OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

State Ideals, Silent Divides: Mapping Self-Censorship and Conformity in Russia

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ABSTRACT

With Russians increasingly accused of passive conformity and a failure to resist authoritarian policies comparable to those met with resistance elsewhere, few recognize how widespread the divergence between public and private political views actually is within Russian society. Existing research tends to treat governance preferences, self-censorship, and demographic background as separate objects of inquiry, leaving their statistical relationships largely untested, and much of it predates the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the tightening of information access and legal risk that followed. This paper explores what qualities Russians associate with an ideal, well-governed state, and how self-censorship, perceived governance gaps, and demographic background relate to one another and to the broader divergence between what citizens say publicly and believe privately. It argues that Russians largely envision a state built on liberal democratic values, and that this vision's public expression is shaped by a specific, intertwined set of psychological and situational factors rather than demographic background alone, including perceived governance gaps, beliefs about others' concealment, and perceived risk of speaking openly. The study draws on a purposively sampled survey of 96 Russian respondents, informed by a targeted literature review and eight hypotheses, with governance beliefs, self-censorship, and disclosure behavior analyzed through correlation and regression. This paper contributes to debates on authoritarian conformity by moving beyond demographic explanations of political divergence toward the mediating and moderating relationships, particularly those involving self-censorship and risk orientation, that quietly determine who feels safe enough to speak and who instead learns to hold their convictions in silence.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, a survey conducted by the independent Levada Center found that a notable share of Russians were already reluctant to voice their true opinions about the state of the country, whether to sociologists conducting the poll (26%, of whom 6% described themselves as entirely unwilling), to colleagues (23%), or even to family and close friends (17%) (BBC Russian, 2016). Even a decade ago, in other words, silence was not confined to strangers or officials, it extended into people's closest relationships. Since then, the legal consequences for openly criticizing the authorities have only intensified: in August 2026, President Putin signed into law restrictive measures targeting individuals prosecuted in absentia for political offenses, a law that took effect immediately upon publication (Meduza, 2026). Taken together, these two moments, a decade apart, raise a pressing question: as the legal cost of expressing political

dissent continues to climb, has the gap between what Russians say publicly and what they believe privately widened further since that 2016 finding, and, perhaps more importantly, what factors determine who is most affected by it?

This question is not simply academic. In the years since the 2016 Levada finding, the legal and social costs of speaking openly in Russia have only continued to climb, through growing legal risk attached to dissenting views and tightening restrictions on public expression (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Yet despite this shift, understanding precisely which citizens are most inclined to self-censor, which perceive the largest gap between their governance ideals and current reality, and how demographic background factors into this divide, remains comparatively underexplored at scale. Much of the available evidence on this topic, including the Levada finding above and the studies explored in the literature review below, offers a broad national snapshot of how widespread self-censorship is, but stops short of examining how these patterns relate to one another statistically, or how they vary systematically across different segments of the population, by age, occupation, region, or belief about how far Russia's governance has drifted from what citizens actually want. Without that statistical layer, it remains difficult to say with any precision who is driving the national averages reported by studies like Levada's, and why.

This study seeks to answer the question: **what qualities do citizens associate with an ideal, well-governed state, and how do self-censorship, perceived governance gaps, and demographic background relate to the divergence between public and private political views in Russia?**

To address this question, the study draws on a structured survey of 96 Russian citizens from a range of ages, occupations, and regions, distributed via Google Forms and covering governance values, perceived governance gaps, self-censorship, and disclosure behavior alongside demographic background. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of specific governance qualities, such as rule of law, accountability, and effective public services, to reflect on how closely they felt Russia's current governance matched their own ideal, and to describe their own tendencies toward self-censorship and selective disclosure in everyday life. A literature review was conducted alongside the survey, used specifically to identify potential relationships worth testing statistically once responses were collected, including possible mediating and moderating connections between governance beliefs, self-censorship, and demographic factors, relationships that existing research has rarely tested together within a single dataset. Correlation and regression analyses were then applied to the resulting survey data to examine these relationships directly, allowing the study to move beyond simply describing attitudes toward explaining how they connect.

This research contributes to a body of literature that, while attentive to individual factors such as governance preferences, self-censorship, and preference falsification, has rarely tested how these factors relate to one another statistically within a single population. Existing studies tend to isolate specific variables rather than examine their intertwinement, leaving the relationships between what citizens want, how threatened they feel, and how openly they express themselves comparatively unexplored, particularly the kind of mediating and moderating relationships this study set out to test (Buckley et al., 2024; Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Galyapina et al., 2024; Rosenfeld, 2020; Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025). This

gap matters because these factors rarely operate in isolation in practice, a citizen's willingness to speak openly is shaped simultaneously by who they are, what they believe about their government, and how much risk they perceive, and a study capable of testing these connections jointly offers a fuller picture than any single-factor analysis could. In addition, official government reporting on public sentiment in Russia is not something independent researchers and analysts generally recommend relying on (Vyrskaia et al., 2025), which makes independently collected survey data of this kind a comparatively rare and valuable resource for understanding these dynamics with any degree of reliability.

This study finds that Russians largely envision an ideal state grounded in liberal democratic values, prioritizing outcome-oriented qualities such as effective public services and equal treatment under the law over process-oriented ones like civic participation. Rather than being explained by broad demographic categories, the divergence between public and private political views is shaped more by psychological and situational factors: self-censorship was closely tied to believing that others conceal their true views, and age was linked to both how many barriers to expression someone perceives and how narrow their circle of trusted political confidants is. Occupation and place of residence also played a more limited but notable role, with students holding somewhat more idealistic governance views and residents of larger cities reporting less personal divergence from those around them, while generational cohort, education, and public-sector employment showed no consistent relationship with any outcome tested.

In practical terms, these findings may be of particular use to activists, advocacy organizations, and practitioners seeking to reach different segments of the Russian population more effectively. Understanding how self-censorship and perceived risk vary across demographic groups, and which factors are most closely tied to divergence between public and private opinion, could help such actors adapt their outreach and communication strategies to different audiences, tailoring their approach based on how cautious a given group tends to be, rather than applying a single strategy uniformly across a population that this research suggests is far from uniform. More broadly, by identifying the specific factors most closely tied to public-private divergence, this research may also inform efforts aimed at improving governmental transparency, offering a clearer, evidence-based picture of where and among whom the gap between official narratives and citizens' genuine views is widest, and where future efforts at rebuilding public trust might most usefully begin.

METHODS

This research looks at what qualities citizens associate with a well-governed state, and how perceived governance gaps, demographic background, and self-censorship relate to the divergence between what Russians privately believe and what they say publicly. This study uses a quantitative design, since it allows individual responses to be combined into broader patterns and tested statistically for relationships between variables. The research is mainly exploratory, aiming to find meaningful statistical connections between governance beliefs, self-censorship, and demographic background through hypothesis testing, while also including some descriptive elements, giving an overview of what respondents consider a well-governed state, and explanatory elements, interpreting the direction and strength of the relationships found.

Any Russian citizen was eligible to take part, though in practice the survey was distributed through the researcher's trusted personal network rather than sent out openly, given the legal risks of circulating a politically sensitive survey more widely in Russia (EUAA, 2025), and it spread further from there as respondents shared the link with people they knew. No formal exclusion criteria were applied beyond currently living in Russia.

Primary data were collected through a structured survey hosted on Google Forms, using mostly closed-ended, multiple-choice, and agree/disagree scale questions covering governance values, perceived governance gaps, and self-censorship, along with a smaller set of demographic questions. A review of secondary sources, mainly existing academic literature, informed which relationships between factors were worth testing once responses came in, and also shaped the survey questions themselves, ensuring they were distinct from and not repetitive of existing research on the topic. The finalized questionnaire began with informed consent, followed by sections on governance values, perceived governance gaps, self-censorship and disclosure behavior, and demographic questions, and was distributed across personal and semi-private channels over a set collection period.

Quantitative analysis relied on correlation and regression to identify statistically significant relationships among the study's variables. Given the political sensitivity of the topic, particular care was taken in question design to avoid language that could cause distress, discourage honest answers, or expose respondents to legal risk based on how they responded. Informed consent was obtained as the first item in the survey, participation was fully anonymous, no names, emails, or other identifying details were collected, and participants could skip any question or withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Taken together, this methodology combines an ethically designed survey instrument with a literature review that shaped its focus, to examine how Russians' governance beliefs, self-censorship, and demographic background relate to the gap between their public and private political views.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesises research on the invisible mechanisms of authoritarian control, public conformity and preference falsification, and citizens' perceptions of the ideal state and good society under authoritarian governance. The review draws on studies published between 2018 and 2025, a period that reflects growing scholarly interest in authoritarian power, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Relevant publications were located primarily through Google Scholar, supplemented by backwards citation tracking and referrals from other academic platforms. A few studies, including those by Ivanov et al. and Seliverstova & Zubok, were first surfaced through AI-assisted search and then independently verified and located via Google Scholar to confirm their academic reliability. Search terms combined concepts of political behaviour, values, and authoritarian governance, including: perfect state + Russia, conformity + authoritarian regime, preference falsification + Russia, political values + post-Soviet, public opinion + authoritarianism, and dissatisfaction + political compliance. Priority was given to studies that (i) examined original, rarely explored mediators or moderators, (ii) directly addressed perceptions of the ideal state in relation to citizen values, (iii) focused on Russia, especially its post-2022 political landscape, or (iv) approached the topic from a sociological or political lens.

Across this literature, several recurring themes emerged that structure the present review: the mechanisms sustaining authoritarian legitimacy, the coexistence of public conformity and private dissent, the role of values and identity in shaping political preferences, and generational divergence in perceptions of governance. The following sections examine these themes in greater detail, drawing from diverse methodologies and contexts.

The literature converges on a small number of related patterns, spanning political, sociological, psychological, economic, and historical perspectives; most work focuses on Russia, though several studies extend to other post-Soviet or authoritarian contexts. A first pattern is a persistent gap between publicly expressed and privately held political views. Publicly declared support for the war in Ukraine substantially overstates genuine private sentiment, and this gap holds even once the war's human costs become widely known (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022). Perceptions of a leader's popularity are similarly self-reinforcing, capable of inflating actual support independently of authentic preference (Buckley et al., 2024). And in a markedly different setting, individuals routinely underestimate how widely their private views are shared, which sustains public conformity even where private dissent is common (Bursztyn et al., 2020). Across a list experiment, repeated survey waves, and an incentivised belief-correction design, all three point to the same underlying gap between what is said publicly and believed privately (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Buckley et al., 2024; Bursztyn et al., 2020).

A second, related pattern concerns what sustains this compliance beyond the initial falsification of preferences. Authoritarian stability appears to rest less on coercion than on moral normalisation, the transformation of obedience into a perceived virtue through ideology and institutional routine (Gogashvili, 2025). Historically, collective punishment secured compliance only as long as retribution remained credible, generating latent opposition once that threat faded (Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019). Poverty drives authoritarian support mainly through the shame of social exclusion and the promise of re-inclusion, rather than through stress or anxiety (Neerdaels et al., 2024), while a middle class economically dependent on the state has little incentive to demand democratisation, weakening pro-democratic coalitions across post-Soviet countries (Rosenfeld, 2020). Together, these findings describe compliance as sustained by moral, historical, psychological, and economic mechanisms operating in parallel, though none examines how the mechanisms interact within a single population (Gogashvili, 2025; Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019; Neerdaels et al., 2024; Rosenfeld, 2020).

A third pattern is depoliticisation rather than polarisation. Affective polarisation largely failed to develop in Russia after the 2022 invasion, as citizens have tended to prioritise private relationships over political disagreement (Siiutkin, 2025). A related dualism emerges elsewhere, in which citizens blame officials for domestic hardship while crediting the state for foreign-policy successes (Sharafutdinova, 2022), and civic engagement in Moscow has been shown to track the local concentration of the middle class rather than independent political motivation (Ivanov et al., 2018). All three point to political life as fragmented and depoliticised rather than organised around clear ideological blocs, differing mainly in whether the cause is located in wartime dynamics, identity, or social composition (Siiutkin, 2025; Sharafutdinova, 2022; Ivanov et al., 2018).

A final pattern concerns the values and identities underlying preferences for governance itself. Urban youth tend to favour democratic governance while rural youth favour authoritarian structures, a divide rooted in sociocultural rather than ideological differentiation (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025). Values such as self-direction, tradition, and conformity shape psychological well-being differently across regions (Galyapina et al., 2024), and collective self-esteem tied to foreign-policy prestige has been found to sustain regime legitimacy on its own (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Across these studies, governance preferences appear rooted in values and identity more than explicit ideology, but none connect these private values back to the public conformity documented elsewhere (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025; Galyapina et al., 2024; Sharafutdinova, 2022).

Taken together, the literature captures two sides of the same phenomenon: quantitative and experimental work is well suited to detecting the scale of the public–private gap and the mechanisms sustaining compliance (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Buckley et al., 2024; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Gogashvili, 2025; Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019; Neerdaels et al., 2024; Rosenfeld, 2020), while qualitative work better surfaces the fragmentation, cynicism, and values behind it, but rarely spans multiple generations within a single design (Siiutkin, 2025; Sharafutdinova, 2022; Ivanov et al., 2018; Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025; Galyapina et al., 2024). This study takes on a quantitative approach, using survey data to statistically test how governance values, self-censorship, and demographic background relate to the divergence between public and private political views, allowing these patterns to be examined at a broader, more generalizable scale than a single qualitative design typically allows.

This study builds on previous research by focusing on the underexplored intersection of citizens' governance value perceptions and the mechanisms of public conformity and private value divergence in Russia. Unlike prior qualitative work, which better surfaces the fragmentation, cynicism, and values behind this divergence but rarely examines it at scale, this research uses a quantitative, survey-based

approach to statistically test how governance values, self-censorship, and demographic background relate to one another across a broader population. It is one of the few studies to directly link governance value perceptions to the mechanisms of public conformity rather than treating these as separate phenomena, testing these relationships jointly rather than examining them in isolation.

Given the accelerating tightening of political freedoms in Russia since 2022, visible in expanded surveillance and restrictions on expression (Human Rights Watch, 2023) and economic activity (Cole, 2025), alongside growing public "leaks" of private dissatisfaction through social media resistance (Aizman, 2024) and celebrity declarations challenging official narratives (Talmazan, 2026), understanding what Russians genuinely consider an ideal state, and why these expressions continue to surface despite the risks involved, is both timely and consequential. In practical terms, the research aims to illuminate the gap between governmental narratives and citizens' actual values, with the longer-term hope of informing efforts to make Russian governance more responsive to its population. Academically, it offers a connective theoretical framework that links values, conformity, and ideal-state perceptions within a single model, advancing scholarship in political sociology and authoritarian studies.

Despite extensive research on political behaviour and public opinion in Russia, few studies directly connect citizens' governance value perceptions to the mechanisms of public conformity and private dissent within a single analytical framework. Existing research treats preference falsification, political values, and governance preferences as separate objects of inquiry, without examining the mediating and moderating links between them, the kind of relationships this study sets out to test statistically. Additionally, much of the available literature relies on qualitative or small-scale designs, leaving these relationships largely unexamined at a broader, population-level scale. The post-2022 political landscape also remains significantly underrepresented in the literature due to access constraints, constituting a further empirical gap this study's data collection helps address.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Drawing on the themes identified in the literature review, eight hypotheses are developed to examine how demographic characteristics influence Russians' perceptions of an ideal state and how citizens navigate the coexistence of public conformity and private value divergence under authoritarian governance.

Previous research suggests that governance preferences are shaped by political socialisation and sociocultural context (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025; Galyapina et al., 2024), while public conformity is reinforced through preference falsification, self-censorship, and perceived political risks (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Gogashvili, 2025). However, relatively few studies connect these two dimensions within a single analytical framework, and fewer still specify the mechanisms, whether mediating or moderating, that link them. The following hypotheses address this gap. Several are developed in two stages: an initial form suited to correlation, which establishes that a relationship exists, followed by a more specific, directional reformulation suited to regression, since regression requires a stated path from predictor to outcome rather than a general association. Previous studies suggest that citizens' perceptions of an ideal state are shaped by their sociocultural background and political socialisation. Urban youth have been found to be more likely to support democratic forms of governance than those living in rural areas (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025), while values such as conformity and self-direction have been shown to vary across Russian regions (Galyapina et al., 2024). Political socialisation, educational attainment, occupation, and place of residence expose individuals to different social environments and experiences with state institutions, which may influence the governance characteristics they prioritise.

> ***H1: Ideal-state perceptions differ according to people's demographic characteristics (generational cohort, education, occupation, and place of residence).***

This form of H1 is well suited to correlation, since it proposes only that demographic background and governance beliefs are connected, without specifying which group leans which way. Complicating the relationship, the finding that different socialisation contexts produce different governance preferences need not be limited to the urban and rural divide originally studied (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025). The same logic can extend to generational cohort, read as a proxy for exposure to two different collective mentalities: one shaped around collective efficiency, national planning, and a scarcity mindset that placed

state and social goals above individual comfort (Skrebyte et al., 2016), and one shaped more by global connectedness and a shift toward prioritising individual comfort over collective planning (Nartova, 2026, on the pre-2022 generational cohort). This leads to a more specific hypothesis suited to regression:

> ***H1b: Citizens socialised under a mentality oriented around collective efficiency, national planning, and scarcity (45 and older) are more likely to prioritise stability, security, and effective service delivery, while citizens socialised under a mentality oriented more toward individual comfort and global connectedness (under 45) are more likely to prioritise participatory and rights-based qualities such as civic participation and rule of law.***

Research on authoritarian regimes consistently demonstrates that public conformity is shaped by historical experience, social environment, and economic circumstance rather than applying uniformly across a population. Preference falsification itself is well documented in the Russian context (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Buckley et al., 2024), but its distribution across social groups is not: a middle class economically dependent on the state has comparatively little incentive to demand change, weakening pressure for reform across post-Soviet contexts (Rosenfeld, 2020), while civic engagement has separately been shown to track the local concentration of the middle class rather than individual conviction (Ivanov et al., 2018). Political socialisation, educational attainment, and place of residence expose individuals to different incentives and constraints, influencing the extent to which they navigate the tension between publicly expressed conformity and privately held beliefs.

> ***H2: The degree of public–private opinion divergence differs according to people's demographic characteristics (generational cohort, education, occupation, and place of residence).***

This form of H2 is well suited to correlation, since it proposes only that demographic background and divergence are related, without stating which groups diverge more. Complicating the relationship, the argument that state-dependent economic position reduces the incentive to hold or express dissenting views points toward occupation specifically as the demographic factor most likely to carry a predictable direction (Rosenfeld, 2020). This leads to a more specific hypothesis suited to regression:

> ***H2b: People employed in the public sector or in state-owned organisations report lower public–private opinion divergence than those in the private sector or self-employed.***

Previous research consistently finds that citizens living under authoritarian rule frequently conceal their genuine political opinions because of perceived legal, social, and psychological risks (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Siiutkin, 2025; Gogashvili, 2025). Preference falsification, self-censorship, and selective disclosure enable individuals to maintain public conformity while privately holding different beliefs (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Buckley et al., 2024; Siiutkin, 2025). Therefore, individuals who report higher levels of self-censorship are expected to demonstrate greater divergence between their public and private political views.

> ***H3a: Higher levels of self-censorship are positively associated with greater public–private opinion divergence.***

This form of H3 is well suited to correlation, since it proposes a link between self-censorship and divergence without committing to which one drives the other. Complicating the relationship, concealment does not merely coexist with divergence but appears to actively sustain it: underestimating how widely one's private views are shared allows public conformity to persist even where private dissent is common, meaning that the act of hiding one's views feeds back into a widening, self-reinforcing gap between what is expressed and what is believed (Bursztyn et al., 2020). This leads to a hypothesis suited to regression, with the causal direction reversed to match this psychological mechanism:

H3b: Higher levels of public–private opinion divergence lead to greater self-censorship.

The literature suggests that many citizens privately hold values that differ from those reflected in authoritarian governance but often refrain from expressing these differences publicly because of perceived political risks (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Siiutkin, 2025). While previous studies have documented governance preferences (Seliverstova & Zubok, 2025; Galyapina et al., 2024) and preference falsification (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022; Buckley et al., 2024) separately, few have examined whether dissatisfaction with the current system is associated with greater self-censorship and public conformity. This study therefore investigates whether perceiving a larger gap between Russia's current governance and one's ideal state is associated with greater reluctance to express genuine political opinions.

H4a: People who perceive a larger gap between their country's current governance and their ideal state report higher levels of self-censorship and public–private opinion divergence.

This form of H4 is well suited to correlation, since it links perceived governance gap to two outcomes at once without specifying a path between them. Complicating the relationship, Russians have been found to hold officials responsible for domestic shortcomings while crediting the state for its successes elsewhere, a dualism that allows dissatisfaction with governance to coexist with continued public support precisely because that dissatisfaction is rarely voiced directly (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Read alongside the account of obedience normalised as a virtue (Gogashvili, 2025), this suggests that perceiving a governance gap does not translate into divergence directly, but operates through the self-censorship it produces. This leads to two hypotheses suited to regression:

H4b: A larger perceived gap between the people's current governance and one's ideal state is positively associated with higher self-censorship.

H4c: Self-censorship mediates the relationship between perceived governance gap and public–private opinion divergence.

Prior research suggests that perceived political risk does not simply suppress expression, it reshapes where expression is allowed to occur. Public conformity has been found to persist even as private disagreement remains latent (Gogashvili, 2025; Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019), while Russians have been shown to channel political views into trusted personal relationships rather than open discourse (Siiutkin,

2025). Building on this, people who perceive more barriers to expressing political views are expected to restrict disclosure to a narrower circle of trusted others rather than sharing more broadly.

> ***H5: People who perceive more barriers to expressing political views report a narrower range of people with whom they feel comfortable discussing political or social issues.***

Russians have been found to channel political expression into trusted personal relationships specifically where perceived risk is high (Siiutkin, 2025), while self-censorship has been argued to function less as a conscious calculation than as an internalised, habitual form of obedience (Gogashvili, 2025). Taken together, these accounts suggest that self-censorship's effect on narrowing disclosure should not be uniform, but should sharpen specifically among those who also perceive concrete external risks, since it is the combination of habitual caution and identifiable threat that channels expression into an ever smaller circle.

> ***H6: The negative relationship between self-censorship and disclosure comfort is stronger among people who perceive more barriers to political expression than among those who perceive fewer.***

Authoritarian stability has been argued to rest on the normalisation of obedience into a perceived virtue rather than on external constraint, a process that deepens the longer a state monopoly over information shapes political socialisation (Gogashvili, 2025). This suggests citizens socialised under a near-total state information monopoly (Vorster, 2021) may perceive fewer barriers to political expression, since caution has been internalised as routine, while also confiding in a narrower circle. This is split into two hypotheses for clarity:

> ***H7a: Citizens socialised under a near-total state information monopoly perceive fewer barriers to political expression than citizens socialised in a media environment with some access to independent or digital sources.***

> ***H7b: Citizens socialised under a near-total state information monopoly report a narrower circle of people with whom they feel comfortable discussing political views than citizens socialised in a media environment with some access to independent or digital sources.***

Economic dependency on the state has been linked to reduced demand for political change: a middle class reliant on state employment has comparatively little incentive to support democratisation, weakening pressure for reform across post-Soviet contexts (Rosenfeld, 2020), while state-dependent economic position has separately been linked to a heightened preference for the stability that sustains it, particularly during periods of job insecurity or economic hardship (Jin & Pyle, 2023). Applied to occupation as a proxy for state dependency, this suggests that public sector and state-owned-sector employees may lean toward prioritising stability and security over participatory governance values.

H8: Citizens employed in the public sector or in state-owned organisations are more likely to prioritise stability or national security over participatory governance values than people in other occupational categories.

SURVEY

The survey was distributed via a link hosted on Google Forms between June 25 and July 19, 2026, a period of roughly one month. It was shared across several channels, though the overwhelming majority of responses came through personal connections, friends and family sharing the link within their own networks. Given the censorship constraints and legal risks surrounding this topic in Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2023), both for respondents and for those distributing the survey, recipients were selected carefully to avoid placing anyone at risk. In total, 96 respondents completed the survey (Table 2).

Respondents were also asked to share basic demographic details. Ethical considerations centered mainly on question wording. Since many participants were expected to be hesitant given the sensitivity of the topic (Vyrskaia et al., 2025), questions were phrased to minimize any perceived risk to their security. Before beginning, participants were asked to confirm their voluntary and anonymous participation (Q1), reducing any legal or personal exposure that might otherwise follow from taking part.

The following is the introductory description distributed to respondents at the start of the Google Form survey, reproduced here verbatim:

"Hi. My name is Julia Kupchik, and I am an 11th-grade student passionate about politics, philosophy, and economics. Through this research, I aim to examine the factors that shape Russian citizens' perceptions of an ideal state and a good society, and to explore how publicly held norms and personal, privately held opinions coexist and interact in everyday life. I intend to investigate this through real opinions and experiences gathered directly from Russian citizens currently living in Russia. I kindly request you to fill in this survey for strictly academic purposes. All responses are anonymous and your data will be kept fully confidential. Thank you for your time and contribution."

Q1: I confirm that I am participating voluntarily, understand that the survey is anonymous, and agree that my responses may be used for academic research. I understand that I may skip any question or stop at any time.		1. Yes 2. No	1. 100% 2. 0%
Power Accountability	**Q2:** Accountability of those in power is an important quality of a well-governed state.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 2.1% 2. 1% 3. 2.1% 4. 32.3% 5. 62.5%
Political Stability	**Q3:** Political stability is a fundamental requirement for a well-governed state.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 0% 2. 4.2% 3. 7.3% 4. 52.1% 5. 36.5%
Public Services Effectiveness	**Q4:** The state's effectiveness in providing public services (for	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree	1. 0% 2. 0%

	example, in the areas of healthcare, education, transport, and safety) is an important indicator of the quality of public governance.	3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	3. 2.1% 4. 36.5% 5. 61.5%
Corruption Reduction	**Q5:** Reducing corruption is important for a well-governed state	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 2.1% 2. 0% 3. 6.3% 4. 34.4% 5. 57.3%
Social Welfare	**Q6:** Ensuring people's basic well-being and social security is one of the state's core responsibilities.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 0% 2. 2.1% 3. 6.3% 4. 33.3% 5. 58.3%
Institutional Trust	**Q7:** Citizens' trust in state institutions is an important condition for the effective governance of the country.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 0% 2. 1% 3. 8.3% 4. 43.8% 5. 46.9%
Equality Before the Law	**Q8:** Equal treatment of citizens under the law is an important value of a well-governed state.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 0% 2. 0% 3. 3.1% 4. 31.3% 5. 65.6%
Judicial Independence & Rule of Law	**Q9:** Justice with an independent and fair legal system should be a guiding principle in how the	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral	1. 0% 2. 0% 3. 5.2%

	state operates.	4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	4. 31.3% 5. 63.5%
Civic Participation	**Q10:** Citizens' ability to influence government decisions through elections, public discussion, or civic participation is important for a well-governed state.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 2.1% 2. 2.1% 3. 8.3% 4. 37.5% 5. 50%
Perceived Governance Gap	**Q11:** How close is present-day governance in Russia to your idea of a well-governed state?	1. Does not correspond at all 2. Mostly does not correspond 3. Partly corresponds, partly does not 4. Mostly corresponds 5. Fully corresponds 6. Prefer not to answer	1. 24% 2. 19.8% 3. 40.6% 4. 8.3% 5. 1% 6. 6.3%
Governance Value Priorities	**Q12:** If a state had to prioritise one of the following, which should come first?	1. Stability 2. Freedom of expression 3. Economic welfare 4. Justice and rule of law 5. National security 6. Citizen participation 7. Not sure	1. 10.4% 2. 10.4% 3. 27.1% 4. 31.3% 5. 9.4% 6. 5.2% 7. 6.3%
Perceived Opinion Divergence	**Q13:** My personal views on good governance are different from what I usually hear in my social environment.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree	1. 5.2% 2. 32.3% 3. 42.7% 4. 16.7%

		5. Strongly Agree 6. Prefer not to answer	5. 3.1%
Self-Censorship	**Q14:** I have lately been avoiding sharing my honest opinion on political or social issues.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree 6. Prefer not to answer	1. 5.2% 2. 14.6% 3. 25% 4. 39.6% 5. 15.6%
Perceived Barriers to Expression	**Q15:** In general, what concerns do you think make people cautious about expressing political views?	1. Legal consequences 2. Workplace consequences 3. Family conflict 4. Social judgement 5. Online surveillance 6. Nothing prevents open expression 7. Other 8. Prefer not to answer	1. 66.7% 2. 24% 3. 20.8% 4. 28.1% 5. 31.3% 6. 7.3% 7. 4.2% "Other" responses: 2 did not specify a rationale, 2 stated, out of which 1 specified nothing prevents open expression but people are still afraid of the aforementioned consequences and another one stated it is an even more complex web of factors 8. 16.7%
Conditional / Situational Openness	**Q16:** When I feel it is safe, I share my views on political or	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree	1. 1% 2. 6.3%

	social issues.	3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	3. 26% 4. 42.7% 5. 24%
Disclosure Comfort Hierarchy	**Q17:** Which of the following groups would you feel comfortable discussing political or social issues with?	1. Family 2. Close friends 3. Colleagues 4. Acquaintances 5. Online 6. No one 7. Other 8. Prefer not to answer	Since this is a multiple-choice question, these percentages do not sum to 100%. 1. 33.3% 2. 60.4% 3. 7.3% 4. 14.6% 5. 9.4% 6. 10.4% 7. 1% (“With everyone listed”) 8. 5.2%
Perceived Preference Falsification	**Q18:** I think some people around me express different views in private than they do in public.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 1% 2. 15.6% 3. 28.1% 4. 45.8% 5. 9.4%
Demographics: Age	**Q19:** What is your age?	1. Under 18 2. 18–24 3. 25–34 4. 35–44 5. 45–54 6. 55–64 7. 65 or above 8. Prefer not to answer	1. 33.3% 2. 13.5% 3. 6.3% 4. 15.6% 5. 11.5% 6. 15.6% 7. 3.1% 8. 1%

Demographics: Residence Type	**Q20:** Which best describes where you live?	1. Large city 2. Medium city 3. Small town 4. Rural area 5. Prefer not to answer	1. 84.4% 2. 9.4% 3. 5.2% 4. 1% 5. 0%
Demographics: Education Level	**Q21:** What is your highest level of education completed?	1. Lower secondary education / Upper secondary education 2. Post-secondary vocational/technical education 3. Bachelor's degree 4. Master's / doctoral studies 5. Prefer not to answer	1. 39.6% 2. 8.3% 3. 29.2% 4. 19.8% 5. 3.1%
Demographics: Employment Status	**Q22:** Your current employment status:	1. School student 2. College or university student 3. Private sector 4. Public sector 5. State-owned company 6. Self-employed 7. Currently not working or studying 8. Retired 9. Other 10. Prefer not to answer	1. 33.3% 2. 11.5% 3. 13.5% 4. 3.1% 5. 3.1% 6. 12.5% 7. 10.4% 8. 5.2% 9. 2.1% "Other" responses: 2 write-in responses were provided; one specified working at an NGO, and another simply stated "I work" without specifying the

			sector or type of work. 10. 7.3%

Table 2: Survey Questionnaire

The sample is predominantly young, urban, and fairly educated. 68.7% of respondents are under 45, compared with 30.2% aged 45 or older; most live in large cities, and the largest share have completed at least secondary education, with school students forming the largest occupational group. This composition likely reflects network-based sampling given the legal sensitivities of the topic in Russia, a limitation discussed further below. (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Respondents converge most strongly on the outcome oriented qualities of good governance: effective public services (98.0%) and equal treatment under the law (96.9%) draw the highest combined agreement of all nine governance items, while values tied more to political process land lower, though still strongly supported, among them political stability (88.6%) and civic participation (87.5%), which ranks last overall. The same preference holds when respondents are forced to choose a single governing priority: justice and rule of law comes out on top (31.3%), followed by economic welfare (27.1%), while civic participation again ranks last (5.2%). Taken together, these results indicate that Russians judge good governance primarily by what a state delivers, a results-based conception of governance, rather than by how power is structured or contested.

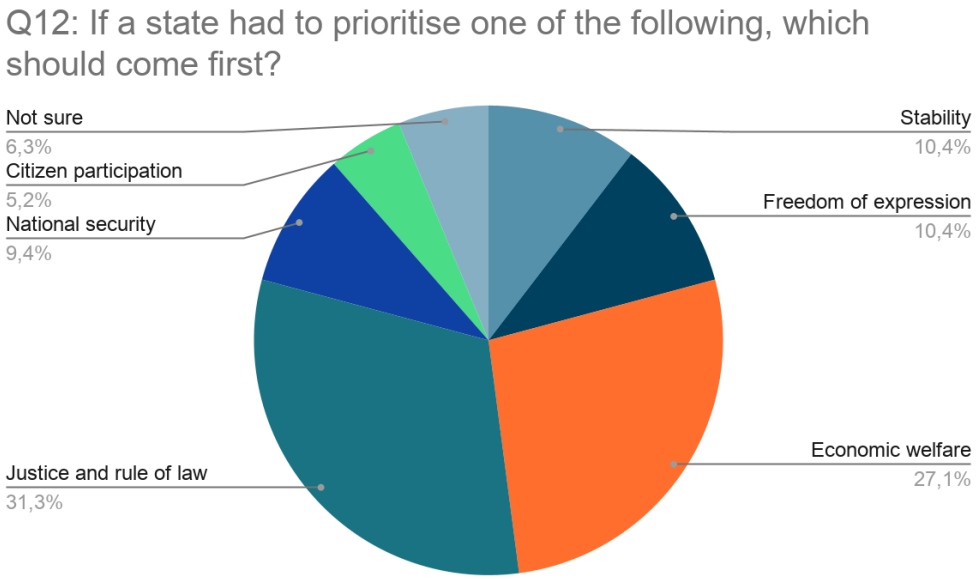

Figure 1: Governance Value Priorities

A parallel pattern of hedging and self-censorship emerges whenever a question requires respondents to place themselves relative to authority or the people around them. When comparing Russia's governance to their ideal, the most common response is the safest, middle option (40.6%), and when comparing their own views to those around them, the plurality again lands on neutral (42.7%). This reluctance to take a clear position extends into more direct measures of self-censorship: a plurality of respondents report having recently avoided sharing honest political opinions (39.6%), and close to half believe people around them behave differently in private than in public (45.8%). Read together, these results suggest the earlier neutral responses are not simple indifference but a softer expression of the same self-censoring instinct.

This caution appears situational rather than absolute, however, since a comparable share of respondents say they do share their views once it feels safe (42.7%), indicating that risk is managed contextually rather than producing blanket silence.

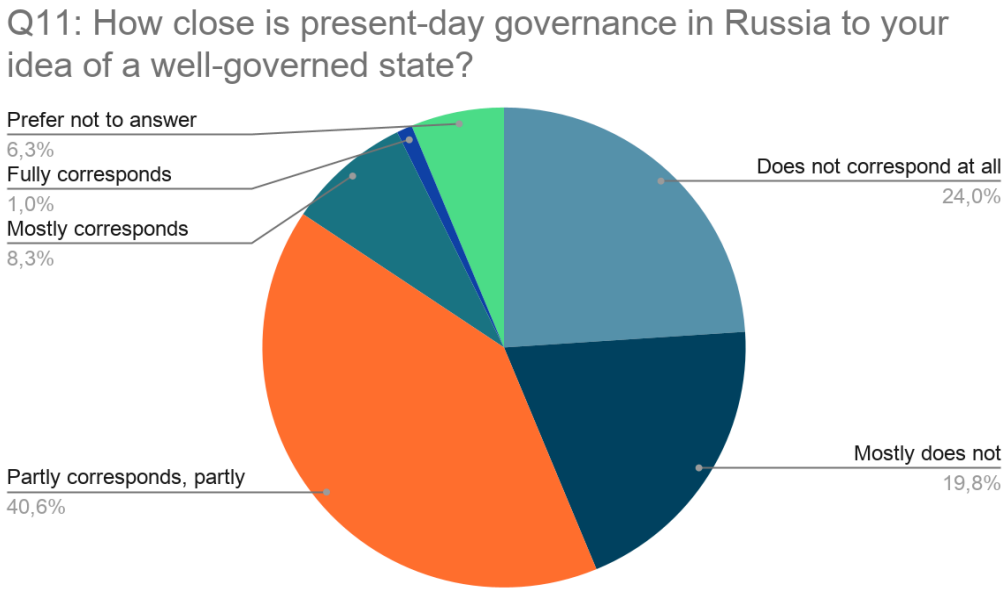

Figure 2: Perceived Governance Gap (Q11)

Legal consequences dominate as the perceived source of that risk (66.7%), well ahead of online surveillance (31.3%) and social judgement (28.1%). One write-in response complicates this picture, noting that no formal barrier exists yet fear persists regardless, a distinction between real and perceived constraint worth carrying into the discussion.

Where disclosure does occur, it concentrates within chosen relationships rather than inherited ones: close friends (60.4%) are trusted with political conversation considerably more than family (33.3%), suggesting that safety, in this context, is a function of relational closeness rather than kinship.

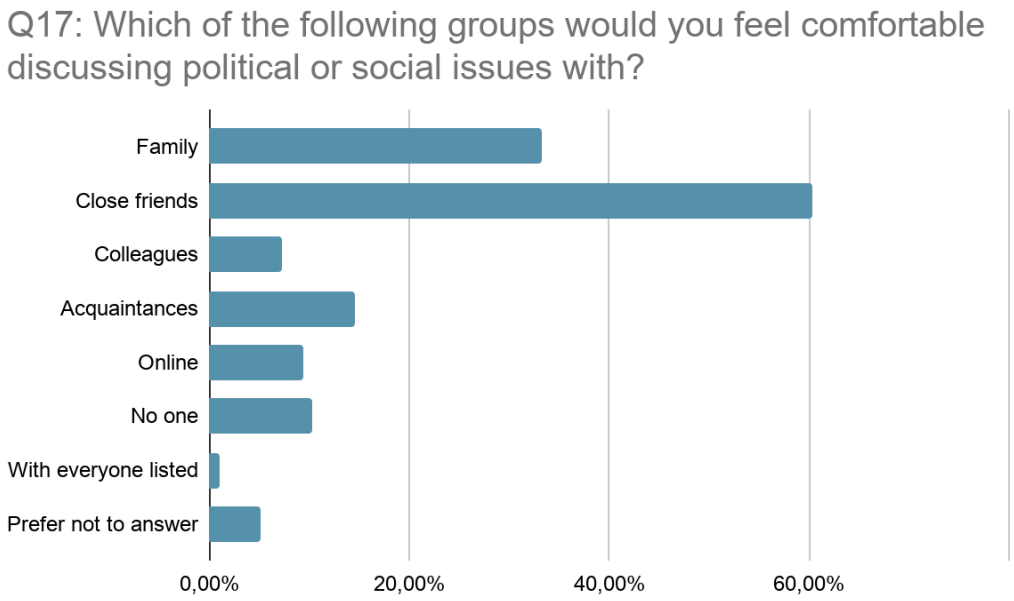

Figure 3: Disclosure Comfort Hierarchy (Q17)

DATA ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

To assess relationships between key variables in this study, both correlation and regression analyses were conducted on the 96 survey responses. The objective was to test the proposed hypotheses and identify predictive patterns between governance beliefs, self-censorship, and disclosure behavior. Data cleaning involved recording Likert responses to numeric scales and standardizing multi-select items into counts; missing values (mainly "prefer not to answer" responses) were excluded listwise per test rather than imputed. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the strength and direction of linear relationships, while linear regression models tested how well one variable predicted

Factors	**M1: Ideal-State Perceptions**	**M2: Own Opinion Divergence**	**M3: Perceived Falsification**	**M4: Self-Censorship**	**M5: Perceived Barriers**	**M6: Disclosure Comfort**	**M7: Prioritizes Stability/Security**	**M8: Stability/Effectiveness Index**	**M9: Participatory/ Rights Index**
Generational cohort	r=0.03, p=.770	r=-0.12, p=.263						r=0.04, p=.705	r=-0.02, p=.842

Age (full range)	r=-0.13, p=.217	r=0.11, p=.271	r=0.11, p=.312		r=-0.47, p<.001***	r=-0.25, p=.020**		r=-0.13, p=.203	r=-0.04, p=.697
Education	r=-0.11, p=.319	r=0.09, p=.404							
Occupation (student)	r=0.22, p=.037**	r=-0.06, p=.593							
Occupation (public/state-owned)		r=0.11, p=.305					r=-0.02, p=.879		
Place of residence (large city)	r=0.13, p=.225	r=-0.23, p=.027**							
Self-Censorship		r=0.06, p=.547	r=0.23, p=.025**			r=-0.36, p=.001***			
Perceived Governance Gap	r=-0.41, p<.001***	r=-0.09, p=.387	r=-0.19, p=.073*	r=-0.10, p=.343					
Perceived Barriers						r=0.06, p=.634			

Table 3: Correlation Results

The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to evaluate the degree of linear association between relevant survey variables. Occupation showed a weak but significant positive relationship with the Ideal-State Perceptions index ($r = 0.22$, $p = .037$), while residence showed a weak but significant negative relationship with own opinion divergence ($r = -0.23$, $p = .027$); cohort, education, and occupation type showed no significant relationship with divergence itself. A moderate, highly significant negative correlation ($r = -0.41$, $p < .001$) was found between the Ideal-State Perceptions index and the Perceived Governance Gap. Self-Censorship showed a weak but significant positive correlation with the belief that others falsify their views ($r = 0.23$, $p = .025$), but no meaningful relationship with respondents' own reported divergence ($r = 0.06$, $p = .547$). Self-Censorship was also moderately and significantly correlated with Disclosure Comfort ($r = -0.36$, $p = .001$), while Perceived Barriers alone showed virtually no

relationship with disclosure (r = 0.06, p = .634). Age showed a moderate, highly significant negative correlation with Perceived Barriers (r = -0.47, p < .001), but neither age nor generational cohort significantly predicted either governance-value sub-index.

Factors	**M1: Ideal-State Perceptions**	**M2: Own Opinion Divergence**	**M3: Self-Censorship**	**M4: Perceived Barriers**	**M5: Disclosure Comfort**	**M8: Stability/Effectiveness Index**	**M9: Participatory/Rights Index**
Generational cohort	β=-0.194, p=.131	β=-0.128, p=.623				β=0.042, p=.705	β=-0.024, p=.842
Age (full range)				β=-0.346, p<.001***	β=-0.132, p=.020**		
Education	β=0.109, p=.168	β=0.103, p=.521					
Occupation (student)	β=0.546, p=.007***	β=0.140, p=.732					
Occupation (public/state-owned)		β=0.396, p=.305					
Place of residence	β=0.152, p=.234	β=-0.698, p=.009***					
Perceived Governance Gap		β=-0.078, p=.421	β=-0.111, p=.343				
Perceived Falsification			β=0.274, p=.025**				
Own Opinion Divergence			β=0.076, p=.547				
Perceived Barriers				β=0.044, p=.634			
Self-Censorship		β=0.046,		β=-0.347,	β=-0.613,		

		p=.600		p<.001***	p=.0012***		
Perceived Barriers					β=-0.289, p=.256		
Self-Censorship × Perceived Barriers					β=0.117, p=.120		

Table 4: Regression Results

Model 1 (R^2 = .119, F p = .032), Model 2's demographic rows (R^2 = .098, F p = .073), and Model 2's Governance Gap and Self-Censorship rows (R^2 = .012, jointly) each test their listed factors together; all remaining rows are single-predictor models.

Regression models were employed to test how well predictor variables influenced outcome variables relevant to governance beliefs and disclosure behavior. Occupation modestly predicted the Ideal-State Perceptions index (β = 0.546, p = .007), the only demographic factor to reach significance in that model; residence significantly predicted own opinion divergence (β = -0.698, p = .009), again the only significant factor in that model, while occupation type (public or state-owned versus other) did not (β = 0.396, p = .305). Neither the governance gap nor self-censorship significantly predicted divergence when entered together (β = -0.078, p = .421 and β = 0.046, p = .600). Age, tested across its full range, remained the strongest predictor overall, explaining a meaningful share of the variance in perceived barriers (β = -0.346, p < .001) and a smaller but still significant share of disclosure comfort (β = -0.132, p = .020). Perceived falsification in others significantly predicted self-censorship (β = 0.274, p = .025), while respondents' own reported divergence did not (β = 0.076, p = .547). Perceived barriers alone failed to predict disclosure comfort (β = 0.044, p = .634), but self-censorship did so strongly (β = -0.347, p < .001), remaining, alongside age, the strongest and most meaningful predictor across these models. To test whether perceived barriers strengthen this relationship, an interaction term was added to the disclosure comfort model; the interaction was not significant (β = 0.117, p = .120), and self-censorship remained the dominant predictor even when barriers and their interaction were included (β = -0.613, p = .0012), while barriers alone still contributed nothing (β = -0.289, p = .256).

Beyond the individual coefficients, a clear pattern emerges across the models: demographic factors explain relatively little of the variance overall, with generational cohort never reaching significance anywhere it's tested (Ideal-State Perceptions: β = -0.194, p = .131; Own Opinion Divergence: β = -0.128, p = .623; Stability/Effectiveness Index: β = 0.042, p = .705; Participatory/Rights Index: β = -0.024, p = .842), education similarly falling short in both models where it appears (β = 0.109, p = .168; β = 0.103, p = .521), and only occupation (student status, β = 0.546, p = .007) and place of residence (β = -0.698, p = .009) reaching significance, each within its own single model, while occupation type as public or state-owned employment does not (β = 0.396, p = .305). By contrast, attitudinal and psychological factors carry the strongest and most consistent predictive power: age, tested across its full range, significantly

predicts both perceived barriers ($\beta = -0.346$, $p < .001$) and disclosure comfort ($\beta = -0.132$, $p = .020$), perceived falsification significantly predicts self-censorship ($\beta = 0.274$, $p = .025$), and self-censorship itself is the strongest single predictor in the table, forecasting disclosure comfort ($\beta = -0.347$, $p < .001$). This asymmetry suggests that how Russians navigate the tension between public conformity and private divergence is shaped less by fixed demographic categories and more by lived psychological orientations toward risk and trust, a point reinforced by the complete absence of significant predictors for the Stability/Effectiveness and Participatory/Rights indices, which indicates that generational cohort alone does not meaningfully differentiate which governance qualities respondents prioritize, complicating any straightforward narrative of a generational value divide.

DISCUSSION

This study found that how citizens rate the qualities of a well-governed state, and how self-censorship, perceived governance gaps, and demographic background relate to the divergence between public and private political views, is shaped far more by personal circumstances and psychological orientation than by broad demographic categories. Occupation and place of residence were linked to specific outcomes, students held somewhat more idealistic governance views, and city residents reported less personal divergence from those around them, but generational cohort, education, and public-sector employment showed no consistent relationship with any outcome tested. By contrast, self-censorship and age emerged as the most reliable predictors in the study, self-censorship was tied to believing that others hide their true views, and age was linked to both how many barriers someone perceives to speaking freely and how narrow their circle of trusted political confidants is. This skew is worth taking seriously as a reliability concern rather than a minor caveat: with certain age groups, education levels, and occupational categories represented by only a handful of respondents, the study's power to detect real effects within those groups was limited from the outset, and some of the null results reported above, particularly for education and public-sector employment, may reflect this underrepresentation as much as a genuine absence of relationship.

The link between occupation and idealism, but not education, aligns with the argument that without state-dependent employment on the line, students face fewer career-based incentives to temper their governance ideals, giving them more room to hold democratic values without material risk (Rosenfeld, 2020). This has a fairly direct implication for anyone working with youth-driven civic or activist movements: if young people's governance ideals are genuinely less constrained by material stakes than those of the average adult, this may help explain why youth-led activism tends to be comparatively vocal (Khvostunova, 2019), and suggests such movements could be a meaningful channel for understanding where public sentiment is heading before it becomes safe for other age groups to express it openly. The absence of any generational split in value priorities (H1b), by contrast, may reflect that both older and younger respondents currently live under the same centralized political environment, leaving little in their present daily experience to pull their priorities apart even if their formative years differed, though this remains a tentative reading rather than something the data confirms directly. If real, this would matter for

anyone designing political messaging or civic campaigns aimed at Russians, since it suggests governance-value appeals may not need to be generationally tailored the way age-based political targeting often assumes. Two hypotheses could not be meaningfully evaluated at all: whether public or state-owned employment relates to lower opinion divergence (H2b), or to prioritizing stability over participatory values (H8). Only 6 of the 96 respondents worked in the public sector or a state-owned organization, far too small a group to draw any reliable conclusion, supported or not. This is a sample limitation rather than a finding, and it points to a clear direction for future research: a study specifically oversampling public-sector and state-employed Russians would be needed to properly test whether economic dependency on the state shapes governance attitudes in this population, since the current data simply cannot speak to it either way.

The finding that city residents report less personal divergence fits work on misperceived social norms: seeing more visible diversity of opinion around oneself, more likely in a large city, may reduce the sense of being alone in one's views (Bursztyn et al., 2020). This carries a broader implication worth taking seriously: if simply perceiving that other people share one's private views measurably reduces felt isolation, then interventions or platforms that make shared private opinion more visible, without requiring anyone to state it publicly first, could meaningfully ease the psychological weight of political isolation, independent of any change in the political environment itself. Related to this, self-censorship's link to believing others diverge, but not to reporting one's own divergence, is consistent with the theory of preference falsification, that sustained concealment does not just deceive others, it can blur a person's own clear sense of their private position (Kuran, 1997). Someone who has spent a long time performing agreement may become less able to consciously register their own divergence, even while still noticing it in others, a pattern the same variance issue likely explains for the null H5 and H6 results as well, since perceived barriers were reported so consistently across the sample that little room remained for that variable to statistically distinguish one respondent's disclosure behavior from another's, whether tested alone or in combination with self-censorship.

Among the hypotheses that could be properly tested, the clearest support emerged for the role of age and self-censorship rather than for governance dissatisfaction itself: age reliably predicted both perceived barriers and disclosure comfort, and self-censorship reliably predicted disclosure comfort and beliefs about others' falsification, standing out as the two variables doing the most consistent explanatory work across the study. The null results for the perceived governance gap (H4a-c) suggest that dissatisfaction with governance and outward compliance can coexist without tension, consistent with the observation that Russians often separate blame for specific officials from support for the state overall (Sharafutdinova, 2022), meaning a large perceived gap between one's ideal and current governance does not necessarily translate into greater guardedness or a wider private-public split. Read together with the age findings, that older respondents perceive fewer barriers yet maintain a narrower circle of trusted confidants, this points toward a methodological implication for researchers and sociologists working on public opinion in restrictive contexts: since older respondents feel comparatively safer expressing views yet share them with fewer people, standard survey and polling approaches may be missing a meaningful share of older Russians' genuine opinions simply because those opinions rarely surface outside a small trusted circle,

suggesting that data collection strategies built around trusted-network access, rather than open solicitation, may be necessary to capture this population's views with any accuracy. Beyond the hypothesis-driven findings, the descriptive pattern of responses is itself worth noting: while all nine governance qualities drew strong majority agreement, respondents ranked outcome-oriented qualities, effective services, equal treatment under the law, somewhat higher than process-oriented ones like civic participation, a modest but consistent pattern that held whether respondents were rating individual qualities or forced to choose a single top priority. A separate pattern surfaced wherever a question asked respondents to place themselves relative to authority or their surroundings: the safest, most neutral answer was consistently the most common choice, a pattern worth reading alongside the self-censorship captured directly elsewhere in the survey, since it raises the possibility that similar caution shaped how respondents answered the survey itself, not just how they described their behavior in the world.

IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes primarily theoretical knowledge to the field. Rather than introducing an entirely new topic, its principal contribution lies in establishing a set of empirically grounded links between citizens' governance ideals and the factors that shape public conformity and private divergence, connections that existing scholarship has largely treated as separate lines of inquiry. Where prior research has tended to document governance preferences and preference falsification independently, this study demonstrates how specific individual factors, occupation, place of residence, self-censorship, and age, relate systematically to both what Russians envision as good governance and how openly they express that vision.

Existing research on Russian public opinion tends to focus on why the current regime is supported or opposed, largely at the level of the state or the political system as a whole (Buckley et al., 2024; Sharafutdinova, 2022; Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022), rather than on what an ideal state would actually look like from an individual citizen's perspective. Given the censorship constraints surrounding this topic (Human Rights Watch, 2024), comparatively little research captures Russians' governance ideals at this individualized, citizen-level scale; much of the existing literature speculates about the regime rather than asking citizens directly what they want (Buckley et al., 2024; Sharafutdinova, 2022; Gogashvili, 2025). This study addresses that gap by identifying specific factors, along with potential moderating relationships not typically explored in prior research, that shape both citizens' governance ideals and their willingness to express them.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, these findings carry practical value for specific stakeholders. For policymakers, the fact that Russians converge strongly around identifiable, liberal democratic governance values offers a concrete evidentiary basis worth consulting when considering paths toward reform. For advocates and civil society actors, the finding that occupation relates to ideal-state perceptions, with students holding more idealistic views, suggests that student-aged populations may be comparatively receptive to political engagement and could represent a valuable focus for advocacy efforts. Similarly, the finding that place of residence relates to divergence, with respondents in larger cities reporting less personal divergence from those around them, suggests that individuals in smaller regions may feel

comparatively more isolated in their views, a consideration worth building into outreach strategies, including greater sensitivity when engaging respondents from smaller towns. Taken together, these findings offer practitioners a more grounded basis for designing engagement strategies suited to specific populations, rather than treating the Russian public as a single, uniform group.

Beyond its academic and practical relevance, this research speaks to a broader real-world problem: a persistent lack of trust and transparency between citizens and the state, in which many Russians remain reluctant to share their political views openly (Human Rights Watch, 2024). By identifying which factors shape this divide, the research offers a foundation for eventually rebuilding that trust, not through equality in the sense of uniform treatment, but through equity, recognizing that different groups face different barriers to transparency and require different approaches to closing that gap. Should conditions eventually

allow for greater openness or institutional reform, findings of this kind may help guide a more citizen-oriented rebuilding of trust, grounded in what Russians have actually expressed wanting rather than assumptions imposed from outside.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this study was to examine what qualities citizens associate with an ideal, well-governed state, and how self-censorship, perceived governance gaps, and demographic background relate to the divergence between public and private political views in Russia. When it comes to what respondents envision as good governance, the findings point clearly to a liberal democratic ideal: respondents overwhelmingly agreed on the importance of qualities typically associated with liberal democracies, from effective public services and equal treatment under the law to justice, rule of law, and civic participation, judging good governance largely by what a state delivers to its citizens rather than by how power is structured (Koliba, 2024). Alongside this, occupation was found to relate to how idealistically respondents rated these governance qualities, place of residence was found to relate to how much personal divergence respondents reported from those around them, self-censorship was found to relate to whether respondents believed others around them conceal their true views, and age was found to relate to both how many barriers to political expression someone perceives and how narrow their circle of trusted political confidants is.

These findings carry several interpretive implications. That occupation, specifically being a student, relates to more idealistic governance views suggests that students hold a comparatively concrete and well-formed vision of what Russia could look like, which may help explain why younger, student-aged Russians appear especially inclined toward activist engagement, having less at stake materially and a clearer sense of what change might mean (Khvostunova, 2019). That place of residence relates to lower reported divergence in larger cities suggests that visible activism in major urban centers may be tied less to some cities being more "honest" than others, and more to city size itself: residents surrounded by more visible diversity of opinion may simply feel less alone in their views (Bursztyn et al., 2020), and that reduced sense of isolation may itself encourage more open engagement and conversation. That

self-censorship relates to believing others also conceal their true views points to how deeply social perception and personal disclosure are intertwined, suggesting that efforts to build public trust and transparency may benefit less from directly encouraging individuals to speak up, and more from cultivating environments where people feel heard, since it is the broader social climate, not just individual willingness, that appears to shape disclosure. That age relates to both fewer perceived barriers and a narrower trusted circle suggests a kind of earned trust dynamic among older respondents: entry into their close circle may be harder to achieve, but once granted, disclosure flows more naturally, since less caution is felt once trust has been established.

Beyond the statistical relationships tested, the raw pattern of responses offers its own insight into how Russians conceive of governance and manage political caution. While all governance qualities drew strong support, respondents ranked those tied to outcomes and delivery, such as effective public services and equal treatment under the law, somewhat higher than those tied to political process, suggesting that what Russians want from their state may be judged as much by what it provides as by how power itself is organized. A similar caution ran through how respondents answered questions that asked them to compare themselves to their government or their social circle, with the safest, most neutral response consistently the most common, echoing the same instinct toward guardedness that self-censorship items captured more directly. Even the specific fears respondents named, legal consequences chief among them, and the specific relationships they trusted, close friends over family, paint a coherent picture in their own right: caution is real and widely shared, but so is a clear sense of where that caution can safely be set aside.

This research is not without limitations. Reaching a broad, representative sample proved difficult, since the topic's sensitivity meant some groups were considerably more willing to participate than others, respondents themselves cited legal risk and fear of online surveillance as reasons others declined to take part. The sample also relied heavily on a specific, trusted personal network rather than being open to the wider population, which limits how confidently these findings can be generalized. Future research should work to widen this circle of trust itself, encouraging a broader, more varied set of contacts to share the survey further within their own distinct networks, allowing the study's reach to naturally extend beyond any single researcher's social circle. In practical terms, these insights may prove useful to sociologists and political scientists refining survey and polling strategies across different demographic groups, as well as to policymakers, activists, or organizations seeking to build genuine public trust, by grounding their approach in a clearer understanding of how governance beliefs and disclosure behavior actually vary across the population, rather than assuming uniformity.

In conclusion, the relationship between how Russians envision good governance and how they navigate the gap between what they believe and what they say is a genuinely complex and intertwined one. Yet beneath that complexity lies a striking degree of consensus: despite their differences in background, circumstance, and caution, Russians converge with real clarity on what they want from their state, a finding that speaks to something more unified than the fragmented, individualized coping strategies might initially suggest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my mentor, Soniya Gupta-Rawal, whose thorough and invaluable support helped guide me through this research process. She taught me how to approach original research and generate genuine, independent knowledge, and her insights were a valuable part of shaping this project. I count myself truly fortunate to have benefited from someone with her level of experience and insight.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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