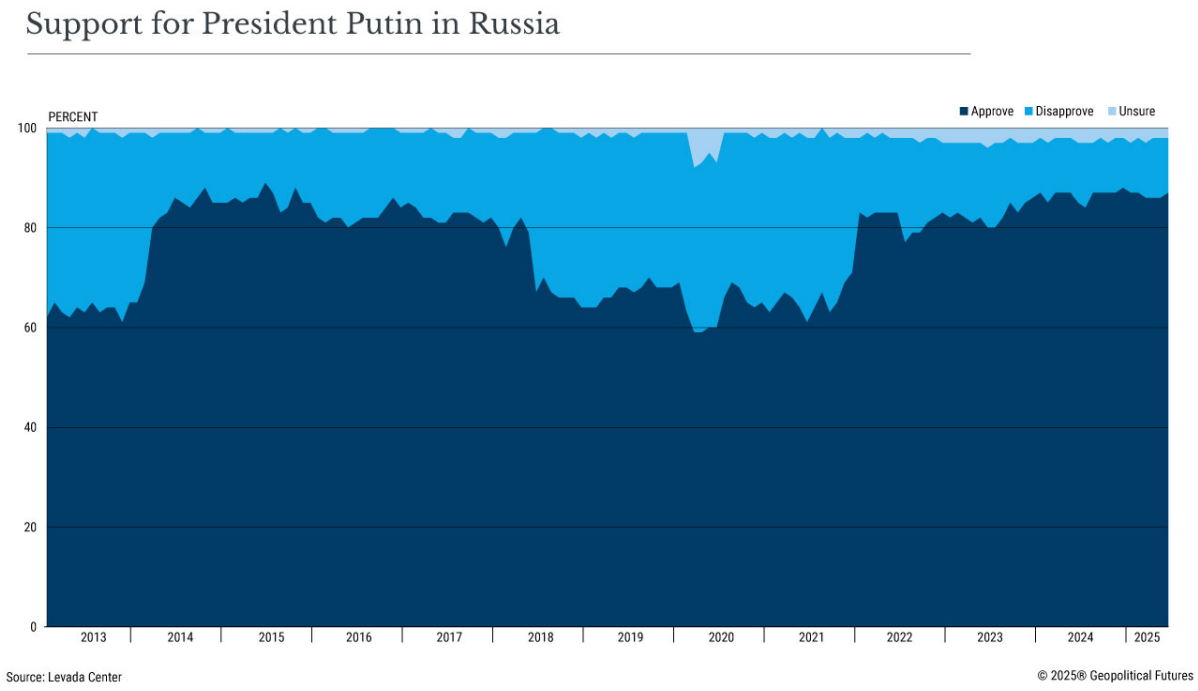
Why Haven't Russians Revolted?

by Ekaterina Zolotova - September 30, 2025

Throughout history, a certain pattern has emerged in times of war that looks something like this: A protracted conflict depletes the budget and resources of a warring country and eventually leads to widespread discontent among the population as living standards decline and opposition movements grow. By that logic, there should be mass unrest in Russia. There is no end in sight to the war in Ukraine, even as enemy drones damage property and occasionally kill Russian citizens. Talks with the United States have not just stalled; they have degraded bilateral relations. More, Moscow has had to alter its tax code to continue to fund the war, creating larger financial burdens on businesses and citizens alike.

And yet, after three and a half years of war, Russia is relatively placid. President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings remain high, and there is a noted uptick in patriotic sentiment in much of the country. Tempting as it may be to write this off as a symptom of autocratic rule, there are deeper societal changes underway that explain why Russia is bucking the historical trend of wartime discontent.



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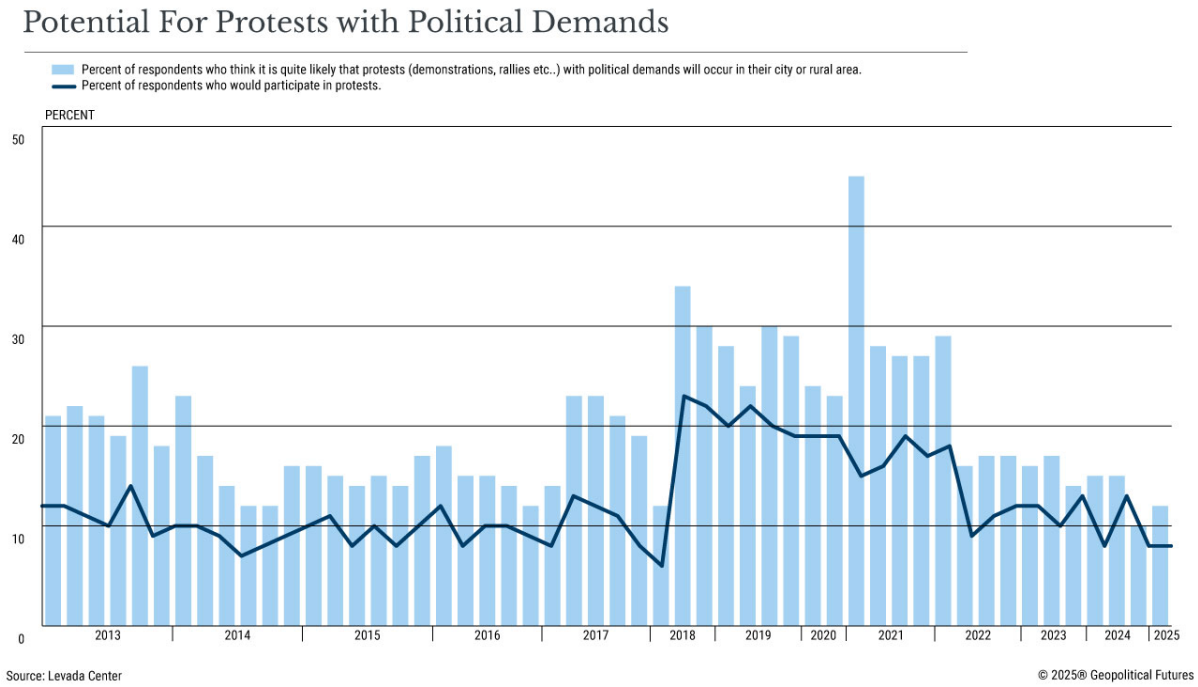
One of these changes is taking place within the government itself. In modern Russia, power has generally been divided into three segments: the rulers themselves, the systemic opposition, which is represented in government structures and works with the rulers, and the non-systemic opposition, which opposes the rulers and is thus excluded entirely from the decision-making process. Given Russia's size and population, the Kremlin has an imperative to consolidate power by establishing regime-friendly hubs in major cities and far-flung regions. It's nothing short of a necessary precondition to forestall protests.

And in theory, there is plenty of reason to protest. Yes, the war in Ukraine has cost Russia a lot of money and lives, but even before the conflict, Ukraine was seen as a fraternal ally, and many Russians considered an invasion unthinkable. Mass mobilization, early failures and increased international pressure could have pushed masses to the streets. But they didn't. Crucially, there was an insurrection led by Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, and participants thought to be non-systemic opposition fled the country or died. Dissatisfaction remains, but for the most part, it's passive, muted discontent rather than animated rage. Generally speaking, Russian citizens aren't being killed en masse or forced to live in the streets; they are being forced to endure slower internet speeds and surrender some of the luxuries they once enjoyed. (The region of Kursk is an obvious exception.)



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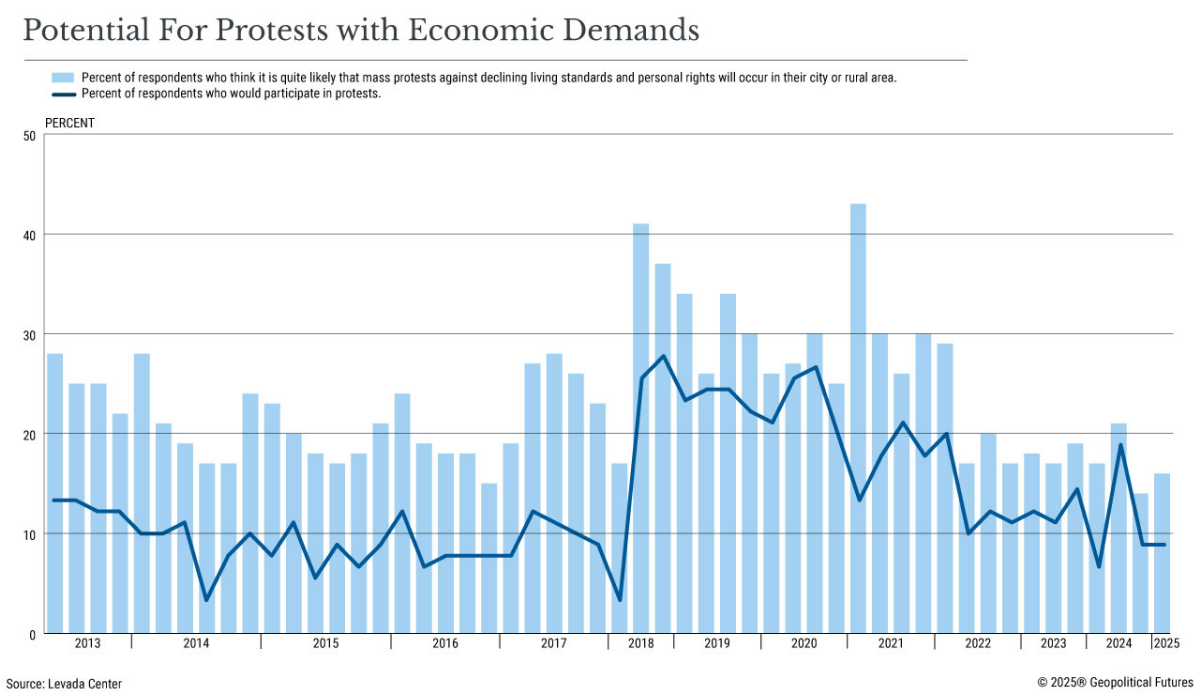

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More, Russia has skillfully reduced the representation of the non-systemic opposition in power, best exemplified by the most recent elections. From Sept 12-14, Russians voted for regional governors in 20 areas, determined the composition of legislative assemblies in 11 regions and formed new city councils in 25 municipalities. The ruling United Russia party improved its standing in regional legislative assembly elections, even in several previously hostile areas in which members of the non-systemic opposition once served in the Duma. This means that power remains in the hands of the ruling party and the systemic opposition. Problems that arise from budgetary constraints, tax payments and central bank policy have, of course, pitted parts of the establishment against one another. In fact, there is a **growing division** among pro-war and pro-peace factions within the government, though it's hardly wide enough to cause any real damage or defection. For the most part, all institutions, strategically important state-owned companies, the central bank and the parties represented in power are following a common course, especially in the realm of foreign policy.

By purging the non-systemic opposition, the rulers have created an emergent government more loyal than previous ones, partly by promoting veterans of the war. At a post-election meeting with the new heads of the country's regions, Putin announced that officials need to recruit participants in the "special military operation" into their personnel policies more actively. He launched the federal "Time of Heroes" development program, aimed at providing specialized training for veterans and

participants in the Ukraine conflict. Considering that veterans currently hold some of the highest-paying jobs and enjoy extensive state benefits, the Kremlin is counting on their loyalty and patriotism.

The second change underway in Russian society is a growing affinity for national identity and culture. Though there are certainly state programs meant to promote this very sentiment, this has been a mostly independent phenomenon. On VKontakte – Russia's analogue to Facebook – users are increasingly posting content related to Russian culture: historical costumes, travel photos and the like. Russian cultural motifs are increasingly featured in clothing, accessories, films and music. (A popular folk singer from the 1990s named Nadezhda Kadysheva is experiencing something of a renaissance.) Last weekend, I attended an event in which lectures on Russian folklore were held and traditional goods such as kokoshniks (traditional headdresses) were sold. The event was not state-sponsored; if anything, many vendors complained about insufficient funding from a government ostensibly interested in promoting traditional culture.

On the one hand, the newfound interest in Russian culture plays into the hands of the Kremlin. It pits Russian values against Western ones and generally explains the long and grueling war in Ukraine as a struggle against NATO. "Family values" often refer to participation in World War II by ancestors, which adds a sense of reverence to the war in Ukraine. This spares the government from having to continue to justify war costs (slated to reach 13 trillion rubles, or $157 billion, by 2028) to a more dutiful population.

On the other hand, cultural affinity doesn't necessarily do much to unite the state and the people. A desire to share historical traditions isn't tantamount to blind obedience to the state, especially if the state is responsible for the decline in their standard of living. In fact, a majority of the population favors a negotiated solution. Modern Russia is also multinational, so Moscow would risk inciting the kind of protests it wants to avoid if it were to actively promote one culture over another.

All this is to say there are societal trends in Russia that have created the conditions for the rulers to maintain power, despite the fact that the financial necessities of war make their positions inherently vulnerable. Geopolitically, though, this suggests the war in Ukraine will continue until Moscow can secure terms that it and its people can live with.

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