

## Assessing the Level of Happiness: a Review of Russian and Foreign Research



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**Abstract.** The article presents the main results of the first phase of the study launched in 2015 by ISED T RAS researchers and aimed at assessing subjective satisfaction with the quality of life and its impact on social development. The article shows that subjective assessment of quality of life is a criterion for assessing the efficiency of public administration, an indicator of people's attitude toward economic, social and political decisions. The generalization of domestic and international experience serves as the basis proving that in the post-industrial economy the phenomenon of happiness is important as a goal of public administration and criterion for evaluating its effectiveness from the viewpoint of politicians, economists, sociologists and psychologists. The authors consider the main international and national indicators and ratings of happiness that help to carry out cross-country comparisons, and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages of index methodologies for assessing the level of happiness are as follows: the use of national averages without taking into account the uneven distribution of benefits and driving forces of spiritual and moral development of individuals; lack of opportunity to make prompt and regular calculations of the indices and to take into account the specifics of countries, cultural and ethnic differences. The integral indicator

does not even reflect problems highlighted by partial indices. The article also substantiates the necessity of using self-representative questionnaire methods as the most reliable sources of information about the level of people's subjective satisfaction with the quality of life, and highlights several methodological features of their application. The authors provide research findings by VTsIOM, RAS Institute of Sociology, and ISED T RAS, which not only assess the level of happiness, but also identify a set of conditions affecting its formation: financial well-being, family relationships, satisfaction with one's profession.

**Key words:** happiness economics, subjective life satisfaction, well-being, methods of assessing the level of happiness, assessment of public administration efficiency, non-economic driving forces of economic growth.

### Introduction

A common trend in the development of contemporary social science is its commitment to accuracy, to the quantitative expression of characteristics of the society and, at the same time, appeal to those sides of its life that have been usually ignored because they supposedly made an accurate quantitative analysis impossible. Happiness, which is an object of interest in a variety of socio-humanitarian disciplines, is one of such characteristics of social life.

Economics has even developed a research direction known as happiness economics. This trend largely overthrows the traditional logic of economic and social assessments, and places emphasis on subjective well-being, using it for evaluating the quality of objective conditions of people's lives, and the economy is considered from humanistic standpoint – as a tool to establish prosperity for society as a whole and for each person individually [20].

Happiness is a social and cultural phenomenon that combines a variety of aspects of social reality, each of which is important both for an individual and for society as a whole. Currently the world is forming a powerful intellectual movement associated with attempts to study happiness using scientific methods. The urgency of

the problem is determined by the particular significance of the concept under consideration as a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of state decisions, as well as the demands of society arising out of the natural desire of every person to be happy and the necessity to improve social health and the quality of life.

If the policy pursued is ineffective, some groups of population feel social deprivation, and the level of their emotional comfort and happiness declines. Therefore, the main goal of social policy at both the state and municipal levels is to eliminate negative moments for different population groups.

In connection with the relevance of studying and using subjective assessments of the quality of life in research and managerial practice, ISED T RAS begins a study of the issue of happiness. The study proposes to develop a scientifically grounded methodological approach to assessing the level of happiness, and to study the factors affecting it, to define the role of subjective life satisfaction in the social perception of socio-economic processes and public administration efficiency. The present article contains the main results of the first phase of the research, the purpose of which was to study and generalize the experience of foreign and domestic research on the subjective assessment of the quality of life.

The goal stated in the article, requires solving the following **tasks**:

✓ to consider the degree of scientific elaboration of the problems of using the happiness index as a criterion of the effectiveness of state decisions;

✓ to study methodological aspects and the application experience of various methods of assessing the level of happiness, to analyze their advantages and disadvantages for the purpose of development and scientific substantiation of the author's approach, which will subsequently be applied to further stages of the research;

In order to solve the tasks, let us consider the following.

**1. Formation of a comprehensive scientific notion about the level of happiness as an indicator of social development and public administration efficiency.**

*Scientific understanding of happiness and its indicative capabilities*

Back in 1968 Robert Kennedy said in his famous speech during a presidential election campaign: "Our Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country,

it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile" [31, p. 61].

Ruut Veenhoven, a Dutch sociologist and a pioneer and world authority on the scientific study of happiness, has contributed to a renewed interest in happiness as an aim for public policy. In his opinion, the level of happiness that people demonstrate, along with the level of health and well-being, is an important measurable indicator that shows the extent, to which a particular society is suitable and comfortable for human life [49]. He has shown that happiness can be used as a reliable measure to assess progress in societies [36]. Veenhoven is the founding director of the World Database of Happiness and a founding editor of the Journal of Happiness Studies. He has been described as "the godfather of happiness studies" [7] and "a leading authority on worldwide levels of happiness from country to country" [50].

According to Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, it is inadmissible to ignore happiness and, at the same time, to exaggerate its significance: "All the criteria of progress, no matter how varied they are, imply and should include the principle of happiness" [25, p. 511].

Richard Layard, Professor at the London School of Economics, believes that the state should consider the pursuit of happiness to be the gold standard and the basis of all political decisions [10]. According to R. Layard, the happiness of citizens is the only performance indicator that the governments should consider when planning their policy; and to multiply wealth only makes sense if it helps increase people's happiness [10].

Psychologists support the opinions of economists and sociologists on the subject. M. Seligman argues that we are entering an

“economy of life satisfaction” that business success depends directly on the meaning of life and interpersonal relationships [23], and government policy should seek to multiply general well-being, and well-being can be used for evaluating its success and failure [ibidem, p. 122]. However, M. Seligman, like Kennedy, says ironically that GDP, the traditional performance indicator of economic policy, grows when a new prison is built, when people divorce, when there is a car accident or a suicide is committed, i.e. GDP growth is achieved by “multiplying misery”.

Numerous studies confirm the fact that the greater welfare, the greater happiness – no matter what we compare: different countries or the population within a country, this fact will be evident. However, it turned out that the growth of life satisfaction is not always connected directly with the growth of welfare. This can be proved by the well-known Easterlin Paradox, named for the economist Richard Easterlin, who found that the growth of per capita income leads to increased happiness only up to a certain level and not more [41]. Here, the principle of “hedonistic wheel” works: “Demands are growing along with the growth of income and after the basic needs for well-being are satisfied, it is not absolute, but relative income level that is of great importance” [ibidem]. R. Layard believes that this threshold is 20,000 U.S. dollars of GDP per capita per year. In the countries that have passed this level, life satisfaction no longer grows, and sometimes even decreases [10].

The interest in this paradox has not been diminishing so far. In 2003 R. Veenhoven and M. Hagerty published a study refuting the Easterlin Paradox [44]. In 2008 B. Stevenson

and J. Wolfers found that an increase in absolute income is clearly linked to a higher self-assessment of happiness. Cross-national studies, as well as national surveys, show that there is an almost linear dependence between happiness and the logarithm of income – and it is the same for the rich and the poor. E. Diener has also conducted extensive research, which resulted in the conclusion that the growth of income causes the growth of happiness, if the needs are growing slower than the income [40]. However, in 2010 Easterlin published a new study that involved 37 countries and confirmed his previous findings [42]. Thus, the question concerning the relationship between happiness and well-being remains open.

The insufficiency of economic factors, their ambiguous relationship with life satisfaction is manifested, for example, in the fact that, although the people in Western countries are on average four times better off than they were 40 years ago, their level of subjective well-being remains virtually unchanged, and the feeling of happiness in 37% of wealthy Americans is below average [39]. M. Argyle points out that so far the scientists “have been unable to understand why the great historical shifts in the mean level of income did not cause the increase in the degree of satisfaction and happiness. Probably, this fact can be explained by the growth of demands: if earlier people dreamed of having their own bike, then now they already want two cars” [1, p. 177].

We agree with the assertion that “subjective perception of life satisfaction objectively affects the social situation to a much greater extent than the actual state of affairs” [28, p. 136]; therefore, as S. V. Stepashin notes, “the satisfaction or

dissatisfaction of the population with their lives is an important indicator of internal stability of the society, of the level of public support of the government and institutions of power in general” [ibidem, p. 137]. Gradually, there comes an understanding that “surveys on happiness can serve as an important auxiliary tool for the formation of public policy” [ibidem]. Currently, according to a widespread opinion, the main difference between the so-called secondary modernization and primary modernization lies in the fact that its main task is no longer just the development of economy for satisfying people’s needs, but the improvement of the quality of life for the satisfaction of their needs for happiness and self-expression [14].

Income growth cannot be directly converted into happiness. According to Alexander Dolgin, Professor at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, “the indicators such as the volume of GDP are being overemphasized. At the same time, the fact that intensive economic growth leads to emotional exhaustion is completely disregarded. Moreover, such growth deprives the next generation of some of its happiness by raising the bar of expectations. It is necessary to establish a system that can capture a subtle self-awareness of people, and capture it in dynamics, without averaging, in relation to the current situation and taking into account different social strata” [3].

Scientists in different fields of research tried to interpret the content of the phenomenon of happiness. P.S. Gurevich, A.F. Losev, Yu.M. Lotman, K. Neshev, V. Tatarkevich, S. S. Horuzhii studied the social and philosophical characteristics of the phenomenon of happiness.

S.G. Vorkachev, I.S. Gavrilova, A.A. Zaliznyak, I.B. Levontina, S.S. Neretina, B.A. Rybakov, I.V. Sidorenko, A.D. Shmelev, M. Fasmer considered the phenomenon of happiness from the sociolinguistic point of view.

The United States has been actively developing a research field of “positive psychology”, the leading representatives of which are E. Diener, M. Csikszentmihalyi, M. Seligman, M. Argyle, D. Vaillant, D. Kahneman, D. Keltner, S. Murray, A. Rechesky, M. Finchman, S. Hazan, L. Harker, G. Howard, and others.

One of the significant factors that determine an individual self-perception as a happy person is the developed “social intelligence” as an ability to manage and plan one’s behavior adequately, to understand properly the assessment of one’s own actions by other people. The idea of social intelligence (F. Vernon, J. Guilford, O.V. Luneva, A.I. Savenkov, M. Sullivan, E. Thorndike, D.V. Ushakov, M. Hendriks) is closely related to the concepts of emotional intelligence, developed by H. Eysenck, R. Baron, D. Goleman, D.V. Lusin, D. Mayer, P. Salovey.

Socio-economic research often associates happiness with the concept of “quality of life”, which was studied by I.V. Bestuzhev-Lada, D. Bell, D. Gabor, J. Galbraith, L.A. Krivonosova, O. Toffler, and others.

Economists S.M. Guriev and E.V. Zhuravskaya considered happiness through the prism of life satisfaction and material needs, but the phenomenon of happiness is not reduced to these indicators only. Many researchers draw attention to the fact that the indicators of the level of happiness in different countries weakly correlate with

indicators of GDP level (R. Ammons, J. Horwitz, etc.).

Modern Russian researchers who study the phenomenon of happiness include I.A. Dzhidar'yan, E.L. Dubko, V.G. Ivanov, M. Mamardashvili, O.V. Mitina, V.F. Petrenko, B.I. Popov, I.V. Sidorenko, E.L. Smirnova, E.P. Pavlova, V.L. Titov, A.V. Yurevich, A.L. Zhuravlev. The latter two substantiated a view on the meaning of life (also in collective sense, "national idea") as one of the fundamental components of life satisfaction and happiness.

Thus, the problem of happiness, its measurement and use is developed in the works of researchers in various fields of social and humanitarian science. This determines the complex nature of the phenomenon under consideration, which is the key to any indicator of public administration efficiency. The relevance of studying happiness is connected with the need to improve the methodology of assessing the effectiveness of public administration and social development as a whole. Macroeconomic indicators that showed the performance efficiency of the policy pursued might work well in the industrial economy, but they are not enough in the postindustrial economy. Mathematical abstractions of economic theories, which are traditionally used by governments of most countries have little in common with the lives of real people; and today more and more scientists are beginning to think that countries should be compared not only by their strength and richness, but also by the happiness of their residents. Of course, GDP should not be abandoned when making cross-country comparisons and assessing the effectiveness of government decisions; but

it is necessary to supplement this criterion with the subjective assessment of life quality satisfaction, since it will contribute to a more objective evaluation of the results of performance of public administration authorities and the country's readiness to transition to a new stage of modernization development.

***Government initiatives in the use of the subjective well-being indicator as an alternative to GDP***

No doubt, happiness is too ephemeral and difficult to assess; nevertheless, currently, the attempts are being made more often. A small kingdom of Bhutan is a pioneer in this respect: it replaced the conventional notion of gross domestic product with the so-called "gross national happiness" (GNH). The concept of gross national happiness involves measuring the quality of life in the balance between the material and the spiritual. This concept was introduced in 1972 by the king of Bhutan Jigme Dorji Wangchuk.

The government of Bhutan declared as its prime goal the pursuit of happiness of its every citizen; this principle is even enshrined in the Constitution: "The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness" [8]. Moreover, the government of Bhutan has requested assistance from Western economists to create a methodology for calculating GNH.

In 1998 the government of Bhutan adopted a new plan known as The Four Pillars of Gross National Happiness. Such "pillars" are: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance. According to the plan, these are the conditions, under

which it is possible to achieve happiness for every citizen of the country. These “four pillars” are divided into nine “domains of happiness”: psychological well-being, ecological diversity and resilience, health, education, cultural diversity and resilience, standard of living, time use, community vitality, and good governance. The pillars and domains of happiness are measured by 72 indicators. For example, the domain of psychological well-being is analyzed by the following indicators: frequency of prayer and meditation; level of selfishness, envy, jealousy, composure, compassion, generosity, despair, thoughts of suicide. Once every two years all the indicators are reevaluated by the method of a national survey [16].

July 19, 2011 the UN General Assembly, on the initiative of Bhutan and co-authored with more than 50 countries including France, the UK and Japan, adopted a resolution on “Happiness: a holistic approach to development”, which recommends to use happiness as an indicator of development of every country [18]. At that, the UN Resolution encourages countries to undertake activities to develop their own methods to measure happiness, to represent them in the UN for the purpose of sharing experiences and creating a universal system for assessing the level of happiness.

One more attempt to find an alternative to GDP was undertaken in **France** in 2008. President Nicolas Sarkozy has established a special commission for assessing economic achievements and social progress chaired by Nobel Prize winners Amartya Sen (India) and Joseph Stiglitz (USA) well-known for their critical attitude toward conventional methods of economic management. The commission proposed to use the indicators

of the quality of life such as development sustainability, security, political rights of people, condition of the environment, etc.

In 2009 Stiglitz and Sen published an article, in which they argued that the overestimation of the value of GDP dynamics has become one of the causes of the global financial crisis. Governments and economists have overlooked other equally important factors such as the social cost of unemployment or the uncontrolled lending, which increased the current growth rate of the economy to the detriment of tomorrow. According to the results of the work of the commission, President Sarkozy has proposed to introduce parameters such as happiness and accessibility of health services to assess the country’s development and encouraged other countries to adopt the experience of France.

Currently there are several national indices calculated in the framework of one country according to specific methodologies [22]. In late 2010 the **UK** government allocated two million pounds for the assessment of the happiness index, which, according to David Cameron, should complement traditional statistical indicators. The happiness index in the UK was measured with the use of an opinion poll, during which the respondents were to answer a series of questions, including the following: “To what extent are you happy with your life, how happy were you yesterday, how big is the feeling that your life is not meaningless?”, etc. Assessing the results of the initial surveys, The Independent newspaper has come to the conclusion that the basis of a positive sense of self-sentiment, from the viewpoint of the British, regardless of age, is good health, harmonious relationships and job satisfaction [11].

The government of **China** decided to introduce its own happiness index in 2011. It is calculated on the basis of 16 indicators that include traditional economic indicators and also some very unusual indicators. The index takes into account expenditures on research, education, culture and sport. In addition, it considers the amount of floor space per person, the number of doctors per thousand inhabitants, the area of green space and even the ratio of carbon emissions to GDP. According to Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, the performance efficiency of an official should be assessed by the degree of happiness of the people under his/her control rather than by the number of skyscrapers built. The happiness index is already used in Henan Province for evaluating the work of officials, and several of them have even been demonstratively dismissed. [30].

Thus, we see that the study and use of phenomenon such as happiness, is of interest not only to representatives of fundamental science, but also to public administration officials. Numerous attempts of governments of various countries to find a universal way to measure happiness and use the results to evaluate public administration efficiency form a separate area of theoretical and practical activity, which is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore due to the evolution of social development and complexity of social structure. There is no or, perhaps, should not be any uniform methodology for measuring happiness, but we think that the effort to create such a methodology is an important factor in enhancing the efficiency of interaction between the society and the government in any country.

## **2. Methods for subjective assessment of satisfaction with the quality of life.**

### *Index methods for assessing the level of happiness*

Various happiness indices are calculated by many international organizations and research centers that use a wide range of methodologies. The **Human Development Index** (HDI) has become the most famous and most widely recognized alternative to GDP. The HDI includes GDP per capita as its integral part, and also other indicators such as access to education, life expectancy and so on.

Analysts from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) annually calculate the HDI in collaboration with a group of independent international experts. Statistical data of national institutions and international organizations are used along with analytical developments to determine the index. The UNDP reports on the research findings have been published since 1990 [19].

Many factors are taken into consideration when the rating is compiled: in particular, the situation in the field of human rights and civil liberties, the opportunity to participate in public life, social security, the degree of territorial and social mobility of the population, the indicators of the level of cultural development, access to information, health, crime, etc.

According to the results of the study carried out in 2011, Norway ranks first, followed by Australia, and then – the Netherlands. Russia ranks 66th.

For all its advantages, the HDI has a number of disadvantages: for example, it relies on national average indicators that do not reflect the asymmetry in the distribution



of benefits; in addition, environmental factors and spiritual and moral development issues are not taken into account. Therefore, despite the comprehensive approach, taking into account many indicators used in calculating the HDI, the attempts are made to improve this methodology and find the optimal and universal method of measuring happiness.

Another such attempt was made in 2006. The New Economics Foundation, the UK's leading think tank, has developed a global index of happiness (**the Happy Planet Index**) in cooperation with some international organizations and independent experts. It is a combined indicator that measures the achievements of individual countries and regions from the viewpoint of their ability to provide a happy life for their citizens. The index is based on the assumptions that an individual a priori desires to live a long life, free from suffering and deprivation, and that the government focuses on maximizing the welfare of its citizens, including the reasonable use and protection of the environment. These assumptions produce three main components used in calculating the index: subjective life satisfaction, life expectancy, and environmental condition assessed by the size of biologically productive areas per person. In other words, the main purpose of compiling this index lies in evaluating the effectiveness of government policy that concerns the country's natural resources and the welfare of its people [37].

The main goal pursued by the creators of the Happy Planet Index was to determine the efficiency with which countries use economic growth and natural resources to ensure a happy life for their citizens [18].

Costa Rica, a small country in Central America was considered the happiest country in 2012: its Happy Planet Index was 64 points. It is interesting to note that nine out of the top ten countries in the ranking are representatives of Latin America. Major developed countries are much lower on the list, primarily due to the negative impact on the environment. Russia ranks 122 (its Happy Planet Index is 34 points). Botswana is at the bottom of the list with the index of 22 points.

According to Saamah Abdallah, Senior Researcher at NEF, "countries like Costa Rica outstripped the UK by the Happy Planet Index because their people live happily using only a small share of resources that we consume" [26].

The authors of the study recognize that the Happy Planet Index has its shortcomings. Countries that are at the top of the rankings can experience some problems. In particular, the index does not take into account human rights violations. Moreover, the people whose rights are violated to the greatest extent, are in the minority, and this has almost no influence on average indicators [37].

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development calculates its own "**Better Life Index**" since 2011. The ranking of countries is compiled on the basis of official statistics and the Gallup Institute surveys according to 11 parameters: income, housing, jobs, environment, education, work-life balance, safety, life satisfaction, civic engagement, health, and community. Each of the sub-indices was given equal weight in the basic model [36]. Initially the index covered only the OECD countries, but since 2012 it includes Russia

and Brazil. According to the latest data, the top of the rating is occupied by Norway, the USA, Denmark, Canada, Switzerland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Luxembourg, and Australia ranks first. The unemployment rate in this country in April 2012 was around 5% (in Europe – 10.9% in the U.S. – 8.1%). Besides, Australia's economy is developing rapidly, largely due to the growth in demand for iron ore and coal. The Australians have no serious health problems – 85% of the respondents said that they felt excellent. The Australians have enough free time for leisure and family – about 3 hours a day; this is a relatively high indicator [24].

Russia scored less than 50 points out of 110. The Russians are less satisfied with their lives (60%) than an average resident of an OECD member state (72%), the indicator is lower only in Portugal and Hungary. Life expectancy in Russia at the time of the study was 69 years, which was the lowest indicator among all the participants [9]. It is noteworthy that when defining conditions for “better life”, most Russians give priority to education and work, civil rights turned out on one of the last places. Meanwhile, people in the West are currently concerned, primarily, with life satisfaction; they put education on the second place, and health – on the third [5].

We can also point out numerous rankings of happy countries based on the results of population surveys and compiled with the use of a wide variety of methodologies. The **Well-Being Index** is the most famous of them; its methodology was developed by Nobel laureate, psychologist and sociologist Daniel Kahneman. The index uses the Gallup World Poll data as a source. Several

indices are used in the calculation: indices of personal health, optimism, basic needs of society, civic engagement, trust in national institutions, youth development, corruption, and several others. The study is based on national surveys that have a basic set of questions common to all countries. People answered a number of questions on the issues related to accommodation, food, law and order, personal economic situation, health, trust in national institutions, etc. Three groups were defined as a result of the survey: “the suffering” (whose level of satisfaction is low), “the struggling” (whose level of satisfaction is average) and “the thriving” (who are highly satisfied with their life). The percentage ratio of these groups forms the basis for ranking the countries [32]. About a thousand people aged over 15 were interviewed in each country. According to the results of 2011, the rating was headed by the Danish – it is Denmark that has 74% of the representatives of the first group (“the thriving”) [ibidem].

In general, the Nordic countries are usually at the top of the rankings compiled on the basis of many similar studies. According to some experts, this is due primarily to the fact that life in these countries is built on the principles of social democracy, community, and engagement in the processes of government and social administration. For example, 78% of the respondents in Denmark consider social inequality the greatest evil (in Russia this figure is only 30%). Denmark with its population of 5.5 million people has more than 300 thousand various unions and associations [21].

The level of well-being is sufficient in Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, and

Israel. As for the unhappiest country in the world, according to this ranking, it is Cambodia, where “the thriving” comprise only 2%, and “the suffering” – 26%. Not more than 5% of the residents in Laos, Afghanistan, Nepal and Tajikistan feel happy. The share of “the thriving” in Russia is slightly below the world average and comprises 22% [17].

The survey data, which were obtained during the calculation of the Well-Being Index and other similar studies, can be an effective tool for modelling forecasts. For instance, in 2008–2010 the share of “the thriving” in Egypt declined from 29 to 11%, and in Tunisia – from 24 to 14%. The situation in Algeria was about the same. These indicators were clear signs of the problems in the country, calling on the Egyptian and Tunisian authorities to undertake urgent efforts. But the government is usually concerned primarily with GDP, and in this respect, everything was going on well: the GDP of Egypt in 2009–2010 grew on average by 5%, in Tunisia – by 3–3.5%. However, the level of life satisfaction was declining so dramatically that both countries had to face a social explosion [2].

In January 2012 the Gallup Research Center published the Happy Planet Index 2012 [19]. The residents of Latin America turned out to be the happiest (eight countries out of the top ten); as for Russia, it ranked 121st.

About 1,000 people were interviewed in each of the 148 countries. It has turned out that the happiest people live in Panama, Paraguay and El Salvador – these three countries topped the rating. The share of happy people in Singapore was only 46%, in Armenia – 49%, and in Iraq – 50%.

The researchers were surprised by the results of the survey: it is not unusual that the standard of living in Panama, a developed country, is comparable to that in Europe; but the standard of living in El Salvador, Uruguay and Venezuela is very far from international standards. Scientists explain this by the people’s mentality that was formed historically in these countries: the people are able to find joy not in material benefits, but in moral satisfaction.

However, according to another poll, the Global Barometer of Hope and Despair, conducted annually by Gallup in 58–65 countries in the same period of time, the top five happiest countries included Fiji, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Ghana (82 to 89% of the population of these countries consider themselves happy). Fifty-three percent of people around the world consider themselves happy and 13% – unhappy. Many people were not ready to say whether they were happy or unhappy and they answered “neither happy nor unhappy”. The proportion of such respondents in Russia is 42%, the proportion of happy residents is 39%, and the share of those who consider themselves unhappy is 8%. In 2011 Russia ranked 40th among the 58 countries participating in the survey [6]. At the end of 2014 Russia was already on the 16th place, next to Brazil and Poland [7]. Obviously, these striking changes were associated with the events that took place in the country in the past year: the Olympic Games, the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation, and the general rise of patriotism.

In the summer of 2012 the monitoring agency NewsEffector and the Fund for Regional Studies “Regions of Russia”

carried out a joint research “**The Happiness Index of Russian Cities**”. The survey involved 26,900 people from 100 largest Russian cities. The research shows that the happiest people live in Grozny, Tyumen, Kazan, Surgut, Krasnodar, Sochi, Nizhnevartovsk, Novorossiysk and Belgorod. Moscow ranks 52nd, Saint Petersburg – 16th, Yekaterinburg – 49th [15].

The analysts have concluded that the level of material well-being is a significant, but not a decisive factor influencing the happiness of Russian people. The environment, the level of security and the feeling of change for the better are no less important. It is the feeling of change that has put Grozny at the top of the ranking. But as for Moscow, despite its high level of income and a good level of urban development, the city showed very poor results according to parameters such as ecology and the sense of security, which, in general, had a negative impact on the final index of happiness.

There are hundreds of different studies of happiness indices in the world. Each of them has its advantages and disadvantages, but no method can be considered absolutely reliable. Different ratings of the “happiest countries”, compiled at the same time, have different states on top: from Paraguay to Norway. According to E.N. Strizhakova, Ph.D. in Economics, the index methodologies for assessing the level of happiness can be divided into two large groups: the first group considers welfare as one of the main indicators and at the same time does not consider the opinion of people; the second group is based on the self-awareness of people and on objective indicators. The first group includes the Human Development Index, the Inequality-adjusted Human

Development Index, the Gender Inequality Index, the Gender-related Development Index, the Multidimensional Poverty Index, V. G. Sadikov and G. M. Samostroenko’s index of harmonious development, the Modified Human Development Index, the index of socialization of human capital, the crisis index of the quality of life, the index of the harmonious development of regions proposed by N.A. Shibaeva. The author includes the following indicators in the second group: S. A. Ayvazyan’s index of the quality of life, Better Life Index, Gross National Happiness, the Satisfaction with Life Index, the quality-of-life index, the index of happy life years and the Happy Planet Index [29].

Both groups of methods have a common drawback: the final integral indicator does not reflect the problems highlighted by particular indices; therefore, in our opinion, none of the indices taken separately can be used for evaluating the current status of a country in the world.

We add that the index method of assessing the level of happiness has two serious drawbacks besides the ones mentioned above. First, it does not take into account specific features of the country, its cultural and ethnic differences that have a significant impact on public consciousness and on the level of happiness. Moreover, the characteristics that appear to be universal, can in fact be very relative in different countries, they can be perceived differently depending on historical and cultural experience, current socio-economic situation and so on.

Another problem is that all these alternative indices cannot be calculated as promptly and regularly as GDP. So far there

is no single and generally accepted methodology for studying happiness, and the question of what happiness is and how to measure it is still open. Currently there are only 15 scientific definitions of the term “happiness” [34]; such a conclusion has been made after analyzing the sections “happiness economics” in the journal “Science and life” and analyzing the reports in publications such as “New Scientist” (UK), “Geo”, “Natur + Kosmos” and “VDI-Nachrichten” (Germany), “American Scientist”, “Discover” and “Popular Science” (USA), “Recherche”, “Science et Vie” and “Sciences et Avenir” (France).

We consider the very idea of compiling the indexes out of several components to be another significant disadvantage. There is no reliable enough reason to believe that one or another component of the index has the value assigned to it by the researchers. The same applies to various kinds of proportions and relations of fractions. In fact, all this dramatically reduces the validity of the results obtained and provides good opportunities for manipulating the totals. The result obtained on the same data may vary diametrically depending on the input characteristics for the calculation of the index.

As we see, the above disadvantages of the index methods of measuring happiness are sufficient to ensure that the study be based primarily on the results of sociological surveys, which are successfully used in the Russian and world practice of scientific research into life satisfaction.

### ***Survey methods for assessing the level of happiness***

Survey methodologies are considered the most effective in the assessment of happiness.

The earliest questionnaire survey devoted to happiness was conducted by American psychologist J.B. Watson back in the early 20th century. Later the subject was developed by E.L. Thorndike (1940s), Andrews and Withey (1976), Campbell and co-authors (1976). Fordyce developed the Happiness Measure in 1988; Brandtstädter created the questionnaire “Affective balance” in 1991; and Diener created the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) in 1996. These methodologies, according to Argyle, are the most representative and valid methods of assessing the level of happiness along with the Oxford Happiness Inventory; Argyle et al., 1989) [1].

Russia also has its own methods of measuring happiness. **VTsIOM** (the Russian Public Opinion Research Center) has published the latest data: 1,600 persons in 138 settlements of 46 regions of the Russian Federation were questioned in November 2014 [12]. It is interesting to compare this data with the results of a similar survey conducted in 1992.

Seventy-six percent of our fellow citizens consider themselves to be generally happy. The happiness index<sup>1</sup> is 59 points. Young people (88% aged 18–24) and those who study in universities (86%) usually assess their spiritual condition more positively than the people of retirement age (64%) and the poorly educated (61%). The social happiness

<sup>1</sup> The happiness index shows how happy the Russians feel. The index is based on the question: “Good and bad things happen in life. But generally speaking, are you happy or unhappy?» It is calculated as the difference between the sum of positive answers (“definitely yes”, “probably yes”) and negative answers (“probably not”, “definitely not”). The index is measured in points and can range from -100 to 100. The higher the index value, the happier the Russians feel.

index<sup>2</sup> is 59 points. It is mostly the family, relatives and close friends that bring joy for 40% of the respondents. Unhappiness is associated primarily with poverty, low standard of living (17%), diseases and poor health (9%).

At present, 25% of the respondents point out that they are definitely happy (the figure was 2% 20 years ago), and 51% admitted that they are sooner happy than unhappy. In 1992 there were only 40% of those who thought that way.

Three percent of the Russians consider themselves very unhappy; 20 years ago only 5% of the respondents chose this answer. Those who consider themselves sooner unhappy than happy comprise 14% in Russia today; it is two times less than in the early 1990s.

**The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences** in its study “Social inequality and value orientations of the Russians” [27] also addresses the issue of happiness. It has been revealed that under the current conditions of total expansion of “market” values the Russians see the meaning of life not as much in enrichment as in harmony, family and good education. A truly universal purpose in life for the Russians is “happiness of affection”, i.e. communication and mutual understanding between the loved ones (family and friends),

<sup>2</sup> The social happiness index shows what people – happy or unhappy – prevail in the environment of respondents. The index is based on the question: “In your opinion, are there more happy or unhappy people among your acquaintances and relatives?” The answer “probably there are more those who are happy” is assigned a coefficient of 0.9, the answer “the share of happy and unhappy people is about the same” is given a coefficient of 0.5, the answer “probably there are more those who are unhappy” is assigned a coefficient of 0.1. The index is measured in points and can take a value from 10 to 90. The higher the index value, the happier the Russians consider their fellow countrymen to be.

and also the joy of having a favorite occupation, which allows an individual to “put his/her heart into it”. The proportion of respondents who said they did not think about achieving such goals is very small – not more than 4–6%. In addition, the vast majority of the Russians did not want to act against their conscience (determination to “live an honest life”).

**ISEDT RAS** in 2012 carried out a research on the level of happiness in the Vologda Oblast<sup>3</sup> [13, 33]. The research helped to determine the share of the region’s residents, who feel happy (65%), and to identify some of the factors influencing the formation of positive emotions and feelings of happiness in people, namely, a set of conditions, including the level of financial well-being, the nature of family relationships, work satisfaction, etc.

The analysis of socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents has shown that the representatives of the following population groups more often consider themselves happy: people aged 30–55 (44%), urban residents (55%), people with higher or incomplete higher education (41%), employed working-age people (70%),

<sup>3</sup> Methodological basis of research is the mass sociological survey of the Vologda Oblast population, conducted with the use of representative regional sample. The sample consisted of 1,500 respondents aged over 18. The representativeness of sociological information was provided by the use of the model of multistage zoned sampling with the quota selection of observation units at the last stage. Zoning was carried out by constituencies – it is the first stage of sampling. The second stage included the allocation of typical subjects of the Vologda Oblast, such as the cities of Vologda and Cherepovets, Babaevsky, Velikoustyugsky, Vozhegodsky, Gryazovetsky, Kirillovsky, Nikolsky, Tarnogsky and Sheksninsky districts. The third stage is territorial zoning within the selected entities. The fourth stage is the direct selection of respondents according to the quotas set by sex and age. Sampling error does not exceed 5%.

married couples who live together (58%), having one child (25%). “Happy” people much more seldom identify themselves as “poor” and “extremely poor” compared to the rest of the population; and they describe their financial situation more positively, they are less concerned with economic issues, they have a higher purchasing power of income. Moreover, happy people are less prone to conflict and more tolerant than the less happy. The negative supply of patience among those who do not feel happy is three times more than among those who consider themselves happy (36 and 11% respectively). The research has shown that in order to maintain a high level of happiness, it is necessary to create conditions for improving the social status and realization of personal potential of individuals in the society.

Philosophical and scientific debate concerned not only the definition of happiness. There were heated discussions as to whether happiness could be measured at all, and if so, then in what way. Therefore, let us focus on some methodological aspects of assessing the level of happiness through a sociological survey. In particular, researchers were interested in whether it is possible to measure happiness objectively by using questionnaires, or we can get only subjective indicators. Is the questionnaire the only method of assessment? Finally, it remains unclear whether the respondents really have an idea of a certain level of satisfaction/positive perception of their own lives, and whether their answers are an adequate reflection of this view.

According to R. Veenhoven, the great part of empirical research on these issues provides an answer to these questions [49]. First, it indicates that objective measurement

in the social sciences differs from that in exact sciences, and measuring the level of happiness can never be equivalent to measuring temperature, for instance. The reason for this lies in the fact that the actual perception of life is only partly reflected in the social behavior of an individual. Moreover, the attributes of happiness such as, for example, joyful appearance, of course, are more common among happy people, but they can be found in unhappy people as well. Even body language is not the most reliable indicator [46]. Therefore, observation as a method for measuring happiness is not very reliable.

Another method is the respondent’s evaluation of the level of his/her personal happiness, which is expressed in various kinds of questions, both direct and indirect, during the anonymous survey or personal interview. Although many scientists doubted the validity of this method, empirical studies have shown that it is sufficiently reliable [48]. The presence of respondents’ own opinion on their perception of life in general is leveled by the fairly stable distribution of responses of people about their life satisfaction, in case if they are at least partly tied to a specific time interval (e.g. week, as in the study carried out by P. Shaver and J. Freedman [43]), as for the standard approved responses, on the contrary, they are rare. There is a quite common and stereotypical view that people consider themselves happier than they really are; however, in practice it is not confirmed [49].

The susceptibility of happiness to situational influences – the wording of the question, the mood, the weather, morning news, etc. is another important aspect to be considered when assessing happiness.

It is one of few serious shortcomings in the assessment of happiness, which has been identified and substantiated in the course of many empirical studies. However, as practice shows, these shifts in the measurements are random error and they are actually smoothed over when the sample size is big [47].

There is a more systematic measurement error. It is caused directly by the wording of a question, answer options, or a special sequence of topics in an interview – in other words, by incompetently designed research tools. On the one hand, even those who have a certain idea about their own level of happiness are not always able to correlate it with the ten-point scale; hence, their answers may vary, even if the level of happiness is stable. On the other hand, the process of analyzing the results already obtained also depends on the researcher's subjective perception. Thus, there is a risk of double distortion of the data.

An important assumption that acts a necessary condition for large-scale studies of happiness is the assumption that the indicators of level of happiness of different people are comparable, i.e. how equal we consider them to be from the viewpoint of perception and assessment of happiness. The issue is complicated; nevertheless, it is important for any research. Is it really true that a Swede or a Danish, who, *ceteris paribus*, consistently shows lower levels of happiness than a Greek or a Spaniard, is more unhappy? Or it is just natural for him/her to answer with reserve because of cultural or individual characteristics? It seems much more likely that the answer of the one relates to the other with a certain proportion, the exact value of which is extremely difficult to calculate.

John Harsanyi put forward this problem in 1955 in the framework of economic research on the individual utility of various benefits [45]. He described this difficulty as metaphysical and cautioned against using self-representative estimates for comparative analysis. However, many of the above-described problems recede into the background and become virtually insignificant under the transition from the individual level of comparison to the group level [32].

Thus, having analyzed the history of the formation of the opinion on subjective satisfaction with the quality of life and having studied the level of happiness as one of the criteria for assessing the efficiency of government decisions, we can draw the following conclusions.

1. GDP is still the main and most developed criterion of economic development of a country. However, according to well-known politicians, economists, sociologists and psychologists, GDP can grow at the expense of “the growth of miseries”. The question about the linear dependence of happiness on welfare remains open. It is proved that the subjective perception of life satisfaction affects the social situation more objectively than the real state of affairs. In this regard, the scientific community more and more often raises the question concerning the inadequacy of the use of purely economic indicators to assess the performance efficiency and effectiveness of various social and economic activities. The significance of the level of happiness of the population, as an alternative indicator to the gross domestic product and as a criterion for assessing public administration efficiency is recognized by politicians, sociologists, economists and psychologists around the



world. Gradually comes the realization that “the surveys on happiness can be an important auxiliary tool for the formation of social policy”.

2. The question of choosing a method for assessing the level of happiness remains acute. Currently there are many different indices and rankings of happiness, which are used in cross-country comparisons, and in numerous questionnaire surveys of the population, allowing for a more in-depth study of this issue.

The areas that are investigated in the framework of various index methodologies are usually as follows: economic development, environmental protection, promotion of national culture, public administration efficiency, development sustainability, security, political rights of people, the environment, access to the services of social institutions, expenditure on scientific research, education, culture and sport, people’s ability to participate in public life, the degree of territorial and social mobility of population, etc.

The analysis of the experience of practical application of index methodologies for assessing the level of happiness allows us to come to a conclusion that this approach has significant drawbacks. Primarily these include the following.

- The integral indicator does not reflect the problems in the directions of particular indices, that is why none of the indices can be used on its own for assessing the status of a country in the world.

- It does not take into account the specifics of countries, cultural and ethnic differences, historical experience and the current situation in the country.

- Happiness indices cannot be calculated as promptly and regularly as GDP.

- There is no sufficiently reliable reason to believe that one or another component of the index has precisely the very value assigned to it by researchers.

- Index methods to assess the level of happiness are most often based on national averages that do not reflect the asymmetry in the distribution of benefits, and do not take into account some factors and issues of spiritual and moral development of man.

As a result of these disadvantages, different ratings of “happy countries”, compiled at the same time, have different countries at the top – from Paraguay to Norway.

Consequently, the survey methods, although they have difficulties in using and interpreting the results, serve as a more reliable source of information on subjective life satisfaction than the approaches based on the creation of indices. Therefore, when carrying out further research on happiness, ISED T RAS associates plan to focus their attention on subjective estimates that people give concerning their social well-being and social perception.

Alternative indices and happiness indicators perform a supporting function in relation to GDP, but they are yet unable to replace it completely. But the very fact that in recent years a serious intellectual movement has been formed with the aim of studying happiness using scientific methods proves the importance of this issue and the growing interest on the part of society, science and authorities.

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