

The Russian Public and the Early 1990s: Economic Shock, Social Trauma, Enduring Beliefs

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the lived experience of Russia's exit from communism has continued to shape the beliefs and values of its citizens well into the twenty-first century. Drawing on regional variation in Soviet industrial structure, retrospective survey data from 2006 and 2025, and cross-country comparisons, it documents a durable connection between the economic shock of the early 1990s and Russians' weak support for democratic values. The regional imprint of Soviet planning on political attitudes persists in measures of democratic demand through 2010 and 2017. Individual-level evidence from the 2006 *Life in Transition Survey* shows that labor market hardships during the early 1990s are associated with weaker democratic and market-oriented values a decade and a half later, with the relationship particularly pronounced in Russia relative to other former Soviet republics. New survey evidence from November 2025 replicates the temporal specificity of this pattern more than three decades after the shock. Unlike much of the impressionable-years literature, the relationship extends across age cohorts, suggesting a shock of unusual magnitude. The combination of economic pain and the identity and status loss accompanying Soviet dissolution, distinctive to the Russian experience, helps explain the depth and durability of the imprint. The evidence suggests that Putin-era appeals to the trauma of the 1990s did not create these political dispositions so much as exploit beliefs whose origins reached back to the transition itself.

1 Introduction

In his much-discussed 2005 address to Russia’s Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin ticked through a list of traumas that followed in the wake of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, including the devaluation of household savings, the spread of mass poverty, and the rise of an unfettered oligarchic class, before observing that those difficult years had forced Russians to forge their own path and recover their essential values. Writing more than a decade later, Vladimir Yakunin, a Kremlin insider and former head of Russian Railways, made a similar point with equal directness in his 2018 memoir: “[S]omeone who does not make an attempt to comprehend Russia as it was then, in the hard years after 1991, will, I think, struggle to understand Russia as it is now” (Yakunin 2018).

Whether rooted in political calculation, sensitivity to the popular mood, or genuine conviction, the view these two men share is neither remarkable nor surprising. That Russians who lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union and its economic system would have their worldviews shaped in enduring ways should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the imprint of the Great Depression (Elder 1974). Nor should it surprise anyone who has engaged with the ethnographies and oral histories of the early 1990s (Shevchenko 2009; Parsons 2014; Alexievich 2016). Personal accounts leave little doubt about the emotional weight of that period or its lasting influence.

This chapter argues that the lived experience of the first post-communist years has continued to shape the beliefs and values of Russia’s citizens well into the twenty-first century and, the evidence suggests, to the present day. The enduring beliefs at the center of this argument are political in character: weak and declining support for democratic governance and norms, and a blind and militant patriotism that has made Russians unusually willing to support their country’s pursuit of national interests even at the cost of conflict with others (Alexeev and Pyle 2023). Understanding this connection is essential for contextualizing the country Putin came to lead, the anti-democratic turn he embraced while in office, and the Russia he will ultimately leave to his successor. The chapter proceeds in three steps, synthesizing published research by myself and co-authors (Natkhov and Pyle 2023; Alexeev et al. 2025; Alexeev and Pyle 2023; Pyle 2021) and introducing new evidence that extends and deepens that work.

First, I summarize a broad and growing literature on aggregate shocks and the formation of preferences and beliefs, which speaks directly to what we observe in Russia. Two central insights from this literature are particularly relevant to the Russian case. One is that shocks experienced during young adulthood leave disproportionately deep and durable imprints; for those past their formative years, effects tend to be shallower and more transitory, fading

as the shock recedes. The other is that negative economic shocks tend to push political preferences in an illiberal direction, eroding trust in institutions and weakening support for democratic values, at least in the short to medium run. The Russian case stands apart within this literature in three respects: the effect on political values appears to have endured not merely for years but for decades; it is also not confined to those who were young adults during the early 1990s, extending instead across age cohorts, as though the shock were of sufficient magnitude to leave durable marks even on those past their impressionable years; and the pattern appears unique to Russia within the post-Soviet world, consistent with the view that the economic shock was amplified by a dimension of loss that other former Soviet republics did not experience in the same way.

Second, after summarizing Russia's experience with market-oriented reforms in the 1990s, I examine the *regional* dimension of Russia's story to trace how the post-communist economic shock shaped political values in both the short and long run. Using data from a late-Soviet-era industrial census, Natkhov and Pyle (2023) link regional vulnerability to market and trade liberalization to the erosion of support for the anti-communist reformer Boris Yeltsin. New evidence on regional mortality rates reinforces this connection, pointing to the material and psychological hardships associated with that vulnerability. The work of Alexeev et al. (2025) further shows that a similar geographically patterned shift in democratic values persisted through 2010 and 2017.

Third, I turn to the *individual* dimension of that same connection. Drawing on retrospective survey data from 2006 and 2025, I show that Russians who experienced severe material hardship in the two- to three-year period immediately following the Soviet collapse place significantly less weight on democratic values than those who did not. This relationship persists three decades after the fact, while economic shocks in later periods show no comparable relationship with political values.

Woven throughout the discussion is the recognition that the way Russian citizens experienced the early 1990s differed fundamentally from the experience of their post-Soviet neighbors. The difference lies not in the depth of economic pain alone, but in its combination with a loss of imperial status that Russians experienced in a distinctive way. As Krastev and Holmes (2019) observe, what was celebrated elsewhere in the region as liberation was mourned in Russia as a loss of territory, population, and global stature. This combination, the chapter concludes, helps explain not only Russians' persistent skepticism of democratic governance but also their embrace of a blind and militant patriotism that has lowered the cost to Putin of both his anti-democratic policies at home and his military aggression abroad (Alexeev and Pyle 2023).

To be clear, this chapter does not dismiss the role of Putin and the state media machine in

shaping Russian society’s political worldview. Sharafutdinova (2020) makes a compelling and well-documented case that the Kremlin has systematically exploited the memory of the 1990s as a political foil, transforming collective pain into a vehicle for authoritarian legitimation. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that in doing so Putin was pushing at an open door. The attitudes were already in place; the trauma was real, not wholly manufactured.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the Russian evidence within the broader literature on aggregate shocks and belief formation. Section 3 describes Russia’s exit from communism, emphasizing the scale of economic disruption, the distinctive severity of the mortality crisis, and the emotional resonance of lived experience, all of which frame the empirical analysis and discussion that follow in later sections. Section 4 develops the regional evidence, tracing the link from Soviet industrial structure through mortality to democratic demand. Section 5 presents individual-level evidence from retrospective surveys conducted in 2006 and 2025. Section 6 draws the threads together, engaging with the question of what the evidence implies for our understanding of the country Putin came to lead, the anti-democratic and revanchist turn he embraced in office, and the Russia he will ultimately leave to his successor.

2 Aggregate Shocks and the Formation of Beliefs

A generation of empirical research has overturned what was long a working assumption in economics: that preferences are stable, and that changes in behavior reflect shifting circumstances rather than shifting tastes or beliefs (Stigler and Becker 1977). A large and growing literature now documents that aggregate shocks, including recessions, bouts of inflation, and trade disruptions, leave measurable and often lasting imprints on the values, attitudes, and political preferences of those who live through them. The recent synthesis of Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2025) provides the most comprehensive review of this evidence, spanning economics and other social science disciplines across dozens of studies. Margalit (2019) surveys a parallel literature in political science focused more narrowly on the political consequences of economic shocks at the individual level.

Several conclusions emerge consistently from this work. Aggregate shocks affect a wide range of preferences and beliefs, including political attitudes, support for redistribution, and views about the role of government. One finding is that negative economic shocks weaken support for democratic values and erode trust in political institutions, often increasing support for nationalist or authoritarian politics (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2025; Margalit 2019; Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Ballard-Rosa et al. 2021; Dippel et al. 2022). At the same time, they tend to raise support for redistribution and a more expansive welfare state

(Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2025; Margalit 2019; Margalit 2013). The effects are not limited to those directly harmed: aggregate shocks can reshape the underlying preferences of entire cohorts, not merely the information or expectations on which those preferences operate, and the resulting shifts can persist well beyond the immediate downturn.

Perhaps the most robust finding in this literature concerns the timing of exposure. The effect of a shock on beliefs and preferences is not uniform across the life course. Experiences during young adulthood exert a disproportionately strong and enduring influence on political attitudes, risk preferences, and social values. This “impressionable years” hypothesis (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2025) draws on multiple theoretical traditions. Social psychologists have long argued that core attitudes crystallize in early adulthood and prove resistant to subsequent revision. Economists have shown that individuals place greater weight on events they have personally witnessed, with that weight declining as those events recede into the past (Malmendier and Nagel 2011).

A central point of tension in the literature, however, concerns persistence. While formative-age effects tend to be strong and long-lasting, not all shocks leave lasting traces. Using panel data from the 2008–09 financial crisis, for instance, Margalit (2013) shows that individual job loss can produce attitudinal shifts that reverse upon re-employment. Understanding when shocks leave durable imprints, and when they do not, remains an open question and one the Russian evidence bears on in ways that the following sections will make clear.

3 Russia’s Exit from Communism

3.1 The Inheritance and the Response to Market Liberalization

The Soviet economic system operated through centralized plans. The state owned almost all natural resources and physical capital and directed most output through tens of thousands of enterprises. Prices were set bureaucratically and served accounting and monitoring functions rather than the allocative ones they perform in market economies. Because they reflected neither use values nor opportunity costs, they concealed gross inefficiencies and left the system, by the late 1980s, as a “structure of capital and economic activity that [was] fundamentally non-viable in an environment determined by market valuation” (Ericson 1999).

No sector more fully embodied these pathologies than manufacturing (Hughes and Hare 1992; Senik-Leygonie and Hughes 1992; Ericson 1999). Burdened by outdated assets and redundant labor, it had become, in the estimation of leading experts, a destroyer of value, a sector in which material inputs were worth more in economic terms than outputs (Gaddy and Ickes 1999).

By 1985, if not well before, Soviet economic stagnation had become impossible to ignore. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new General Secretary, introduced partial reforms that challenged neither the Communist Party's leading role nor the centrality of planning and state ownership, yet nonetheless destabilized the country and ultimately hastened its collapse (Zubok 2021).

In the spring of 1991, as the Soviet Union entered its final year, Russians went to the polls to elect a president of the Russian Republic. Boris Yeltsin, running as an independent backed by Democratic Russia, a loose coalition of pro-democracy and pro-sovereignty movements, won 58.6 percent of the national vote. Although massive demonstrations were held in support of his candidacy, Yeltsin neither campaigned actively nor articulated clear policy priorities. The rapid market liberalization program that would define his presidency did not take shape until the autumn.

In early December, several months after a coup he had helped foil, Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus signed an accord that set in motion the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On Christmas Day, Gorbachev resigned, and the following day the Soviet parliament passed a declaration recognizing that the USSR had ceased to exist. Where there had been one country, there were now fifteen.

A week later, as 1992 began, the Yeltsin government rolled out a program of rapid market liberalization in the newly independent Russian Federation. The planning bureaucracy was disempowered, the ruble was made convertible, and prices on nearly all consumer and producer goods were liberalized. International trade was opened and markets, both domestic and international, became the primary mechanisms for determining what would be produced and how.

A stunning collapse ensued. Enterprises that had been sustained by subsidies, distorted prices, and captive suppliers found themselves unprepared for competitive markets. From its 1991 level, Russia's real per capita GDP fell by nearly a third by 1994 and by roughly 40 percent by 1998.¹ In the emerging labor market, wage arrears and unemployment rose sharply (Desai and Idson 2000; Earle and Sabirianova 2002).

Figure 1 places this collapse in comparative perspective. Like Russia, the non-Russian former Soviet republics experienced severe and prolonged contractions during the 1990s, with their combined real GDP per capita falling to roughly 60 percent of its 1991 level by the middle of the decade. Russia's material collapse, in other words, was not meaningfully worse than that of its neighbors.

When Yeltsin launched his re-election campaign in early 1996, his popularity had plummeted alongside the economy, and he was widely expected to lose to the Communist Party

¹The decline in consumption per capita over this period was less severe than the decline in GDP per capita.

candidate, Gennady Zyuganov. Yet, in what one close observer called “the last referendum on communism – a vote between two different political and economic systems” (McFaul 1996), Yeltsin secured a 35.8 percent plurality in the first round before winning a majority in the runoff.

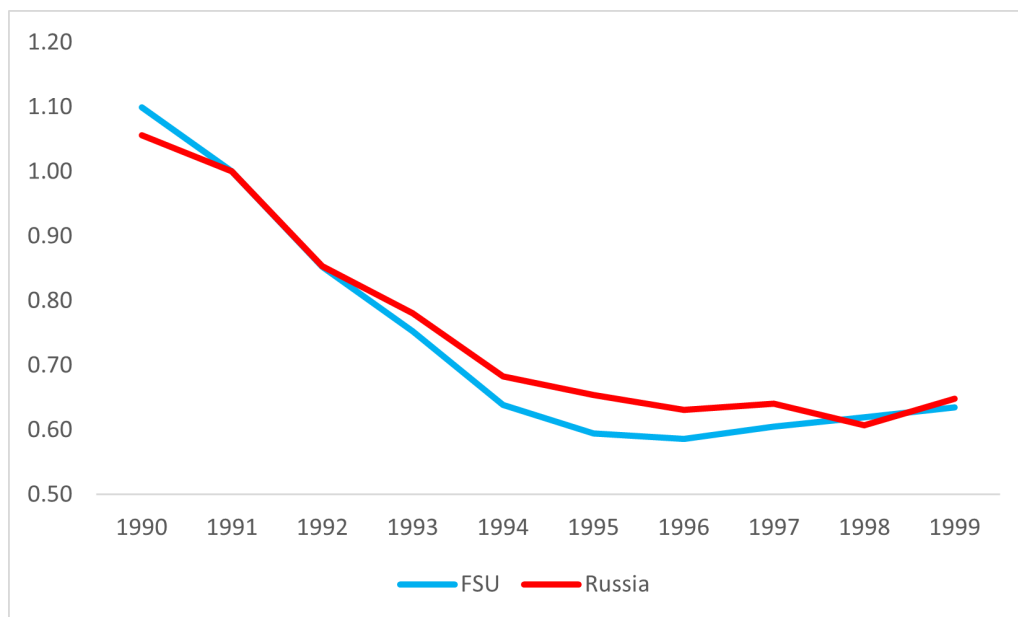


Figure 1: Real GDP per capita, Russia and the non-Russian former Soviet Union, 1990–1999 (indexed to 1991 = 1.0). The FSU series aggregates real GDP (constant 2015 US\$) across all former Soviet republics excluding Russia and divides by their combined population. Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators.

3.2 The Human Cost: A Divergent Mortality Crisis

While Russia’s economic contraction in the 1990s was broadly in line with that experienced elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the deterioration in its population health was far more dramatic. Figure 2 plots life expectancy at birth, indexed to 1991, for Russia and the FSU excluding Russia. At the beginning of the decade, life expectancy was similar across the two groups: in 1991, the FSU (excluding Russia) averaged approximately 67.1 years, while Russia stood at 68.5 years. Between 1991 and 1994, however, Russia experienced a precipitous decline, with life expectancy falling by four years in just three years, or roughly 6 percent. Over the same period, the rest of the FSU saw a considerably more modest decline of about 2 percent.

The divergence is striking. While both series reach their troughs in the mid-1990s, Russia’s decline was roughly three times as large in relative terms. The rest of the FSU began a

sustained recovery, returning to its late-Soviet level by the decade’s end. Russia, by contrast, experienced only a partial recovery by 1998 before slipping again in 1999, ending the decade at roughly 4 percent below its 1991 level.

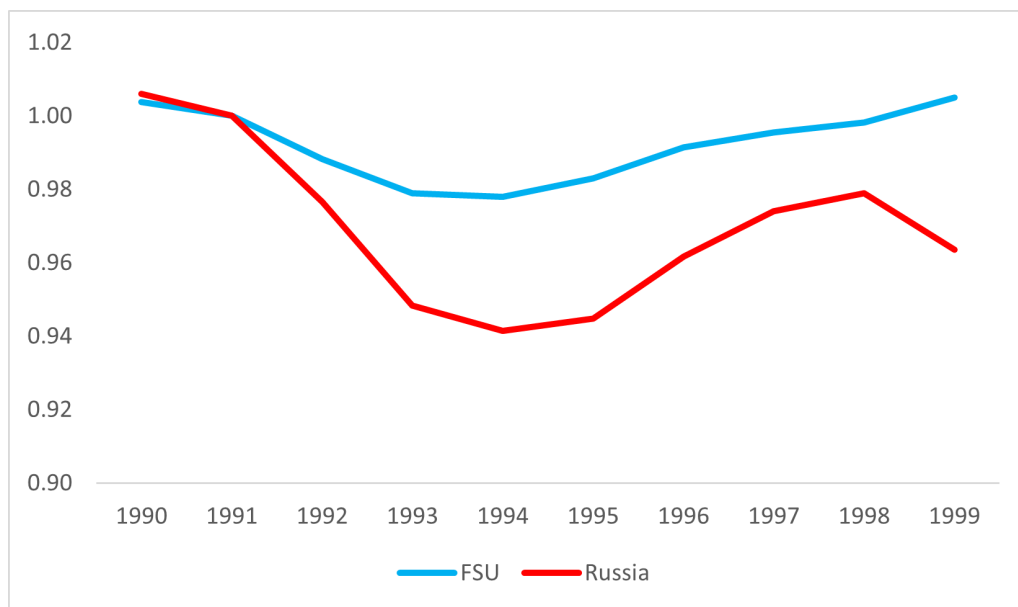


Figure 2: Life expectancy at birth, Russia and the non-Russian former Soviet Union, 1990–1999 (indexed to 1991 = 1.0). The FSU series is the unweighted average across all former Soviet republics excluding Russia. Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators.

The aggregate decline in life expectancy understates the severity of Russia’s mortality crisis for particular groups. The burden fell overwhelmingly on working-age men, with cardiovascular disease and “external causes,” including homicide and accidental death, among the leading drivers (Brainerd and Cutler 2005). Male suicide rates also rose sharply in the early 1990s; by 1994, the rate for Russian men aged 50 to 54 was more than six times that of their American counterparts (Brainerd 2001).²

A common thread linking cardiovascular disease, violent deaths, and suicide was alcohol (Brainerd and Cutler 2005). Consumption rose sharply as supply restrictions associated with a Gorbachev-era anti-alcohol campaign collapsed. One influential account attributes a large share of Russia’s mortality crisis to the demise of that campaign, assigning a relatively minor role to economic liberalization (Bhattacharya et al. 2013). The evidence, however, does not support so sharp a separation. A study of mid-sized Russian towns finds that the decline in industrial employment following the 1992 liberalization was independently and robustly associated with mortality, even after controlling for alcohol consumption (Scheiring et al.

²Similar patterns of elevated working-age male mortality were also observed in some other non-Muslim former Soviet republics, though generally less severe than in Russia.

2023). The two processes, alcohol rebound and economic shock, converged in the early 1990s and reinforced one another, shaping the geography of the mortality crisis in ways that track the geography of the industrial inheritance, a connection taken up directly in Section 4.

3.3 Beyond Material Deprivation

The mortality patterns described above already point to something more than material deprivation alone. The concentration of deaths among working-age men, the prominence of cardiovascular disease and external causes, and the sharp rise in suicide are difficult to reconcile with income loss alone. They suggest a population under acute psychological strain.

Macroeconomic indicators, arresting as they are, thus capture only part of the story. Ethnographies and oral histories complement this picture by bringing into focus the emotional weight of the early 1990s (Shevchenko 2009; Parsons 2014; Alexievich 2016). These accounts converge on a view in which the impact of Yeltsin’s reforms extended well beyond their immediate material consequences. In this sense, the ethnographic record echoes a broader theme in the literature reviewed in Section 2 (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2025) that aggregate shocks shape preferences and beliefs through channels, including identity, that go well beyond narrowly defined income loss.

The anthropologist Michelle Parsons, drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted in the context of Russia’s mortality crisis, emphasizes how the early 1990s eroded an entire generation’s sense of being needed, notably by disrupting its connection to what Soviet society had institutionalized as socially useful work. In Soviet times, work was the central mechanism through which citizens were integrated into the social order. It structured social relations, fostered mutual recognition, and, as both a right and an obligation, gave people a sense of having a place in society. In the immediate aftermath of Yeltsin’s liberalization shock, however, that sense of being part of a larger social order was weakened; labor market hardships carried a force that went well beyond the loss of income (Parsons 2014, pp. 79–88).

Visiting Moscow in the late 1990s, Olga Shevchenko described Russian society as having entered a state of “routinized emergency” (Shevchenko 2009, p. 65). “Crisis” [*krizis*], she observes, had become normalized. Her interlocutors divided their lives into a seemingly distant “before,” a period of modest incomes, relative social equality, and personal security, and the “after” of crime, social polarization, and economic insecurity. Strikingly, even though 1998 marked the nadir of the post-Soviet recession for Russia, the years her interlocutors identified as having shaken them most had come at least five years earlier. And what distinguished those years for Russians in particular, Shevchenko notes, was that the upheaval they had brought was unaccompanied by a “legitimizing rhetoric of national liberation” frequent in

the former Union republics, leaving Russians to experience the post-Soviet years exclusively “as a form of betrayal and loss” (Shevchenko 2009, p. 58).

For Russians, who had occupied positions of relative privilege in the Soviet order and tended to identify with the Union itself rather than with the republic that housed them (Tolz 1998; Hosking 1998), the dissolution registered not as liberation but as diminished territory, population, and stature. The evidence to follow suggests that this combination of economic shock and status loss gave Russia’s political trauma a depth and durability that set it apart from the rest of the post-Soviet world.

4 Regional Exposure to Market Liberalization

The preceding sections have established two things: that the early 1990s were a period of exceptional material and psychological hardship in Russia, and that a broad literature gives us reason to expect aggregate shocks of that kind to leave imprints on political values. The evidence developed in this section traces those imprints, in the short run and, ultimately, across a generation. The strategy for doing so exploits geographic variation in the industrial structure inherited from the Soviet era, which, as the following subsection explains, provides a plausible basis for identifying the causal effect of the liberalization shock.

4.1 The Industrial Legacy as Proxy

The identification strategy rests on a simple but powerful insight: the industrial location decisions of central planners reflected strategic, administrative, and ideological factors bearing no obvious relationship to the political preferences of the regions that would later emerge from communism. That geography nonetheless would determine which parts of Russia were most exposed to the pain of market liberalization in the months and years after January 1992.

The logic begins with the well-established observation that no sector more fully embodied the pathologies of Soviet central planning than manufacturing, which was burdened by outdated assets, redundant workforces, and products that were, in the formulation of Gaddy and Ickes (1999), outright “value-destroying.” When Yeltsin’s government liberalized prices and opened trade overnight, enterprises that had operated within a web of captive customers, distorted prices, and state subsidies found themselves suddenly exposed to market forces for which they were wholly unprepared.

Crucially, that vulnerability varied across Russia’s regions. Some had inherited heavy concentrations of manufacturing employment; others were more oriented toward natural

resources, agriculture, or services. It is this variation that the analysis here exploits to isolate the causal effect of the market liberalization shock on political outcomes.³

In the analyses that follow, the primary measure of a region’s market vulnerability is its per capita manufacturing employment, drawn from the 1989 Census of Soviet Industry, which recorded the sector, location, and employment of over 21,000 civilian industrial enterprises across the Russian Federation (Natkhov and Pyle 2023). Taken as a share of the regional population, this variable provides a clean pre-shock snapshot of inherited industrial structure and serves as the key measure of regional vulnerability to market liberalization.

4.2 The Collapse in Support for Yeltsin

The first test of this identification strategy concerns political preferences in the short run. Boris Yeltsin was simultaneously the architect of Russia’s market liberalization and, until 1991, its most prominent democratic reformer. As described in Section 3, he had swept to the presidency in June 1991 on a wave of enthusiasm for democratic change. The economic program that would define his presidency had not yet taken shape; voters who supported him were, in large part, voting for democratic transformation rather than for any specific economic agenda (Urban 1992). When he stood for re-election, the picture had changed dramatically. By the mid-1990s, he was the incumbent whose liberalizing reforms had become associated with economic collapse and rapid deterioration in public health. His bid for a second term would thus not only be the “last referendum on communism” (McFaul 1996), it would be a verdict on the democratic and market projects to which he was tied.

That verdict would be harsh. Between the first rounds of the two elections, Yeltsin’s nationwide vote share fell by nearly 23 percentage points. Highlighting the geography of that abandonment, Gehlbach (2000) observed that Yeltsin’s vote shares in 1991 and 1996 were only weakly correlated at the provincial level, a striking finding given prior commentary emphasizing the geographic stability of his base and his reliance, in both years, on well-educated urban voters (McFaul 1996; Berezkin et al. 1999). The geographic basis of Yeltsin’s support had shifted fundamentally between the two elections. Building on this observation, Natkhov and Pyle (2023) showed that the reorientation of support was a function of Soviet industrial geography. The decline in Yeltsin’s support was greatest in parts of the country whose inherited industrial structures made them most vulnerable to market competition, a

³This approach borrows a fundamental idea from the “China shock” literature (Autor et al. 2013; Autor et al. 2020). Just as that literature uses the pre-existing industrial structure of local labor markets to measure their exposure to the surge in Chinese imports, the strategy here uses the pre-existing manufacturing intensity of Russian regions to measure their exposure to the market liberalization of 1992. In both cases, the key identifying assumption is that inherited industrial structure was determined by forces predating the shock and plausibly unrelated to the political or attitudinal outcomes we seek to explain.

finding they established at the sub-provincial district level.⁴

The analysis in this section operates at the provincial level, reflecting the demands of the analyses that follow, which link the economic shock of the early 1990s to longer-run measures of democratic values that are available only at the provincial level. The cost is some loss of identification precision; the benefit is a chain of evidence that runs from Soviet industrial structure to political values measured across a generation.

Figure 3 presents the primary finding in a binned scatter plot at the provincial level: manufacturing employment as a share of the population in 1989 is strongly negatively associated with the change in Yeltsin’s vote share between 1991 and 1996.⁵ Regions whose Soviet-era production profiles made them most vulnerable to market liberalization saw Yeltsin’s support collapse most sharply.

4.3 Mortality in the 1990s

The electoral evidence of the preceding subsection establishes that Soviet industrial structure shaped voting patterns in a manner consistent with differential exposure to economic dislocation. The outcome measure, that is, is a political one. A more direct measure of material hardship is mortality. If the most manufacturing-intensive regions were genuinely the sites of the greatest economic and social distress, we should observe elevated death rates there in the years following liberalization. The mortality evidence presented in this subsection confirms exactly that.

Figure 4 presents the primary evidence in the form of an event study, plotting the year-by-year effects of manufacturing exposure and pre-campaign alcohol consumption on the crude death rate, with both variables standardized to unit standard deviation so their coefficients are directly comparable.

The contrast between the two series is informative. The alcohol series goes negative before 1992, reflecting the campaign’s suppression of mortality in heavier-drinking regions, and turns sharply positive after 1992 as the rebound took hold, exactly the pattern documented by Bhattacharya et al. (2013). The manufacturing series, by contrast, is flat and near zero

⁴Natkhov and Pyle (2023) argue that analysis at the district level allows provincial policy variation to be controlled for, thereby helping isolate the independent effect of inherited economic structure on the change in support for Yeltsin.

⁵Though the presentation in Figure 3 is new, the underlying logic and the core empirical relationship it depicts reflect the findings of Natkhov and Pyle (2023) and, in its connection to longer-run values, anticipate the work of Alexeev et al. (2025) discussed in section 4.4. Nighttime light intensity provides a complementary check on the mechanism. Natkhov and Pyle (2023) show that districts with more manufacturing-intensive inherited structures experienced larger declines in night-light intensity between 1992 and 1996, confirming that the structural inheritance shaped not only political behavior but actual economic activity. Nighttime light data are first available in 1992, so the temporal alignment with the 1991–96 change in support for Yeltsin is not exact.

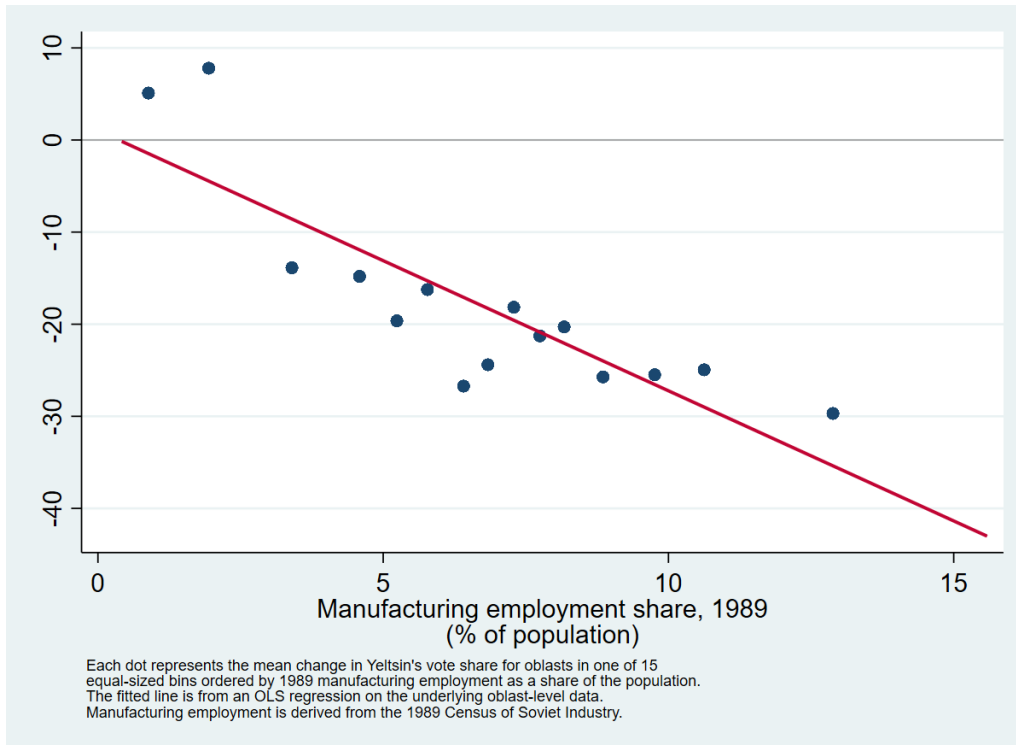


Figure 3: Each dot represents one of 15 equal-sized bins of oblasts ordered by 1989 manufacturing employment share as a fraction of the regional population. The vertical axis shows the change in Yeltsin's vote share between the first rounds of the 1991 and 1996 presidential elections, in percentage points. The fitted line is from an OLS regression on the underlying province-level data. Manufacturing employment is derived from the 1989 Census of Soviet Industry.

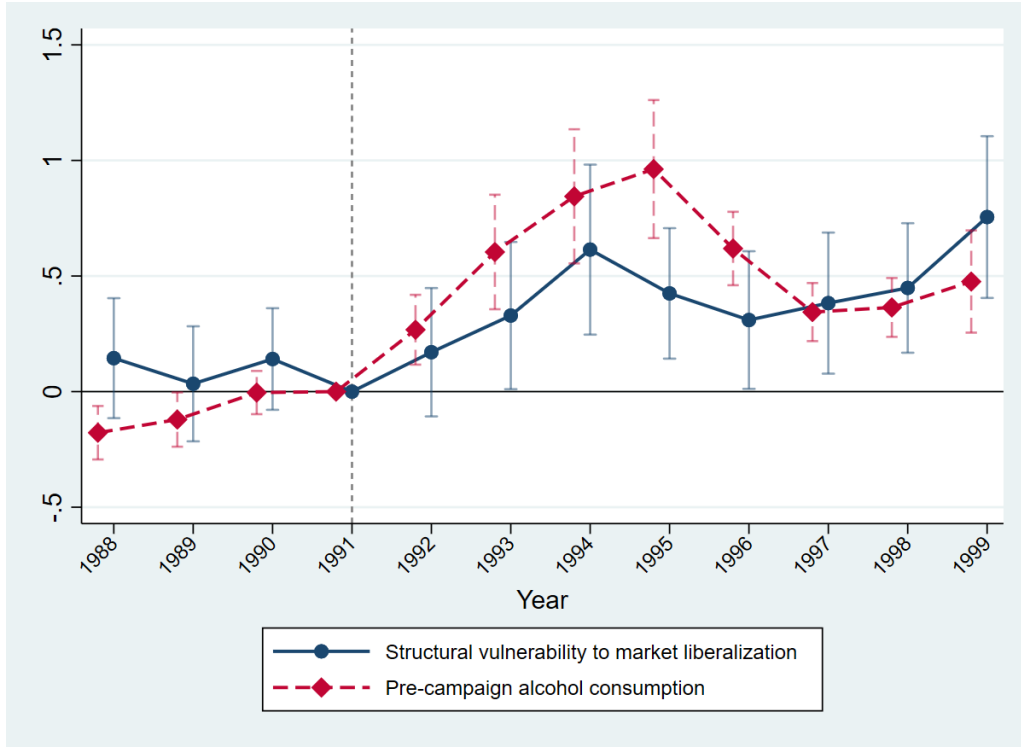


Figure 4: Both series are drawn from a single fixed effects regression of the crude death rate (per 1,000 population) on interactions of each variable with year dummies, with oblast and year fixed effects and 1991 as the base year. Both variables are standardized to unit standard deviation so coefficients are directly comparable. The vertical axis shows the effect on the crude death rate per 1,000 population per one standard deviation increase in each variable. The manufacturing exposure variable is 1989 manufacturing employment as a share of the regional population, drawn from the 1989 Census of Soviet Industry. The alcohol variable is mean pre-campaign total alcohol consumption, 1980–1984, following Bhattacharya et al. (2013). Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

before 1992, indicating no evidence of differential pre-trends: inherited industrial structure did not predict differential mortality before the liberalization shock arrived. After 1991, it rises persistently and significantly, peaking around 1994 before remaining elevated through the end of the decade. The two series thus capture distinct phenomena, and manufacturing exposure retains an independent and significant effect on mortality even after the alcohol channel is controlled for.

Figure 5 decomposes the mortality effect by cause of death, using cancer mortality as a placebo. The logic is straightforward. Cardiovascular disease and violent and accidental deaths, both of which can respond relatively quickly to acute economic and psychosocial stress, as discussed in Section 3, should be elevated in manufacturing-intensive regions after 1992 if the mechanism is genuinely the economic shock. Cancer mortality, by contrast, develops over years or decades and should not respond to a short-run economic disruption.

The figure confirms this pattern. Cardiovascular and violent deaths rise sharply after 1992 in more manufacturing-exposed regions and remain elevated throughout the decade. Cancer deaths are flat near zero across the entire period. The divergence between the two series strengthens the causal account linking economic shock to acute mortality, and it maps directly onto the mechanisms identified in the ethnographic and epidemiological literature reviewed in Section 3, where alcohol, psychosocial strain, and the collapse of socially useful work were identified as proximate drivers of Russia’s distinctive mortality crisis.

Taken together, the mortality evidence serves two purposes in the argument of this chapter. First, it reinforces the electoral evidence by confirming that manufacturing-intensive regions experienced genuinely worse material outcomes after 1992. The political signal in Figure 3, that is, reflects real human cost, not merely a political response attributed to economic dislocation. Second, it connects the regional identification strategy to the broader portrait of Russia in the early 1990s drawn in Section 3. The Soviet industrial inheritance that shaped Russia’s transition did not only reshape how people voted. In manufacturing-heavy regions, it shortened lives.

4.4 Democratic Demand a Generation Later

If the economic shock of the early 1990s left enduring effects on political values, as the literature on aggregate shocks and belief formation suggests is possible, then Soviet industrial geography might continue to shape democratic demand well into the twenty-first century. Alexeev et al. (2025) test for this possibility directly. The primary data source is the Public Opinion Foundation’s 2010 *Georating Survey*, administered to 500 adults in almost every Russian province, yielding a total of 41,000 observations. Respondents were asked to identify

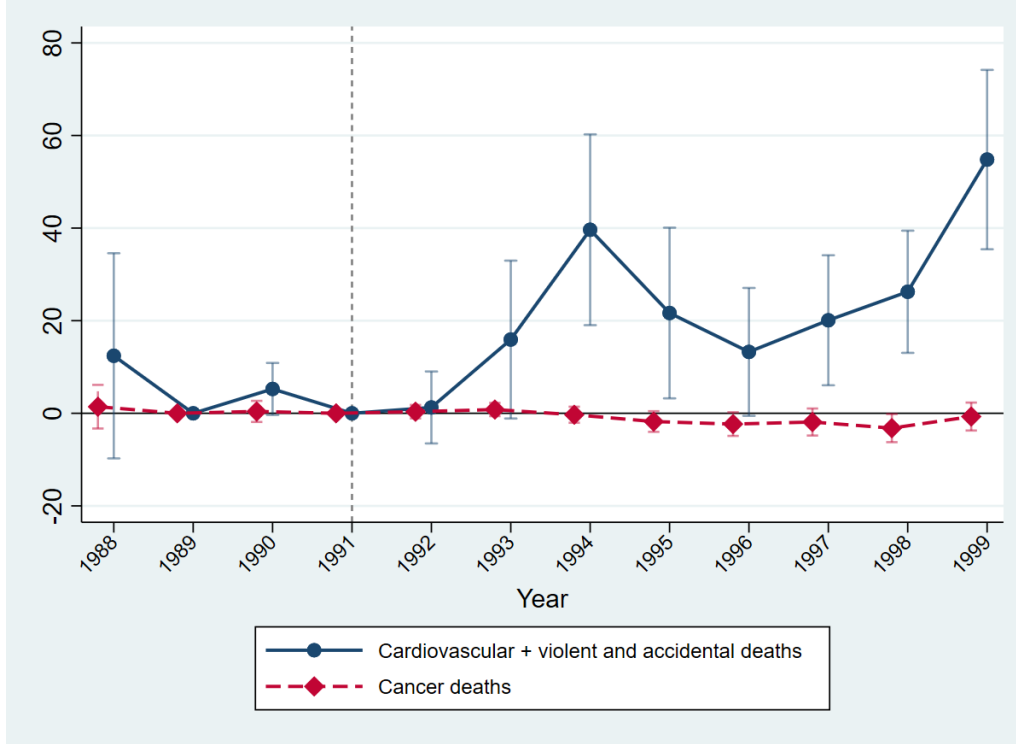


Figure 5: Both series are drawn from separate fixed effects regressions of each cause-specific death rate (per 100,000 population) on interactions of manufacturing exposure with year dummies, with oblast and year fixed effects, pre-campaign alcohol consumption interactions, and 1991 as the base year. The vertical axis shows the effect on the cause-specific death rate per 100,000 population per one standard deviation increase in manufacturing exposure. Cardiovascular and violent and accidental deaths are shown with a solid line; cancer deaths, which serve as a placebo outcome given the long biological timescale of cancer mortality, are shown with a dashed line. The manufacturing exposure variable is 1989 manufacturing employment as a share of the regional population, drawn from the 1989 Census of Soviet Industry. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

from a list of 18 rights and freedoms the ones most important to them personally. These included the rights to free medical care, employment, social security in old age, and free education, as well as freedoms of speech, assembly, and movement, and the right to elect one’s representatives. The first principal component of these responses loads positively on democratic freedoms and negatively on economic rights, and the resulting index, on which higher scores reflect greater prioritization of political freedoms over economic entitlements, serves as the primary outcome variable.⁶

The empirical strategy proceeds in two stages. In the first, provincial decline in Yeltsin’s vote share between 1991 and 1996 is instrumented with late-Soviet-era manufacturing employment share in the province, exploiting variation similar to that highlighted in the preceding subsections.⁷ In the second stage, the predicted decline in Yeltsin’s vote share is used to explain democratic values in 2010, nearly two decades after the shock. By instrumenting, that is, for the change in electoral support for Yeltsin with variables that capture Soviet-era economic distortions, we connect a region’s vulnerability to the market liberalization shock of 1992 to the short-run erosion of support for Yeltsin and, ultimately, to diminished support for democratic values nearly two decades later.

The results are striking. In the provinces that experienced the sharpest decline of support for Yeltsin, as predicted by their Soviet industrial inheritances, respondents display the weakest support for democratic values a generation later. This result is robust to alternative measures of democratic demand, including a narrower index focused specifically on prioritizing freedom of speech and the right to elect one’s representatives.

The effects are strongest among those who were at least 46 at the time of the survey, that is, old enough to have passed the 18-to-25-year age window traditionally associated with the “impressionable years” in the early 1990s. The relationship is also highly statistically significant for those aged 31 to 45. For the youngest cohort, those 30 and under, the effect is marginally significant at the 10 percent level in the IV specifications, a finding consistent with, though not strong evidence for, inter-generational transmission of values.

In an extension, we run similar models with a behavioral measure of democratic engagement: membership in a civil society organization. The same pattern holds. In IV specifications, the predicted decline in Yeltsin’s support predicts civil society participation for the full sample and this effect increases with age. In regions more vulnerable to market liberalization in the early 1990s, the oldest cohort, those who experienced Soviet life as mature

⁶Prioritizing freedom of speech and movement were the strongest positive predictors of the index; the rights to free medical care and social security in old age were the strongest negative predictors.

⁷As an additional proxy for regional vulnerability to marketization, we also use a second instrument measuring provincial employment in manufacturing sub-sectors in which the Soviet Union had a revealed comparative disadvantage.

adults, are least likely to engage in civic life, a behavioral counterpart to the democratic deficit documented in the values evidence.

Finally, using regional identifiers from Wave 7 of the *Integrated Values Survey*, Alexeev et al. (2025) show that a similar relationship persists through 2017, with regions more vulnerable to the 1992 liberalization shock exhibiting weaker democratic values a quarter century later.⁸

Cross-country evidence from the *Integrated Values Survey* places this within-Russia pattern in comparative perspective and speaks directly to the question of persistence raised in Section 2. Between IVS Waves 2 and 3, administered in Russia in 1990 and 1995, there is a large drop in the prioritization of democratic values, larger than in the post-communist comparison countries. In those other countries, support for democratic values rebounded as their economies recovered in the late 1990s and 2000s. In Russia it did not. From 1995 through 2017, the democratic values index in Russia remains essentially flat even as household incomes rose substantially during the oil-fueled 2000s. The values gap opened between Russia and its regional neighbors in the early 1990s did not close, and the combination of economic trauma and Russia’s distinctive experience of the identity shock associated with imperial dissolution helps explain why Russia’s trajectory diverged so durably from the rest of the region.

5 Individual Exposure to the Early-1990s Economic Shock

While the regional evidence of Section 4 supports a causal interpretation, it speaks to the experiences of places as much or more than people. A complementary question is whether individuals who were personally exposed to the economic hardships of the early 1990s hold systematically different political values than those who were not. The analyses that follow address this question using two retrospective surveys administered roughly two decades apart. Since hardship was not randomly assigned to individuals and recall is imperfect, the identification is less clean than in the regional analysis, but the findings are consistent across surveys separated by nearly twenty years and, when read alongside the regional evidence, cumulatively compelling.

⁸These results should be interpreted with caution. The Wave 7 sample for Russia contains roughly 3,600 observations, roughly one-tenth the size of the *Georating Survey*, and the regional subsamples are not representative. The outcome variable also differs: where the *Georating* analysis uses the first principal component of 18 rights-and-freedoms items, the Wave 7 analysis relies on Inglehart’s four-item index of materialist and post-materialist values. The OLS and IV coefficients on the main variable of interest are significant at the 5 percent level in specifications without contemporaneous controls, but weaken to 10 percent significance when contemporaneous regional controls are included.

5.1 Looking back from 2006

The 2006 wave of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development’s *Life in Transition Survey* (LiTS) offers an unusually well-suited dataset for examining the individual-level connection between early-1990s hardship and subsequent political values. Administered face-to-face in Russia and thirteen other former Soviet republics, with nationally representative samples of roughly 1,000 respondents, the LiTS asked retrospective questions about major life events going back to 1989, including whether respondents had experienced wage cuts or arrears, received unemployment benefits, or left a job involuntarily in each year of the period.

The survey also asked respondents about their current beliefs and values across a range of dimensions relevant to the transition from communism. Russians, as suggested above, were markedly less in step with the values that had animated that transition than respondents elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. They expressed weaker support for markets and democracy, were more likely to report that political connections and corrupt ties rather than effort and hard work or intelligence and skills determined success in life, and were more inclined to endorse a strong state role in reducing inequality (Pyle 2021).⁹

The question is whether these differences can be traced, at least in part, to the labor market hardships individuals experienced during the early 1990s. To answer it, I count a respondent as having experienced a labor market disruption in any year in which they reported wage cuts or arrears, involuntary job loss, or receipt of unemployment benefits, and then create three variables representing the number of such years in each of three non-overlapping windows: 1989 to 1994, 1995 to 2000, and 2001 to 2006.

The primary specification in Pyle (2021) regresses each outcome on these three variables along with a rich array of individual characteristics, including current economic circumstances, employment history, age, gender, education, and location, as well as primary sampling unit fixed effects to absorb any factors common to respondents in the same locality. The key finding is that the coefficient on the 1989 to 1994 window is consistently negative and statistically significant for support for democracy and preference for markets, and consistently positive and significant for support for redistribution and state intervention to reduce inequality. Labor market hardships in the years around the Soviet collapse, in other words, are associated with weaker support for the democratic and market values that had animated the transition from communism. Disruptions in the two later windows bear no such relationship to beliefs measured in 2006.

Figure 6 presents the core results for the Russia-only sample using narrower temporal

⁹The sample was restricted to respondents who would have been of working age in 1989, that is, women aged 35–72 and men aged 35–77 at the time of the 2006 survey, corresponding to the official retirement ages of 55 and 60, respectively.

windows than Pyle (2021), replacing the three six-year blocks of the published paper with five non-overlapping three-year bins spanning 1992 to 2006, all included simultaneously in a single regression. The four outcome variables shown, support for democracy, preference for markets, belief that effort and skills rather than connections determine success, and support for a strong state role in reducing inequality, each capture a distinct dimension of the values that animated the transition from communism. The coefficient on each bin reflects the independent effect of disruptions in that period after netting out the effects of all others, with the same individual controls and PSU fixed effects as in the primary specification in Pyle (2021).

The 1992–94 window, corresponding to the years immediately following price and trade liberalization, produces systematically negative coefficients for support for democracy, preference for markets, and the belief that effort and skills determine success, and a positive coefficient for support for state reduction of inequality. The point estimates for all four outcomes are larger in absolute magnitude for 1992–94 than for any subsequent window, and the pattern of attenuation across later periods is consistent with the hypothesis in Pyle (2021): the earliest window of exposure is the most consequential. Disruptions in the three later periods, 1998–2000, 2001–03, and 2004–06, produce coefficients that cluster near zero and are nowhere near statistical significance. The 1995–97 window occupies an intermediate position, with point estimates smaller than those for 1992–94 and generally insignificant, consistent with the ethnographic evidence reviewed in Section 3 that by the mid-1990s the upheaval of the transition had become normalized into what Shevchenko described as a “state of routinized emergency.”

Figure 7 extends the analysis to the full FSU sample, showing the Russia-versus-other-FSU interaction terms from the same stacked-bin regressions. The interaction coefficient for the 1992–94 window is negative for support for democracy and preference for markets, meaning that the negative association between early-1990s disruptions and liberal values was larger in Russia than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, while the interaction term for the 1995–97 window reverses sign. This pattern of Russian distinctiveness in the earliest window, but not in subsequent ones, provides support for the hypothesis that Russia was particularly sensitive to the early-years shock. Similar to the findings in Pyle (2021), three of the four interaction terms for the 1992–94 window are significant at the 1 percent level. No comparable pattern appears for any later period.

Figure 8 speaks to one of the most striking features of the Russian case in light of the literature reviewed in Section 2: the effect of the early-1990s shock on political values is not confined to those who were in their traditional “impressionable years” during the transition. Each panel shows the coefficient on the 1992–94 disruption variable estimated separately for

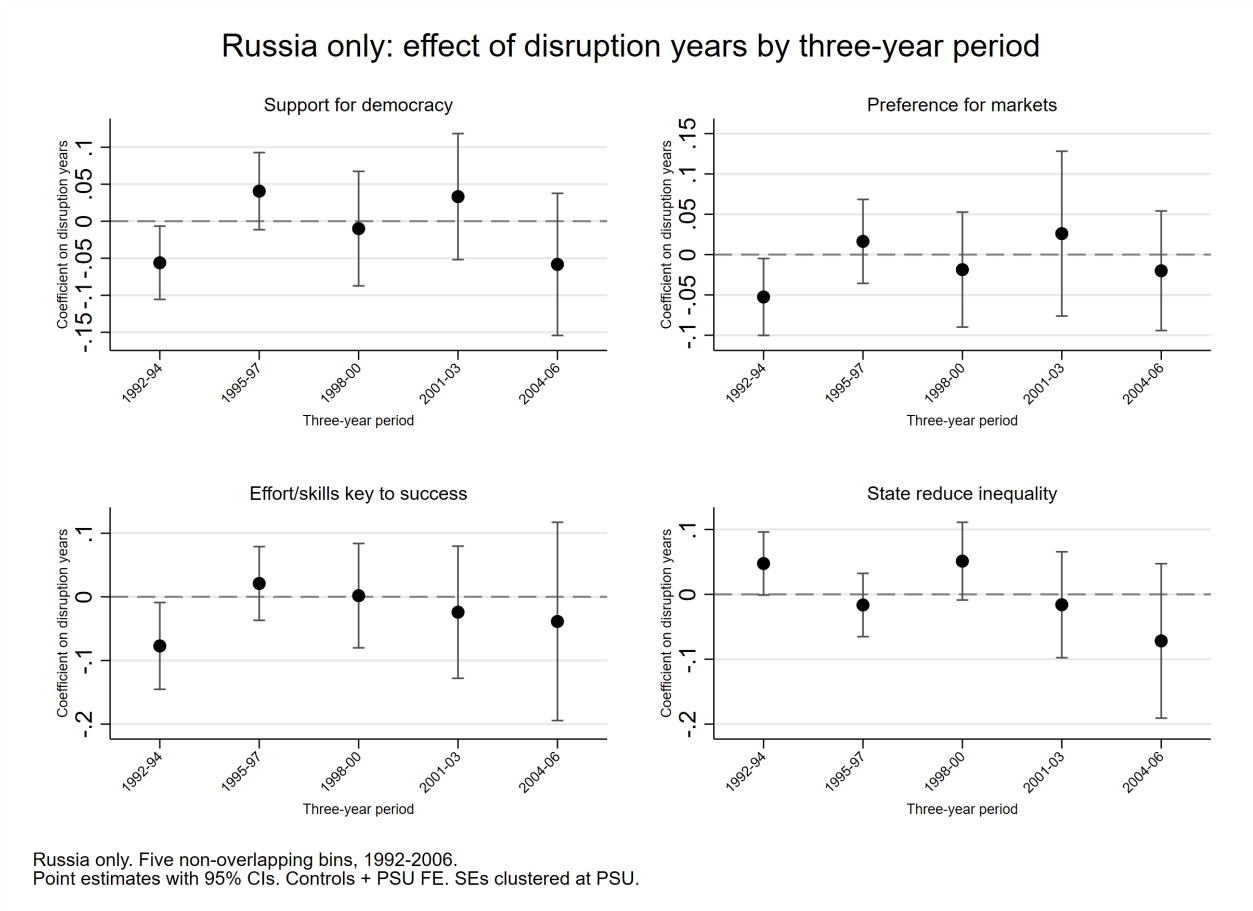


Figure 6: Effect of an additional year of labor market disruption by three-year period, Russia only. Each panel shows coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals from a single regression including all five non-overlapping bins simultaneously. Outcome variables are binary: support for democracy, preference for markets, belief that effort and skills are key to success, and support for state reduction of inequality. A disruption year is defined as one in which the respondent experienced wage cuts or arrears, received unemployment benefits, or left a job involuntarily. Data: 2006 *Life in Transition Survey*. Controls and PSU fixed effects are included; standard errors are clustered at the PSU level.

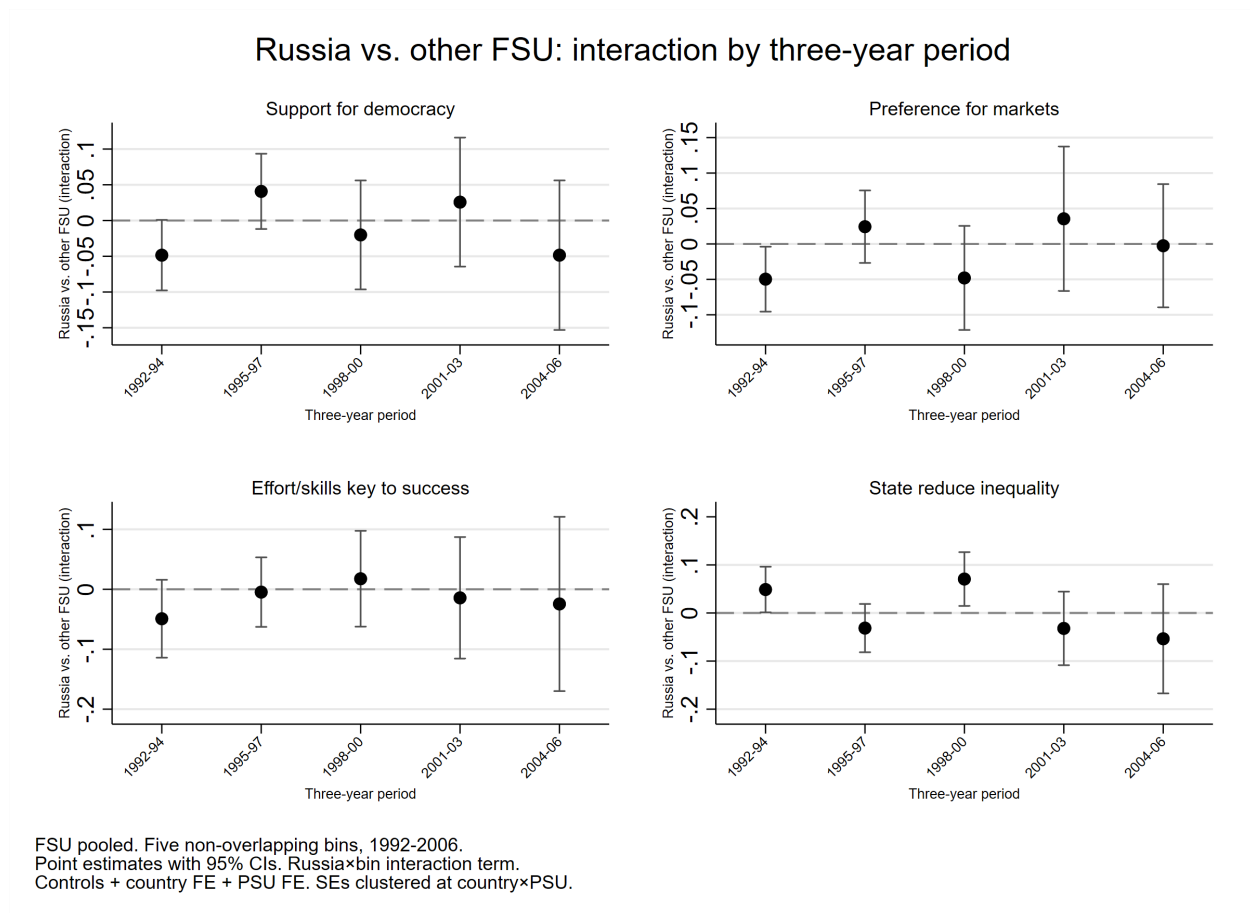


Figure 7: Russia versus other FSU: interaction by three-year period. Each panel shows the Russia-bin interaction term with 95% confidence intervals from regressions pooling Russia with thirteen other former Soviet republics, with all five non-overlapping bins included simultaneously. A negative interaction coefficient for the 1992–94 window on support for democracy and preference for markets indicates a stronger negative association between early-1990s disruptions and liberal values in Russia than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Data: 2006 *Life in Transition Survey*. Controls, country fixed effects, and PSU fixed effects are included; standard errors are clustered at the country-PSU level.

three age cohorts defined by their age in 1991: those aged 18 to 33, who were in or near their formative years at the time of the shock; those aged 34 to 49, who were well past them; and those aged 50 and above, who experienced the transition as mature adults.

If the standard impressionable years mechanism were the primary driver, we would expect the effect to be concentrated in the youngest cohort and to attenuate sharply with age. The figure does not support that prediction. For support for democracy, preference for markets, and belief that effort and skills determine success, the coefficients are negative across all three cohorts. If anything, the middle cohort shows the largest effects for support for democracy and preference for markets, while the youngest cohort's estimates, though negative, are imprecisely estimated and not statistically distinguishable from zero. The "State reduce inequality" panel, where all three cohort coefficients are small and positive, is the exception. The overall picture is of a shock whose imprint on political values cut broadly across generations rather than leaving its deepest mark on the young, a pattern consistent with the view that the early 1990s were of sufficient magnitude and emotional weight to reshape political beliefs among Russians well past their formative years.

What accounts for Russia's distinctiveness? The pattern is difficult to explain by recollection bias. If the conditional correlations simply reflected Putin-era political framing that cast the 1990s as a decade of disorder, leading Russians to both embrace illiberal values and exaggerate past hardships, it is not obvious why the association should be concentrated so sharply in the years immediately surrounding the Soviet collapse and market liberalization. Instead, the evidence shows a sharp cutoff around 1994 to 1995. As will be seen in the following subsection, a similar temporal pattern replicates in survey data collected nearly two decades later, making recollection bias an even less plausible explanation at that remove. One speculative but plausible answer for Russia's distinctiveness lies in the combination identified throughout this chapter: for Russians, individual economic hardship arrived alongside the dissolution of a Union with which they identified far more than did the citizens of other former Soviet republics. Where others experienced liberation, Russians experienced loss. The economic and identity shocks together may have left an imprint that hardship alone, in other post-Soviet settings, did not.

5.2 Looking back from 2025

The evidence reviewed in the previous section rests on a survey conducted just over a decade after the shock whose imprint it seeks to document. In late November 2025, in collaboration with Michael Alexeev, I commissioned the Levada Analytical Centre to include a battery of questions in their monthly Omnibus, a nationally representative survey of 1,608 Russian

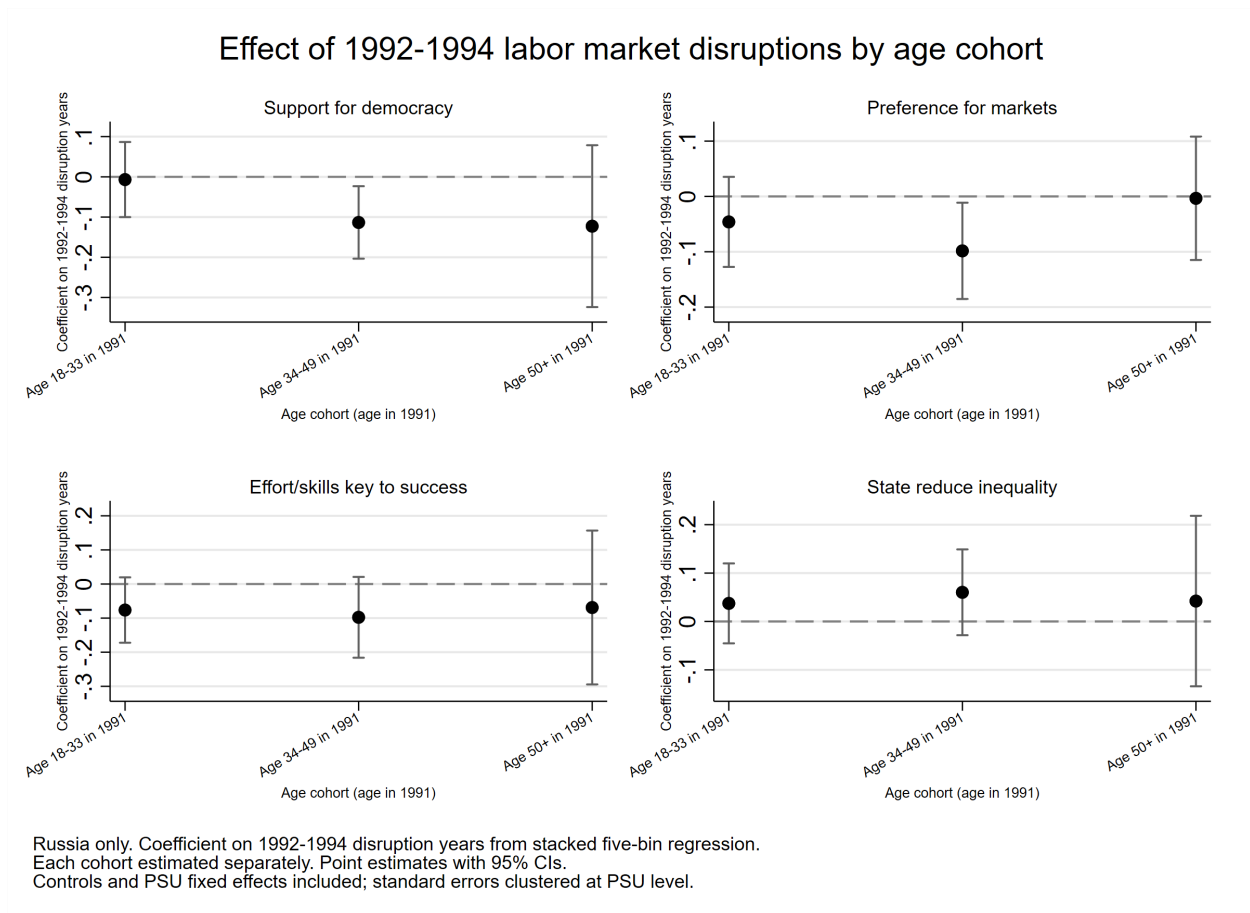


Figure 8: Effect of 1992–94 labor market disruptions by age cohort, Russia only. Each panel shows the coefficient on the 1992–94 disruption variable from the stacked five-bin regression estimated separately for three age cohorts defined by age in 1991: those aged 18–33 (in or near their impressionable years), 34–49 (past their impressionable years), and 50 and above (mature adults at the time of the shock). Outcome variables are binary: support for democracy, preference for markets, belief that effort and skills are key to success, and support for state reduction of inequality. Data: 2006 *Life in Transition Survey*. Controls and PSU fixed effects are included; standard errors are clustered at the PSU level. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

adults. It allows us to push the individual-level analysis nearly two decades further, asking respondents to reflect on their family’s material circumstances during four distinct periods of macroeconomic hardship: the year or two after the dissolution of the Soviet Union; the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009; the currency and sanctions shock of 2014 and 2015 following Russia’s annexation of Crimea; and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and early 2021. For each period, respondents were asked to indicate whether their family’s living standards had fallen quite significantly, fallen to some extent, or not fallen at all.

The distribution of responses is summarized in Table 1. The early 1990s stands out: 40.6 percent of respondents reported a quite significant decline in living standards during that period, more than twice the rate reported for the 2014–15 shock and well above the rates for 2008–09 and Covid-19. The “don’t know” or “difficult to answer” rate is also highest for the early 1990s at 17.2 percent, presumably in part because a share of respondents were children or not yet born at the time. Taken together, the responses confirm that the early 1990s are recalled as the most materially disruptive of the four periods.

Table 1: Family Living Standards During Four Economic Shock Periods

	Early 1990s	2008–09	2014–15	Covid-19
Fell quite significantly	40.6	21.1	11.5	17.7
Fell to some extent	28.9	37.3	33.7	31.0
Did not fall	13.4	28.9	45.9	47.8
Don’t know / difficult to answer	17.2	12.8	8.9	3.5

Note: Respondents were asked: ‘s living standard decline during the following periods?’ Figures are percentages of the full sample ($N = 1608$). The early 1990s question refers to the first year or two after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Levada Centre *Omnibus Survey*, November 2025.

Following the approach of Alexeev et al. (2025), the primary outcome variable is the first principal component of thirteen binary indicators capturing which rights and freedoms respondents considered most important, derived from a question asking them to select up to four items from the list. Table 2 presents the full list of items along with the share of respondents selecting each and its loading on the first principal component. The thirteen items span both political and civil rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to participate in public and political life, and social and economic entitlements, including the right to free healthcare, free education, and social protection. As in the *Georating* analysis, the first principal component loads positively on the former

and negatively on the latter. In other words, respondents who score high on this index, which is standardized with mean zero, emphasize political and civil freedoms over economic entitlements; those who score low prioritize healthcare, education, and economic security.

Table 2: Rights and Freedoms Considered Most Important: Prevalence and First Principal Component Loadings

Freedom / Right	Share (%)	PC1 loading
Right to free healthcare	52.3	-0.480
Right to free and equal education	39.2	-0.423
Right to social protection and decent standard of living	39.1	-0.267
Right to work, decent conditions, and fair pay	38.1	-0.314
Right to life, liberty, and personal security	33.1	0.120
Freedom of speech	26.4	0.339
Right to inviolability of property and home	24.3	0.084
Right to a fair trial	22.3	0.167
Right to rest and leisure	17.3	0.199
Freedom of movement and choice of residence	15.9	0.205
Freedom of conscience and religion	14.3	0.213
Right to participate in public and political life	9.8	0.231
Freedom of peaceful assembly	6.8	0.275

Note: Respondents selected up to four rights they considered most important (question P5). Share (%) is the percentage selecting each item. PC1 loading is the eigenvector coefficient for the first principal component of the 13 binary indicators, which serves as the *free* index throughout the analysis. Positive (negative) values indicate that endorsing the item loads positively (negatively) on the liberal values dimension. Levada Centre *Omnibus Survey*, November 2025 ($N = 1608$).

I regress this index on the four hardship variables, each of which is coded 0 (“did not fall”), 1 (“fell to some extent”), or 2 (“fell quite significantly”), along with controls for gender, log age, city size, vignette assignment, list treatment status, and province fixed effects, with robust standard errors.¹⁰ In a second specification, I replace the index with an alternative outcome that counts how many of two specific freedoms, freedom of speech and the right to

¹⁰Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions before answering the rights-and-freedoms question. Two of the vignettes were drawn from a Russian secondary school history textbook: one emphasized the economic shock of the early 1990s and its social consequences, and the other described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. A third vignette served as the control condition, describing popular cultural figures and musical acts of the early 1990s with no reference to hardship or politics. Dummy variables for two of the three vignette conditions are included as controls. Each respondent was also randomly assigned to either the treatment or control version of two list experiments designed to measure sensitive attitudes under wartime survey conditions; a binary list treatment indicator is included as a control. The vignette experiment results are reported in Alexeev et al. (2025). The specification absorbs oblast-level geographic variation through fixed effects, analogous in spirit to the PSU fixed effects used in the LiTS analysis, though the LiTS controls for variation at the finer primary sampling unit level rather than the oblast level.

participate in public and political life, the respondent selected, taking values of 0, 1, or 2.

Figure 9 presents the results, which again demonstrate a strong association between experiencing an economic shock in the wake of the early-1990s market-oriented reforms and diminished support for democratic values. In both panels, the coefficient on early-1990s hardship is the most negative, and it is the only one that falls significantly below zero. The three later shock periods, 2008–09, 2014–15, and Covid-19, cluster near or above the zero line with confidence intervals that comfortably span zero. That the pattern replicates across two surveys separated by nearly twenty years is itself reassuring, but the more telling point concerns temporal specificity: whatever is driving the relationship between early-1990s hardship and weak democratic values, it does not extend to recalled hardship during three major subsequent economic shocks.

6 Pushing at an Open Door

It is not self-evident that what happened in the immediate wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse would continue to shape the values of Russia’s citizenry well into the twenty-first century. After all, among the eras that might exercise influence over Russians’ beliefs and values, the early 1990s compete not only against more distant historical periods but also against the power of the more immediate past, a past characterized by increasing state control over the educational and media landscapes.

One sophisticated take, expressed eloquently by Sharafutdinova (2020), argues that twenty-first-century political and cultural elites have exploited the 1990s as a kind of foil, rendering the decade synonymous with social disorder and economic collapse for the purpose of making Russian society more comfortable with Putin’s illiberal turn. The research summarized in this chapter is consistent with this perspective in one important respect: both point to the enduring importance of the 1990s. Where I might part ways is over the centrality of Putin-era elites. If the nature of Russians’ support for democratic governance were primarily a product of politicians’ rhetoric and media messaging in the twenty-first century, we would not expect to see what we do: a consistency of beliefs traceable to the early 1990s, regional patterns in democratic demand that map so cleanly onto Soviet industrial geography, and a temporal specificity in the individual-level evidence, replicated in surveys conducted nearly two decades apart, that points precisely to the years of the early post-Soviet shock.

The broader literature on aggregate shocks and belief formation, reviewed in Section 2, gives us a framework for understanding why this might be so. Political values have been shown to respond to economic disruptions when experienced in early adulthood. But the Russian case complicates that finding. The effects documented here are not confined to those

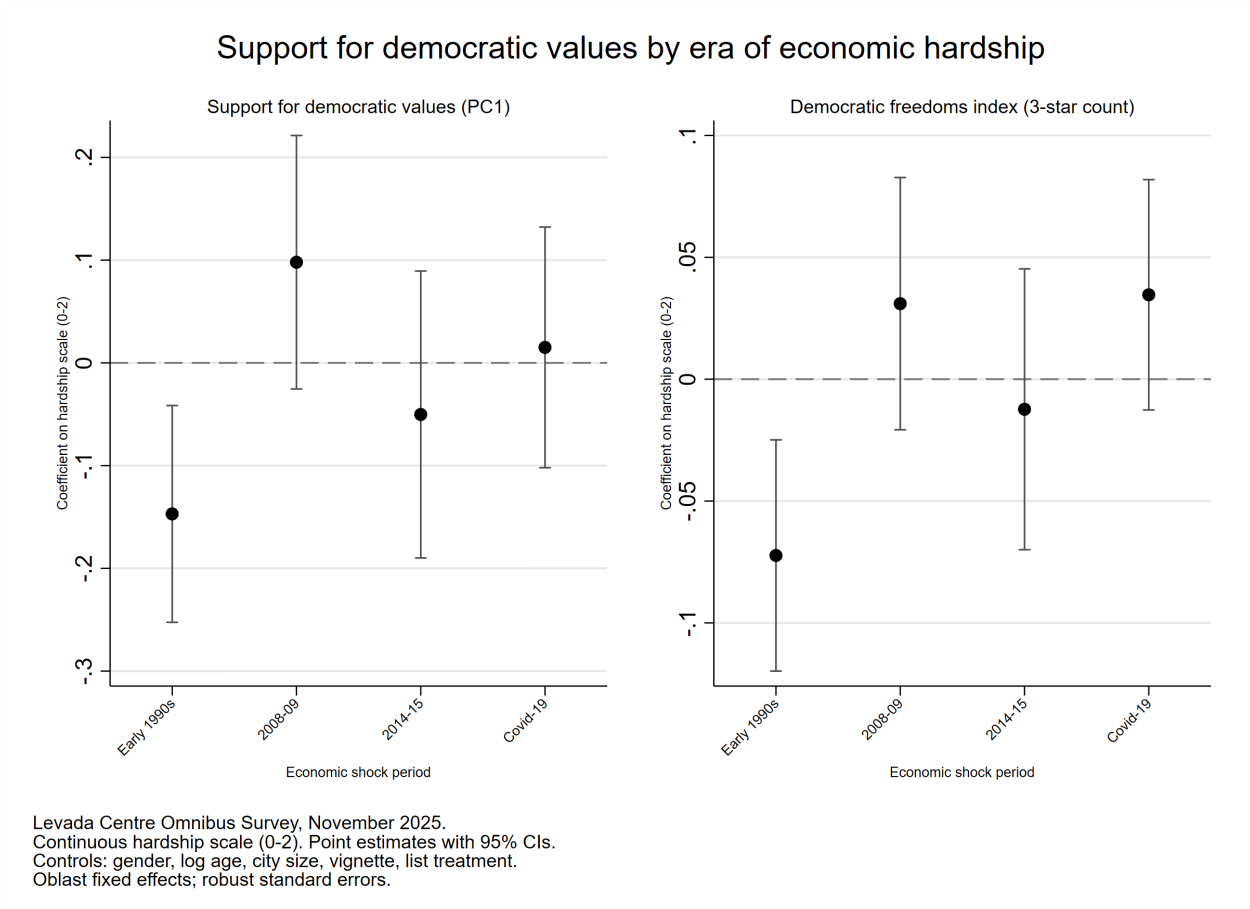


Figure 9: Support for democratic values by era of economic hardship, Levada Centre *Omnibus Survey*, November 2025 (N=1,608). Left panel: first principal component of the rights-and-freedoms question. Right panel: count of responses selecting freedom of speech or the right to participate in public and political life. Hardship is coded 0 (no decline), 1 (some decline), and 2 (quite significant decline). Controls include gender, log age, city size, vignette assignment, list treatment status, and oblast fixed effects; robust standard errors. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

who were in their “impressionable years” during the early 1990s. They extend across age cohorts, and, perhaps more notably, they appear to persist in survey data collected more than three decades after the shock.

What made the Russian experience so distinctive? The evidence points to a combination that was distinctive within the post-communist world: economic pain unmitigated by any narrative of national liberation, arriving alongside the dissolution of a Union with which Russians identified far more than did the citizens of other former Soviet republics. Whereas economic hardship elsewhere was often accompanied by a narrative of national liberation, in Russia it was compounded by a feeling of lost identity and status. Already in 1994, Levada Centre polling showed that three-quarters of Russians thought the disintegration of the Soviet Union had brought more harm than good. That sentiment did not require Putin to manufacture it. It was already there, and it created the conditions in which illiberal and authoritarian politics could find fertile soil.

The consequences of this extend beyond the question of democratic values. In work with Michael Alexeev, I have documented that levels of blind and militant patriotism in Russia, reflected in a willingness to support the country even when it is in the wrong and to pursue national interests even at the cost of conflict, far exceeded those in any other country in the National Identity module of the *International Social Survey Programme* across all three waves from 1995 to 2013 (Alexeev and Pyle 2023). This pattern cannot be attributed to Putin-era indoctrination. It pre-dated his presidency and remained stable across two decades of dramatically different political environments. What Putin inherited was a society already primed.

Uncovering connections between developments in the early post-Soviet years and the beliefs and values Russians espouse well into Putin’s tenure serves multiple purposes. It enriches our understanding of the country he came to lead; it contextualizes the illiberal and revanchist tendencies he has embraced in office; and it clarifies the sort of society he will ultimately leave to his successor. To point out that the origins of Russians’ skepticism of democratic governance and their militant patriotism pre-date his presidency is not to absolve him of responsibility for the country’s authoritarian turn. The nature of Russian society, traumatized as it was by its exit from communism, has lowered the cost to Putin of doing what he has done. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Russians have courageously stood up and protested the authoritarian and revanchist political order over which he has presided. But Russia is a country of tens of millions, and history’s hand is heavy.

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