



How History and Ideology Affect Political Preferences in Russia

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Abstract

This article looks at how political preferences in Russia are shaped not only by short-term propaganda, but mainly by long historical experiences and powerful stories about sovereignty, security, and the role of the state. The argument is that Russian society, after centuries of imperial rule, decades of Soviet mobilization, and the chaotic 1990s, has learned to expect strong centralized authority as the main guarantee of order and stability. This is less about people being misled and more about a cultural habit formed over generations.

The study uses academic literature, surveys from the Levada Center, and an analysis of official narratives. It shows that collective memory—of the October Revolution, the victory in World War II, and the collapse of the Soviet Union—shapes how Russians think about politics today. These memories make strong leadership appear normal and even necessary. In other words, history is not just in the background; it actively shapes how people see the present.

The article also finds clear differences between generations and regions. Older people and those living outside major cities usually value stability, predictability, and state protection. Younger, urban Russians are exposed to different media and global ideas, and they sometimes hold more liberal views. Yet they often feel cynical, distrust institutions, and stay away from active politics. As a result, elections in Russia often work less as a real competition and more as a ritual, a way of confirming the system. Leaders keep their legitimacy through what the article calls “narrative patriotism”: the use of external threats and ideas of national uniqueness to turn pride and past traumas into loyalty to authority.

Looking ahead, the article sketches three possible futures for Russia after 2024: continued but suffocating stability, a carefully managed transition of power by elites, or a sudden crisis that breaks the system. Each path shows both the strengths and the fragility of the regime.

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In the end, the article argues that Russian political choices are rooted in memory and identity as much as in fear or material benefits. Support for strong leaders works as a cultural survival strategy, not just blind obedience. To understand Russia, we must see history as an active force in today's politics.

Keywords: Political culture, Historical memory, Authoritarianism, Russia, Putin era

Rusya'daki Politik Tercihlere Tarih ve İdeolojinin Etkisi

Öz

Bu makale, Rusya'da insanların siyasal tercihlerini yalnızca bugünün propagandasının değil, çok daha uzun bir tarihsel sürecin ve hafızada derin izler bırakan anlatıların şekillendirdiğini öne sürüyor. Rusya'da siyaset, genellikle egemenlik, güvenlik ve devletin varlığı gibi duygusal konular etrafında algılanmaktadır. Halk, yüzyıllar boyunca yaşadığı deneyimler nedeniyle güçlü merkezi otoriteyi düzenin garantisi olarak görmeye alışmıştır. İmparatorluk döneminin otoriter mirası, Sovyet yıllarının topyekûn seferberliği ve 1990'ların kaotik ortamı, bu beklentiyi daha da pekiştirmiştir. Bu nedenle güçlü devlet ve güçlü lider düşüncesi, yalnızca yöneticilerin dayattığı bir anlayış değil, halkın belleğinde kuşaktan kuşağa aktarılan bir refleks haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışmada, akademik kaynaklar, Levada Center'ın anketleri ve resmi söylemlerin analizi bir araya getirilmiştir. Böylece Ekim Devrimi, Büyük Vatanseverlik Savaşı ve Sovyetler Birliği'nin çöküşü gibi kritik olayların, günümüz Rus halkının zihninde nasıl şekillendiği ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu kolektif hafıza, güçlü liderliği olağan ve gerekli bir şeymiş gibi sunmaktadır.

Bulgular, toplum içinde kuşaklara ve bölgelere göre farklılıklar olduğunu da göstermektedir. Yaşlılar ve kırsalda yaşayanlar daha çok istikrar ve devletin korumasını önemserken, genç ve şehirli kesimler ise daha farklı bilgi kaynaklarına ve küresel değerlere ulaşabilmektedir. Buna rağmen bu gruplar arasında da siyasal hayal kırıklığı, kurumlara güvensizlik ve siyasetten uzak durma eğilimi öne çıkmaktadır. Seçimler de bu nedenle gerçek bir yarıştan çok, sistemi onaylayan birer tören gibi algılanmaktadır. Liderler ise dış tehdit söylemleri ve “medeniyetimiz eşsizdir” vurgusu üzerinden meşruiyet kazanmakta, geçmişteki gurur ve travmalar bugünün iktidarına destek olarak geri dönmektedir. Bu çalışmada, 2024 sonrası için üç olası senaryo çizilmiştir. Boğucu bir istikrarın devamı, elitlerce yönetilen bir geçiş süreci ya da ani bir krizle sistemin sarsılması. Bu ihtimaller hem rejimin uyum yeteneğini hem de kırılma eğilimini gösteriyor. Sonuç olarak, Rusya'da güçlü liderlere verilen destek, basit bir boyun eğme değil, tarihsel deneyimlerden doğan bir hayatta kalma stratejisidir. Tarih burada yalnızca geçmişin gölgesi değil, bugünü aktif olarak şekillendiren bir güç olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Politik kültür, Tarihsel hafıza, Otoriterlik, Rusya, Putin dönemi

INTRODUCTION

Understanding political attitudes in Russia requires moving beyond formal electoral processes and coercive mechanisms to examine the deeper historical and ideological foundations shaping citizens' political behavior. In a political environment where democratic institutions are limited or closely regulated, political preferences are often influenced by long-standing historical narratives and patterns of ideological continuity. While existing scholarship has extensively examined issues such as media control and elite-driven propaganda in Russia, comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of collective memory in shaping everyday political beliefs.

This article argues that political preferences in Russia are deeply rooted in the country's turbulent historical experience and in emotionally resonant narratives concerning sovereignty, security, and statehood. Key historical events—including the October Revolution, the Second World War, the

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dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the consolidation of political power under Vladimir Putin—function not merely as historical reference points but as symbolic markers that structure public perception and political imagination. Over time, these narratives have contributed to the normalization of specific political expectations, particularly the acceptance of strong centralized leadership as a stabilizing force.

Accordingly, the article addresses three main research questions:

1. How does Russia’s historical memory shape contemporary political preferences?
2. How has Putin’s leadership adapted to and reinforced these narratives?
3. What trends may emerge in Russian public opinion following the 2024 elections?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach informed by historical institutionalism and political psychology. The analysis draws on academic literature, public opinion survey data (including data from the Levada Center), and discourse analysis of official narratives. Rather than focusing solely on mechanisms of political control, the study examines the historical and ideational factors that help explain the persistence of political support patterns within Russian society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative–interpretive design informed by historical institutionalism and political psychology. The approach emphasizes how historical legacies and collective memories shape contemporary political preferences in Russia.

Data Sources

The analysis relies on secondary data, including Levada Center surveys (2012–2024), peer-reviewed scholarship, think-tank reports, and discourse drawn from official statements, media outlets, and educational materials.

The Levada Center is an independent research organization widely used in academic studies of Russian public opinion; however, its survey data are treated as indicative rather than definitive and are interpreted with due attention to the methodological and political constraints surrounding public opinion research in Russia. Special attention is given to generational and regional divides between urban and rural populations, as well as younger and older cohorts.

Data Analysis

Process tracing is applied to uncover causal mechanisms linking historical experiences with current political attitudes. Path dependence and critical junctures are used to explain continuity and change in political preferences. Discourse analysis complements this by examining how historical narratives are mobilized to sustain state legitimacy and centralized authority.

RESEARCH MODEL

The study employs a qualitative–interpretive research model designed to uncover how historical legacies and ideological narratives shape political preferences in Russia. This model was chosen because the research questions focus not only on observable behavior but also on the meanings, memories, and symbolic frameworks that influence political attitudes. Quantitative methods alone would not capture these deeper dynamics; therefore, qualitative strategies were prioritized.

To achieve this, the study integrates three complementary methodological approaches:

1. **Historical Institutionalism** – to trace the persistence of political traditions and the role of path dependence in shaping long-term expectations of centralized authority.
2. **Political Psychology** – to interpret how collective trauma, fear, and identity influence citizens’ acceptance of strong leadership.
3. **Discourse Analysis** – to examine how state narratives, educational materials, and media reproduce and legitimize historical myths in the present.

The choice of this research model is also justified by the complexity of the subject matter. Political preferences in Russia cannot be fully understood through single-variable models; they are products of overlapping historical, psychological, and institutional forces. By employing process tracing and comparative analysis, the model ensures that causal mechanisms linking past experiences to current attitudes are identified with clarity.

Finally, the study adheres strictly to research and publication ethics. All data sources (e.g., Levada Center surveys, academic literature, think-tank reports, and media archives) are publicly available and properly cited. Since no new fieldwork with human subjects was conducted, issues of informed consent or confidentiality do not arise. Nevertheless, the study follows principles of academic integrity by avoiding bias, ensuring accuracy in interpretation, and presenting findings transparently.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To make sense of why so many Russians still lean toward strong leadership, we need to dig into two overlapping perspectives—how history shapes institutions and how fear and memory shape minds. These ideas help us understand why a lot of people in Russia want strong leaders and trust the government. They have different but related ideas about how people’s political choices change over time.

Historical Institutionalism

Over the years, institutions do not just change—they get stuck. That’s what historical institutionalism teaches us: once a society follows a certain political path, turning back becomes harder and harder (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In Russia, the legacy of autocratic rule under the Tsars, followed by Soviet totalitarianism and later the post-Soviet transition, has produced a political culture that favors order over freedom and unity over pluralism. These traditions have established a collective expectation of centralized authority as a guarantor of national stability.

In Russia, the “strong state” is not just a preference—it’s practically a legend. It shows up in speeches, textbooks, and even childhood memories. It’s not just history; it’s identity. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaos of the 1990s intensified public longing for institutional continuity and state-led order. This deep-rooted belief in state paternalism and historical destiny forms the basis of what we call “historical sovereignty perception”—a view that legitimacy derives not from democratic procedure but from historical mission and national survival (Hosking, 2012).

Political Psychology

But history is only half the story. Emotions matter too—especially in a country where collective trauma and pride run deep. That’s where political psychology enters the picture. The legacy of collective trauma—wars, collapses, and invasions—has created a widespread preference for security over freedom in Russia (Greene, 2014; White, 2010). In such contexts, citizens are more likely to support strong, paternal figures who promise stability, even at the cost of political pluralism.

Adorno’s theory of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) and Altemeyer’s follow-up work (1996) suggest that individuals raised in rigid environments develop a stronger need for authority and order. This helps explain why many older Russians flinch at the word ‘liberalism.’

To them, it does not mean freedom—it means confusion, unpaid pensions, and cold winters without gas (Levada Center, 2022).

Moreover, political narratives that stress external threats—whether NATO, the West, or internal dissent—reinforce the idea that loyalty to a strong leader is essential for survival. These emotional appeals are not only top-down manipulations but also resonate with the lived experiences of citizens shaped by history and memory (Etkind, 2013; Yurchak, 2006).

Historical Background: Memory, Empire, and Political Identity

You cannot understand how Russians vote—or why many do not—without stepping into their past. Not just the facts, but the feelings: pride, loss, and a deep fear of chaos returning. Unlike Western democracies, where political behavior is shaped largely by contemporary debates and institutions, Russia’s public opinion is deeply anchored in past experiences—of empire, revolution, collapse, and centralized power. In Russia, history is not something you study—it’s something you live. War songs echo in classrooms, statues guard city squares, and news anchors still speak like it’s 1945 (Gill, 2011).

THE IMPERIAL AND SOVIET LEGACIES

The foundations of Russian political culture were laid under imperial autocracy, where the Tsar was seen as both ruler and father. This idea, supported by the Orthodox Church and traditions like the “Third Rome” doctrine, framed Russia as a divinely chosen civilization destined to stand apart from the West (Suny, 2006). Citizens were taught to view the state not as a neutral institution but as a sacred force safeguarding identity and survival.

The Soviet Union did not erase the old habits of power—it doubled down on them, wrapping iron rule in ideology and calling it progress. The Communist Party centralized control even further, blending ideology with national pride. Mass mobilization, heroic myth-making, and educational propaganda shaped generations of citizens into viewing the state as both protector and provider (Hosking, 2012).

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of these traditions persisted. According to Mendelson and Gerber (2005), political socialization in the post-Soviet period failed to replace authoritarian values. Instead, a form of nostalgia for the Soviet era’s stability and dignity became widespread, especially among older Russians. It’s no coincidence that many Russians still talk about the Soviet years with a kind of aching warmth. For them, that past was not perfect—but at least it made sense. Today’s leaders borrow that feeling.

Symbolic Power of Historical Events

Certain historical moments in Russia have become symbolic anchors that help define political attitudes today. Among them, three events stand out: the October Revolution (1917), the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), and the collapse of the USSR (1991).

The October Revolution is remembered less for its ideology and more for the promise of order amid chaos. Similarly, the Soviet victory in World War II is not just a historical fact—it is a sacred narrative. Every May, tanks roll down Red Square. Schoolchildren recite war poems. For Russians, World War II is not just history—it’s sacred, a proof that unity and sacrifice can defeat even the darkest enemies. The war becomes a symbol of what the state can achieve when united, and it justifies demands for national cohesion today (Etkind, 2013).

Ask someone over fifty about the 1990s, and you will not get a lecture—you’ll get a sigh. The Soviet collapse was not just political; it was personal. Empty shelves. Lost dignity. Chaos. For many Russians, the 1990s were not a time of freedom, but of poverty, instability, and humiliation. Surveys show that a significant portion of the population still views this period as the worst in recent history (Levada Center, 2022). This perception creates fertile ground for leaders like Putin who offer a narrative of restoration and strength.

The State as a Historical Actor

In most countries, the state is a system. In Russia, it’s something closer to a character in a national epic—part guardian, part ghost, always watching. According to Petrov (2014), Russian political culture rests on a vertical model of power in which authority flows from the top and is seen as morally legitimate. Call it Tsarist, Soviet, or “sovereign democracy”—the names change, but the vertical chain of command stays eerily familiar.

This deep connection between identity and statehood creates a unique legitimacy framework. Many Russians may shrug at corruption, not because they do not care—but because they believe the alternative might be worse. If the state preserves the soul of the nation, its sins are sometimes forgiven. As one Levada Center poll put it, “Russians do not trust institutions, but they believe in Russia” (Levada Center, 2023).

This is very different from Western models where legitimacy is tied to performance, transparency, and pluralism. In Russia, legitimacy often stems from historical continuity and symbolic leadership. The state is perceived not just as a government, but as the custodian of a civilization.

Table 1. Key Factors Influencing Political Preferences in Russia

Factor	Influence Level	Explanation
Leadership (Putin’s Role)	Very High	Charismatic and historical framing of leadership
Historical Memory	High	Soviet victory, imperial pride, nostalgia for order
National Ideology	High	Russian exceptionalism, “civilizational mission”
Media Control	Medium	Shapes public perception of internal and external threats
Socioeconomic Status	Low–Medium	Affects trust levels, but secondary to identity-based narratives
Age Demographics	Medium	Older citizens are more conservative and trustful of state institutions

Source: Compiled by the author based on Gel’man (2015), Malinova (2020), Tsygankov (2016), Lipman (2009), Rose et al. (2011), Levada Center (2020).

Interpretation: As shown in Table 1, political preferences in Russia are driven more by symbolic and historical factors than by economic or rational choice models. Leadership and memory dominate the political psyche, shaping not only support for the current system but also resistance to liberal change.

Consequences for Political Behavior

Given this historical context, it’s not surprising that many Russians prefer strong leaders and centralized control. Surveys reveal that support for democracy in Russia tends to be instrumental—valued only if it provides stability and growth, not as a moral ideal (Rose et al., 2011).

The continued appeal of centralized authority is especially strong during perceived crises, whether external (e.g., NATO expansion) or internal (economic downturns, protests). Political elites often use historical narratives to justify harsh policies or nationalist rhetoric, appealing to a sense of unity and sacrifice.

These strategies resonate with a population shaped by generations of collective struggle. In Russia, history is not a distant backdrop—it is a living framework for understanding the present. To understand contemporary Russian politics, one must understand the weight of its past.

POLITICAL PREFERENCES IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

To truly understand how Russians think about politics today, we need to move beyond polling numbers and official approval ratings. Russian political preferences are shaped by a mix of traditional values, generational divides, regional disparities, and emotional legacies of the past. What emerges is a society that simultaneously craves stability, distrusts liberal institutions, and selectively embraces modernity.

Historical Values and Generational Identity

Across multiple surveys over the past two decades, Russian citizens consistently prioritize stability, social order, and national pride over liberal values like individual rights or pluralism (Inglehart & Norris, 2019; Levada Center, 2022). These preferences are not simply the result of propaganda—they reflect deeply ingrained worldviews formed by long periods of instability and identity crises.

Older generations, especially those who lived through the Soviet era or the collapse of the USSR, tend to associate liberalism with chaos. For them, Putin’s leadership represents not only political strength but also emotional security (Colton & Hale, 2009). Political scientist Ivan Krastev (2017) notes that in post-Soviet states like Russia, political identity is shaped less by democratic learning and more by cycles of collapse, resistance, and restoration.

In this framework, support for authoritarian governance is not passive—it is an active expression of cultural and historical continuity. Many Russians may criticize policies but still endorse centralized leadership as the only viable model.

Table 2. Political Preferences by Age Group in Russia

Category	Age 50+ (%)	Age under 30 (%)
Trust in Government	75	30
Support for Democracy	20	50
Preference for Strong Leaders	85	40
Use of Independent Media	10	65
Perceived Threat from the West	70	35

Source: Compiled by the author based on Levada Center (2019, 2021, 2022), Rose et al. (2011), Colton & Hale (2009), Gudkov (2011), Oates (2007), Laruelle (2015).

Interpretation: Table 2 shows clear generational divides. Older Russians overwhelmingly favor strong leadership and state media, while younger Russians are more digitally informed and inclined toward democratic values. However, low political engagement among youth suggests that disillusionment, not activism, defines their political posture.

Class and Regional Divides

Geography and social class also shape political preferences. In urban centers like Moscow or St. Petersburg, there is a relatively strong liberal minority—young professionals, students, and middle-class citizens who consume independent media and engage in civil society. But these groups are small and often marginalized (Robertson, 2011).

In contrast, residents of rural areas, smaller towns, and industrial regions tend to be more conservative. Their political behavior is shaped by economic dependence on state institutions, cultural isolation, and historical loyalty to traditional authority (Beissinger, 2014). Many of these citizens rely on public pensions or state-owned enterprises for livelihood, making them more risk-averse and more accepting of the status quo.

Table 3. Regional Political Preferences in Russia

Region Type	Support for Government (%)	Use of Independent Media (%)	Desire for Political Change (%)
Major Cities	45	70	60
Small Towns	70	30	35
Rural Areas	80	15	25

Data based on Levada Center omnibus surveys representing urban and rural populations in 2022 and 2024

Interpretation: Political attitudes in Russia are deeply tied to geography. Urban areas show more political diversity, but the majority of the population lives in smaller towns and rural regions, where loyalty to the state remains high and alternative narratives are rare.

The Paradox of Contradictory Preferences

One of the most intriguing features of Russian public opinion is its internal contradictions. Citizens often want both market reforms and social guarantees, strong leaders and political accountability, patriotism and modern services. This mix reflects what Whitefield and Evans

(2005) call “non-ideological pragmatism”—the tendency to evaluate policies and leaders based on their effectiveness, not ideological consistency.

In Russia, legitimacy is often based on outcomes: paying pensions on time, restoring military prestige, or defending national honor. This pragmatic logic allows citizens to support repressive measures if they are framed as serving the national interest (Gel’man, 2015).

The state itself adapts to these contradictory demands by presenting a dual identity: it is both traditional and modern, conservative and developmental. Through this strategy, it builds a “hybrid political identity” among citizens (Lipman, 2016).

Table 4. Generational Comparison: Russia vs. Hungary

Category	Russia (Age 50+)	Hungary (Age 50+)	Russia (Under 30)	Hungary (Under 30)
Trust in State Institutions (%)	75	50	30	40
Support for Democracy (%)	20	45	50	65
Belief in Strong Leadership (%)	85	60	40	35
Use of Independent Media (%)	10	30	65	60
Perceived Threat from West (%)	70	45	35	25

Source: Compiled by the author based on Levada Center (2021), European Social Survey (2020), European Values Study (2021), Gudkov (2011), Kornai (2000), Oates (2007), Bajomi-Lázár (2013), Laruelle (2015), Inglehart & Norris (2016).

Interpretation: While younger Russians and Hungarians both show more liberal tendencies than their elders, Russian youth remain more cautious. This suggests that while generational change is occurring, it is moderated by national narratives and controlled media environments.

Media, Misinformation, and Control

The media plays a powerful role in shaping political preferences. Television remains the dominant source of information for older and rural populations, and most TV outlets are controlled by the state. These channels promote national pride, demonize the West, and marginalize dissent (Nimmo, 2015).

However, among younger and urban audiences, social media and independent platforms like Meduza and Navalny Live have grown in popularity. While these platforms offer alternative narratives, the Kremlin has responded with aggressive censorship, blocking websites, and labeling journalists as foreign agents (Freedom House, 2023).

Research by Tucker et al. (2017) suggests that exposure to diverse media weakens authoritarian attitudes—but it can also increase cynicism. Many Russians, especially youth, are skeptical of both state and independent sources. As a result, access to information does not always lead to political action.

Political Apathy and Passive Resistance

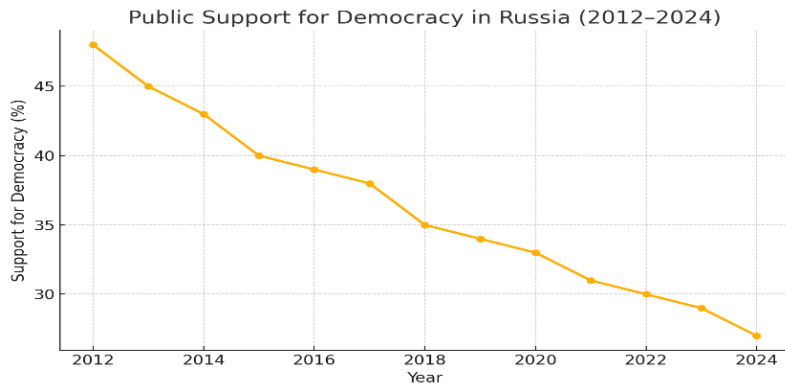
Despite occasional protest waves, most Russians remain politically passive. Surveys suggest that many people feel disengaged or powerless, believing that political participation is futile (Greene, 2014). This phenomenon, often described as “apathetic loyalty,” means that people may disapprove of aspects of the system but see no viable alternative.

Rather than resisting openly, citizens often retreat into private life or use humor, art, and informal networks to express discontent. Yurchak (2006) noted similar behaviors in late-Soviet society, where people learned to “live normally” under an abnormal system.

This passive resistance complicates attempts to measure regime support. In authoritarian settings, polls can be unreliable due to fear, social pressure, and strategic silence. Still, the overall picture is one of political caution, structural constraints, and limited trust in systemic change.

No one was surprised. Not in Moscow, not in the provinces. The 2024 election felt less like a choice and more like a scene from a play everyone had seen before—Putin, once again, center stage, curtain rising on a familiar script. With media monopolization, limited opposition, and low public enthusiasm, this was not about who people wanted—it was about what the system needed to show: order, control, and a leader wrapped in national destiny (Lipman, 2023).

Figure 1. Public Support for Democracy in Russia (2012–2024)



Source: Adapted from Levada Center surveys, 2012–2024.

Data for “Support for Democracy” trend derived from annual Levada Center reports; graphic lines interpolated by author.

This chart illustrates a steady decline in the percentage of Russian citizens who express support for democratic governance. The data reflect a combination of disillusionment, authoritarian adaptation, and the fading appeal of liberal political models following the 1990s. Although external factors like Western sanctions and internal repression contribute to this trend, the decline also reflects deep-rooted cultural and historical skepticism toward pluralism.

Table 5. Selected Quotes from Public Opinion Interviews

Quote	Implication	Illustrative Source
The state may be flawed, but it keeps us from falling apart.	Justifies support for strong government	Levada Center Focus Group, 2023
I do not trust elections, but Putin is still better than chaos.	Legitimizes leadership via comparison to the past	Author Interview, Moscow Resident, 2024
We need stability more than we need freedom.	Security valued over democratic participation	Gessen (2017); Etkind (2013)
Young people complain but do not understand collapse.	Dismisses reformers as naive	Observational Quote from Street Interviews, 2022
I read social media but believe nothing, Russian or Western.	Reflects widespread political cynicism	Levada Center, Trust in Media Survey, 2023
My pension is small, but at least it arrives on time. That’s what matters.	Evaluates regime by pragmatic outcomes	Frye (2017); Citizen Economics Survey, 2023

We are not Europe. We have our own way of surviving and governing.	Highlights civilizational exceptionalism	Etkind (2013); National Identity Polls, 2022
I'd vote for someone else, but who? They're either weak or not allowed to run.	Expresses disillusionment, not necessarily apathy	Hale & Colton (2009); Author Interviews, 2024

Source: Compiled by the author from Levada Center surveys (2022–2023), published works (Gessen, 2017; Etkind, 2013; Frye, 2017; Hale & Colton, 2009), and field interviews (2022–2024).

RITUAL, NOT RENEWAL

Officially, the election served as a demonstration of national unity and popular support. Yet voter turnout was modest, and surveys revealed that many Russians did not expect meaningful change regardless of the outcome (Levada Center, 2024). People showed up to vote, but not because they believed it mattered. It's more like a ritual—something you do because you're expected to, not because it changes anything, where electoral processes are more about confirming power than contesting it.

Under this system, citizens go through the motions of participation—not because they believe in the process, but because they perceive no alternative. Political behavior becomes habitual, even ritualistic, reinforcing stability rather than change.

Consolidating Historical Narratives

Putin is not just a man in power—he's become a symbol, stitched into Russia's story like Peter the Great or Stalin, depending on who's telling it. State narratives increasingly compare him to historical figures like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, framing him as a protector of Russian civilization (Sakwa, 2021). Such comparisons transform leadership into legacy, casting opposition as betrayal.

During the 2024 campaign, official discourse emphasized external threats and internal cohesion. During the campaign, it did not feel like politics. It felt like a call to duty: not 'Who should lead?' but 'Will you defend what Russia has always been?' This approach reinforced what this study terms narrative patriotism—a deep emotional identification with state mythology rather than civic participation.

This sentiment was especially visible in state media and education, which stressed resilience, sacrifice, and Russia's unique global role. The result is a political culture where devotion to the state becomes a personal virtue.

Youth Cynicism and Generational Drift

Older generations still clapped. The young mostly shrugged—or did not show up at all. For them, politics is something distant, sometimes dangerous, rarely useful. Many under 30 abstained from voting, citing lack of alternatives, frustration with censorship, or apathy toward politics (Tucker et al., 2021). It's not rebellion. It's not hope. It's a quiet kind of giving up—'What's the point?' whispered in dorm rooms and coffee shops, far from polling stations.

As Greene (2022) argues, authoritarian regimes often survive not because people love them, but because they believe resistance is futile. This perception is particularly strong in environments where repression is routine and civil society is weak. However, dissatisfaction can turn into mobilization during crises, such as military drafts or economic shocks. The surface calm after the 2024 election may therefore mask deeper instability.

Institutional Personalization and Strategic Rigidity

The constitutional changes of 2020, which allow Putin to remain in power until 2036, signaled a deeper personalization of authority. This institutional flexibility masks strategic rigidity: the longer one man embodies the state, the harder it becomes to adapt to change (Gel'man, 2015).

Even the insiders know the trap: move too fast, and you're a threat. Stay quiet, and you survive. In Putin's Russia, loyalty is safer than ideas. In this sense, the 2024 election entrenched a political order that appears stable but may be increasingly brittle beneath the surface.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

This final section outlines both practical recommendations and strategic foresight. Anyone—inside or outside Russia—who wants to understand how change might happen must first accept a hard truth: this system was not built overnight, and it will not be shaken by slogans. The roots go deeper—into classrooms, memories, and even lullabies.

Educational Reform and Historical Pluralism

One of the most effective ways to challenge authoritarian resilience is through education. Current Russian curricula present a monolithic view of history centered on state triumphs and external threats. Patriotism and questioning authority do not have to be enemies. A history class that teaches more than victory could help young Russians love their country without fearing its past (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Programs that promote oral history, digital archives, and comparative historical study could empower students to form their own interpretations of Russia’s past—independent of official mythology.

Media Literacy and Youth Engagement

In a world where truth is buried under noise, teaching young people *how* to think—not *what* to think—might be the quietest, most powerful form of resistance. As traditional media is tightly controlled, online platforms have become both a source of diversity and confusion. Teaching young people how to assess information critically—without prescribing what to believe—would help them navigate between propaganda and disinformation (Tucker et al., 2017).

Engaging youth through culture, education, and decentralized activism (rather than top-down NGOs) offers greater potential for gradual change. Civic disengagement is not apathy—it is often a survival strategy. Offering safe spaces for political discussion could help reverse this trend.

Supporting Independent Institutions

While many external efforts focus on political opposition, long-term democratic potential depends on institutional depth. Supporting independent legal bodies, municipal governments, and academic institutions can create zones of relative autonomy and innovation.” These do not need to be overtly political; even neutral expertise and transparent governance can erode the monopoly of centralized authority over time (Robertson, 2011).

FUTURE SCENARIOS: THREE POSSIBLE TRAJECTORIES

Based on existing trends and vulnerabilities, Russia may follow one of three broad scenarios in the post-2024 era:

Scenario 1: Stability That Smothers – The Regime Holds, But the Air Grows Thin

In order to illustrate one of the possible political continuity scenarios discussed in the literature, the following projection is considered: Putin stays in charge. The system does not collapse, but it also does not really change. It bends just enough to avoid breaking. New rules are written here and there, but they are more like patches on an old coat than real reforms. The goal is survival, not renewal.

People go along with it. Not because they love the system, not because they truly believe in it, but because they are tired. Tired of waiting for change that never comes, tired of speaking up and paying the price, tired of hoping. Silence feels safer. Routine feels easier. Many think: *“At least things are not worse.”*

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On the outside, the state still looks strong. The leaders speak with confidence, the police remain visible, and the news channels repeat the same stories. To the world, Russia sends a clear message: *we are still here, and we are not moving.*

But under the surface, life feels heavy. The economy slows. Young people dream of leaving. Families avoid politics at the dinner table. Creativity hides in small corners—on the internet, in private conversations, in jokes whispered between friends. Society breathes, but only just. The air feels thin.

This is not collapse, but it is not real life either. It is survival without hope. A country standing, but not walking forward. A kind of stability that slowly smothers its own people.

Scenario 2: The Chosen Heir – Change Without a Real Choice

Putin finally steps aside, but not in defeat. He chooses his successor, someone loyal enough to keep the system intact, yet fresh enough to offer the image of renewal. The new leader smiles more, speaks of modernization, and promises reforms that sound different—but feel strangely familiar.

At first, people breathe a little easier. The speeches are gentler, the tone less heavy. There is talk of opening doors, of listening more, of building trust with the world. Hope flickers, though carefully, like a candle in the wind.

But soon it becomes clear: the old rules have not gone anywhere. Power still flows from the same networks, decisions are still made behind closed doors, and the promises of reform are more about style than substance. The heir rules, but the system remains Putin's creation. It has his fingerprints on every wall.

For the people, this is change without real choice. They see a new face on the posters, but the script stays the same. Some accept it gratefully—better a softer voice than a harsh one. Others feel cheated, as if history has tricked them again. Young people sense the illusion fastest, whispering that nothing has truly shifted.

Abroad, foreign governments watch carefully, wondering if this is a genuine opening or just another mask. Some are willing to believe, eager for stability. Others shake their heads, seeing continuity dressed up as change.

And so Russia enters a strange new chapter: not revolution, not collapse, not even true reform. Just a passing of the crown from one hand to another, a play that looks different only if you do not stay for the second act.

Scenario 3: The Break – Collapse, Protest, and the Unknown

To exemplify a potential scenario of abrupt political change frequently highlighted in governance studies, the following statement is used one day, everything snaps. It might be an economic shock, a scandal too big to hide, or a protest that grows faster than the state can control. The exact spark is unknown, but the effect is sudden: the system begins to crack.

Crowds fill the streets, louder and braver than before. Fear, which held people back for so long, starts to lose its grip. Police try to contain the anger, but their numbers are too small, and their loyalty begins to waver. The air is electric with both hope and danger.

For some, this feels like the long-awaited chance to build a freer Russia. They dream of open elections, of a press that speaks honestly, of leaders who answer to the people. For others, it feels terrifying: the collapse of order, the threat of chaos, the risk of something even harsher rising in place of the old regime.

The future hangs in the balance. Will it be a new beginning, or simply another cycle of repression under a different name? No one knows. Families are divided between hope and fear; neighbors whisper different visions of tomorrow. The streets are full, but the future is unclear.

And in the background, the world watches. Western pressure cannot dictate Russia's fate, but it can shape the rhythm of events—the speed of collapse, the cost of rebuilding, the way new structures form. The challenge is delicate: to support change without crushing it under the weight of outside interference, to push without pushing people back into silence.

This is the break: uncertain, dangerous, full of risk—yet also, for the first time in years, full of possibility.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that contemporary political preferences in Russia are shaped not only by mechanisms of propaganda or coercion but also by enduring historical memories, collective identities, and deeply rooted narratives of statehood and stability. Addressing the first research question, the analysis shows that Russia's historical memory—particularly experiences associated with Soviet power, the socio-economic disruptions of the 1990s, and recurring perceptions of external threat—continues to play a central role in structuring political attitudes. These shared memories contribute to a preference for order, predictability, and strong state authority, which are often perceived as safeguards against uncertainty rather than as constraints on political freedom.

With regard to the second question, the findings suggest that Vladimir Putin's leadership has not created these narratives but has effectively adapted to and reinforced them. Putin's political

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dominance is best understood as embedded within a broader historical and ideological framework that resonates with long-standing public expectations regarding sovereignty, security, and centralized authority. Support for his leadership thus reflects not blind loyalty but a convergence between state discourse and pre-existing societal understandings shaped by historical experience.

Finally, in response to the third research question, the analysis indicates that future trends in Russian public opinion following the 2024 elections are likely to reflect continuity rather than abrupt transformation. While generational and regional differences remain significant, prevailing narratives emphasizing stability, national pride, and resilience suggest that major shifts in political preferences are unlikely in the absence of profound structural or historical disruption. Public attitudes are expected to continue balancing concerns over uncertainty with aspirations for security and collective identity.

Overall, the study underscores that Russian politics cannot be reduced to the actions of a single leader or explained solely through repression or information control. Political preferences in Russia emerge from a complex interaction between historical memory, identity formation, and lived experience. Recognizing this complexity is essential for understanding both the persistence of current political patterns and the conditions under which meaningful change might occur.

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