how institutional guarantees of employment, housing, and welfare once provided a collective sense of security, which is now largely individualized and dependent on economic success. Together with Figure 3, it highlights the central tension between freedom and security that defines post-Soviet experiences of well-being.

However, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive: individuals with above-average income levels tended to associate happiness with freedom. This suggests that autonomy becomes a source of well-being only once material needs are satisfied (Sen 1988; Nussbaum 2000).

Finally, many respondents (42.9 %) linked their happiness during the Soviet period to their youth rather than to institutional factors. This reveals a life-course effect whereby older individuals tend to idealize earlier life stages as periods of vitality and belonging (Davis 1979; Batcho 2013). Overall, the findings reveal that perceptions of happiness are shaped less by absolute living standards than by the interplay of stability, opportunity, and collective identity. Life in the Soviet-era is remembered as secure and cohesive, whereas life in the post-Soviet era is remembered as freer but riskier.

Regression Analysis

Logistic regression models were estimated for the Soviet and post-Soviet periods to identify the main determinants of happiness under different socio-economic systems. The dependent variables indicated whether respondents reported being happier during the Soviet era (*happier_sov*) or in contemporary Russia (*happier_curr*). Each model incorporated both material indicators (income, benefits, spending) and psychosocial variables (security, family bonds, and goal attainment). Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in E-Appendix A, Table 1. Diagnostic tests confirmed a good model fit and the absence of multicollinearity (Hosmer–Lemeshow $p > 0.1$; AUC > 0.75), ensuring reliability of interpretation.

Soviet Period

The Soviet model identified three significant predictors of happiness: goal achievement, personal security, and family bonds ($\chi^2(3) = 50.78$, $p < 0.001$; pseudo $R^2 = 0.18$). Respondents who felt able to achieve their goals were almost four times more likely to describe themselves as happy. Meanwhile, those who reported a strong sense of security or close family ties were twice and six times more likely to do so, respectively. These findings suggest that well-being in the Soviet period was primarily shaped by relational and psychological stability, rather than material prosperity. In Sen's (1993) terms, happiness reflected the perceived ability to function effectively within stable institutional conditions — a sense of agency within predictability (see E-Appendix A, Figure 1 for the ROC curve and AUC visualization).

Post-Soviet Period

In order to identify the main determinants of happiness in contemporary Russia, a logistic regression model was estimated, with happier_curr (1 = happier now, 0 = otherwise) as the dependent variable. The final model retained

the following five significant predictors: current income; perceived adequacy of income; freedom contributing to happiness; personal security; and family bonds ($\chi^2(5) = 71.62$, $p < 0.001$; pseudo $R^2 = 0.28$; AUC = 0.84).

Respondents who reported that their income was sufficient to maintain an acceptable standard of living were almost four times more likely to describe themselves as happier today (OR = 3.99, p = 0.002). Those who felt that freedom increased their happiness were over three times more likely to do so (OR = 3.27, p = 0.017), while a strong sense of security and family cohesion also substantially increased the odds of happiness (OR = 2.88 and 2.99, respectively). Income itself had a small but positive effect (p = 0.048).

Model diagnostics confirmed that the regression was well specified and demonstrated good predictive accuracy (Hosmer–Lemeshow p = 0.13; mean VIF = 1.16; AUC = 0.84; see E-Appendix A, Figure 2 for ROC curve and AUC visualization).

Taken together, these findings suggest that economic sufficiency, personal security, and relational stability remain central to subjective well-being, but their meaning has changed under capitalism. Unlike the Soviet period, when security and belonging were collectively guaranteed, happiness in the post-Soviet era is increasingly conditional, dependent on individual success and access to stable income. While freedom and opportunity contribute positively to well-being, yet their benefits are primarily realized by those who have already secured material stability. Thus, the model reflects a broader shift from collective guarantees to individualized risk, highlighting how the transition to market institutions has redefined both the origins and disparities of happiness in Russia.

Interpretation

Security and family cohesion consistently predict well-being across both regimes, but their social meaning has shifted. Under socialism, happiness was rooted in collective guarantees and predictable routines, whereas under capitalism, it is tied to individual achievement, income sufficiency, and the effective use of freedom. The transition from a system of shared security to one of personal responsibility has therefore redefined the structure of happiness, making well-being more individualized and unequal. Freedom and choice only enhance happiness when accompanied by material stability, illustrating that even in a market society, the quest for well-being remains bound to the enduring need for security and belonging.

Cluster Analysis

To complement the regression findings, I performed a k-means clustering algorithm for the analysis using standardized indicators of material well-being — food satisfaction, savings capacity, healthcare access, and frequency of social celebrations — across both periods. The analysis identified two distinct

socio-economic clusters that reflected different life experiences during the Soviet era and how these changed in post-Soviet Russia.

Cluster 1 (approximately 87% of respondents) exhibited consistently below-average scores on all indicators during the Soviet period, including food satisfaction, savings ability, and healthcare access. This group likely comprises economically disadvantaged or rural populations with limited access to state resources and public services. Their profile illustrates the presence of material deprivation even within a system committed to universal provision.

Cluster 2 (approximately 13% of respondents) displayed above-average values on all dimensions, suggesting greater economic security and better access to goods and services. Members of this cluster were probably urban residents or professionals with institutional ties to the Soviet state apparatus. Their experiences highlight the stratified nature of privilege within a formally egalitarian regime.

Comparing these clusters over time reveals that structural divides persisted and deepened in some areas. While Cluster 2 maintained or improved its position, particularly in food access and savings, Cluster 1 showed stagnation or decline, most notably with regard to healthcare and perceived security. These results indicate that post-Soviet reforms have disproportionately favoured the already privileged, perpetuating existing hierarchies rather than creating equal opportunities (see E-Appendix A, Figure 3 for cluster visualization).

Thus, the cluster analysis adds a structural dimension to the study's findings: well-being trajectories are path-dependent and are shaped by earlier access to material and institutional resources. The persistence of these disparities highlights that transitions from state socialism to market capitalism did not eliminate inequality, but rather reconfigured it along new economic and geographic lines.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined how individuals who had experienced both socialism and capitalism in the selected Russian regions perceived their well-being, and asked what made people feel happier: collective security or personal freedom. The comparative design reveals that well-being is not determined by ideology or regime type but by how social and economic institutions shape people's sense of safety, agency, and belonging.

During the Soviet period, happiness was grounded in predictability, stability, and strong social bonds. Under the current capitalist system, happiness is more closely tied to material sufficiency and the capacity to convert freedom into meaningful opportunities. Regression results show that while feelings of security and family cohesion consistently predict well-being in both contexts, freedom only contributes to happiness when accompanied by adequate income and economic stability. In other words, freedom without security does not generate well-being.

Cluster analysis further demonstrated that these dynamics are unevenly distributed. A small socio-economically advantaged group has benefited from the post-Soviet transformation, while the majority continues to experience vulnerability and uncertainty. This enduring stratification reflects the fact that market reforms have reproduced rather than resolved structural inequalities.

The study's key contribution lies in its integration of the psychological, relational, and institutional dimensions of well-being within a single analytical framework. It moves beyond simplistic contrasts between socialism and capitalism, showing that well-being depends on striking a balance between security and freedom rather than allowing one to dominate the other.

For policymakers, the findings highlight that economic growth and liberalization alone do not guarantee greater happiness. Policies that protect stability, strengthen social ties, and guarantee basic security are essential to enable individuals to exercise freedom meaningfully. Future research should build on this analysis using representative and longitudinal data to explore how perceptions of well-being evolve across generations and regions.

Ultimately, this study shifts the focus of the debate away from whether socialism or capitalism makes people happier and towards the question of under what conditions any system can enable human flourishing — materially, socially, and emotionally.

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