# The Value of Public Opinion Polls

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## THE VALUE OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS



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COMMENTARY

# Are Meaningful Public Opinion Polls Possible in Today's Russia?

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Ever since Vladimir Putin announced the start of a special military operation (SMO), public opinion polls in Russia have been criticized with renewed vigor. Usually, critics give the following reasons why Russian polls cannot be trusted. Some argue that in 2022, the response rate has declined sharply and people's reluctance to participate in surveys has increased. Others say that respondents interrupt interviews as soon as the conversation turns to events in Ukraine. Some say that only supporters of the government are now participating in the polls, while opposition-minded citizens prefer to abstain. Others speak of survey list experiments, which seem to show lower support rates, and claim that these show the "real mood" of the people. Finally, the most extreme critics of polls say that polls are not relevant because they do not show what people "really think." Let us take a look at each of these allegations in turn.

At the Levada Center, we use the AAPOR recommendations (https://www-archive.aapor.org/Education-Resources/For-Researchers/Poll-Survey-FAQ/Response-Rates-An-Overview.aspx) to calculate the response rate for each survey we conduct. In 2022, the average response rate in our regular all-Russian door-to-door survey was 27 percent. This is slightly less than in 2021 (31 percent on average), but higher than the averages of previous years (25 percent in 2020, 20 percent in 2019). For now, let us leave aside the discussion about what kind of response rate is considered sufficient (in the United States, for example, 9 percent has been considered an acceptable level of reach for telephone surveys, https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2017/05/15/what-low-response-rates-mean-for-telephone-surveys/). Importantly, the response rate has not changed much in the past year (just as attitudes toward the surveys themselves have not changed, https://www.levada.ru/2022/05/24/uchastie-v-oprosah-i-doverie-dannym/). If things were different, surveys according to the usual methodology would become impossible: interviewers would not take on a task that was obviously impossible, or the cost of their work would become prohibitive. But that has not happened.

We looked into the problem of interrupted interviews at the end of last year (https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/15/o-nedostizhimosti-i-prervannyh-intervyu/). The analysis showed that this indicator is stable and has barely changed over time. In each survey on questions related to Ukraine and the "special operation" conducted in 2022, only 2 to 7 interviews were interrupted, which is an insignificant number on the scale of the entire survey. Moreover, "Ukrainian" questions do not differ in this sense from questions on other topics. In most cases, if respondents have already agreed to answer, they will go through the survey to the end, especially if it is a face-to-face interview. Therefore, there appear to be no grounds for questioning the quality of the survey data on the basis of interrupted interviews.

Nor have claims that only supporters of the authorities take part in the polls been confirmed to date. Looking at the results of the panel survey of respondents who have taken part in Levada Center surveys (https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/14/gotovnost-uchastvovat-v-oprosah-rezultaty-eksperimenta/), we were unable to confirm the assumption that people who repeatedly participate in telephone surveys assess the events more positively, nor that respondents who do not approve of the activities of the country's leadership more often refuse to participate in surveys (and, thus, that public opinion polls capture the views only of those who are prepared to make contact and answer polling questions). In other words, the increased support for the authorities and their decisions in 2022 reflects actual changes in public sentiment rather than any shortcomings of the survey instrument.

As for survey list experiments (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/04/06/do-russians-tell-the-truth-when-they-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine-evidence-from-a-list-experiment/), which seem to indicate lower support for the authorities and the SMO, their results cannot always be interpreted unambiguously. Researchers who conducted similar experiments on mass support for Vladimir Putin in Russia in 2015–2021 warn against such an interpretation of the results of their experiments (https://www.ponarseurasia.org/is-putins-popularity-still-real-a-cautionary-note-on-using-list-experiments-to-measure-popularity-in-authoritarian-regimes/). The figures obtained as a result of such experiments coincide with the indicators of unconditional support for military action and power. But this does not mean that those who have doubts and show weak or conditional support do not really support the SMO. There is a whole set of factors that encourage doubters to side with the majority (https://ridl.io/can-you-trust-russia-s-public-support-for-a-military-operation-in-ukraine/). To reduce everything to a fear of answering pollsters would be a gross oversimplification.

Finally, there is a thesis that in repressive Russian conditions, respondents will never say what they "really

think." But we never conduct surveys using a polygraph, and we only record what people are willing to share with the interviewer. Thus, pollsters get information not about people's innermost thoughts, but about their public attitudes. However, this should be sufficient to understand and explain their behavior in public. One can hardly contest the fact that the pressure of the Russian state on the individual has recently increased. The main goal of such pressure is obviously to change people's behavior, discouraging them from criticizing the authorities or participating in protests. And this works. But the results of the polls say exactly the same.

And besides, if changes in public opinion occur, they are—as a rule—of a systemic nature: changes in the level of support for the authorities are accompanied by changes in answers to questions about mood, hopes, and economic behavior. Such changes are unlikely to be driven by a fear of answering the questionnaire (provided that the proportion of those participating in surveys remains more or less constant). Thus, the growth in the approval ratings of the president and government in February–March 2022 and high levels of support for the SMO were accompanied by an increase in general optimism, enthusiasm, and jingoism.

Moreover, an analysis of long-term trends in public opinion showed already at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022 that if a military conflict with the West were to break out, the majority of Russian society would be on the side of the president and the government. By that time, the main contours of Russian society's attitude toward this conflict had already taken shape: three-quarters were sure that the United States and Ukraine were to blame for the escalation, while only one-third showed sympathy for Ukraine (https://ridl.io/we-are-being-dragged-into-a-war/). Vladimir Putin's approval rating was already 71 percent in mid-February (in March it rose to 83 percent). The main gaps—between the largest cities and the rest of the country, between young and old, and between TV viewers and Internet users—were already visible. Polls showed that although Russian society was afraid of the conflict, it was internally ready for it.

Furthermore, even in the spring, there were early signs of people's adaptation to the situation (https://ridl.io/can-you-trust-russia-s-public-support-for-a-military-operation-in-ukraine/). This manifested itself first in focus groups and then in surveys (as there is no need to set qualitative and quantitative survey methods up in opposition; indeed, we should use them in combination). It was possible to accurately describe society's reaction to the mobilization immediately after its announcement based on the materials of previous studies (https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/477797-ispytanie-dla-vlasti-naskol-ko-nepopularnym-budet-resenie-o-mobilizacii). By the end of September, one could already say that Russian society had come to terms with the first wave of mobilization (https://www.agents.media/uzhas/)—and this was abundantly clear by the end of the year, when the mood largely returned to "pre-mobilization" levels (https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/483091-resursy-spokojstvia-pocemu-dla-rossian-2022-j-ne-stal-samym-strasnym-godom).

All of the above allows us to say that doubts about the quality of polls in today's Russia remain largely ungrounded. Analysis of the situation and forecasts based on regular sociological research have shown their effectiveness. Indeed, such analysis is much more accurate than some of the most-cited journalistic speculations (https://www.proekt.media/guide/kremlin-telegram-meduza/), which very often do not come true. Of course, one must be careful when using survey data: the survey projects of political activists and no-names might do more to confuse than to illuminate the situation. But it is fair to say that if we discount opinion polls in general, we deprive ourselves of one of the few proven tools for understanding Russian society.

*About the Author*

*Denis Volkov* is a Russian sociologist who serves as director of the Levada Center, a Moscow-based independent sociological research organization. Over fifteen years with the Center, he has been involved in more than 100 quantitative and qualitative research projects on different aspects of Russian society. Volkov has authored works on the sources of the political regime's support, the political attitudes of Russian youth, protest activities and civil society, and business and elite opinion in Russia. He was formerly a columnist for *Vedomosti*, *RBC*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the *Moscow Times*, and Carnegie.ru. He now writes for *Forbes Russia*. His articles have also appeared in *Osteuropa*, *Journal of Democracy,* and *Foreign Policy*.

# Curious What Russians Think about the War? Ask Yourself This before You Read the Polls

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Following Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine nearly a year ago, the Kremlin adopted a raft of repressive measures aimed at stifling criticism of the government and opposition to the war. Within days, the context for publicly expressing political opinion, and consequently for survey research in Russia, changed dramatically.

Yet the Russian authorities have not sought to regulate household surveys directly. The Russian government has not pursued the Chinese model of controlling what topics or questions can be asked.

Paradoxically, the war has brought more rather than fewer survey research entities into view in Russia—and this despite concerns, widespread at its start, that the war would spell the end of independent polling in Russia.

With the opportunities for continued survey research in Russia come critical questions about the practice of polling in repressive environments. Here are four questions you should be asking about surveys on the war in Russia.

## Who Is Responding?

"Surveys are a worthless barometer of opinion in Russia, 95 percent of people refuse to respond" is a frequent refrain among skeptics of survey research in Russia. But it isn't exactly right.

Who pollsters successfully interview depends on many things. It depends on who they can contact and then who agrees to participate. One key factor is how pollsters attempt to reach potential respondents—whether by phone, online, or in person. And even within a given survey mode, there is wide variation across surveys in terms of the effort and cost expended to reach respondents and build a rapport with people who initially decline to participate.

It is true that some telephone surveys successfully interview fewer than 10 percent of the people they dial. Russian Field, for example, reports a success rate of 5–9 percent since the start of the war. (https://russianfield.com/yubiley). Response rates are not even reported for many online surveys, raising additional concerns. With such low response rates, a lot hangs on how the sample of people pollsters do reach is adjusted to match the known characteristics of the general Russian population.

High-quality face-to-face surveys have much higher response rates: 25–30 percent over the same period, according to data published by the Levada Center. For context, the rate at which people have refused to participate in Levada's surveys since February 2022 has been similar to the rate at which people in the US have refused to participate in recent American National Elections Studies surveys, the gold standard for survey research on American politics.

A separate but crucial question is whether Russians are more fearful and less willing to respond to surveys since the start of the war. Russian Field reports that refusals are rising—yet their own published data (which begin in February 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion) reveal some volatility but no consistent trend. The refusal rates for dialed numbers in post-war Chronicle polls are likewise stable (https://www.extremescan.eu/post/14-the-first-phase-of-a-special-military-operation-in-the-minds-of-russians). But it bears repeating that though the percentage of dials yielding a completed interview for these telephone polls is low, it is no worse than in reputable American phone polls—even if that is perhaps cold comfort given talk about the death of telephone polling in the US.

To understand whether this situation is driven by fear, however, a key piece of data is this: for surveys where a pre- and post-war comparison is possible (such as Levada's regular omnibus poll), response rates are not appreciably lower than they were before February 2022. Vladimir Zvonovsky reports the same for surveys by FOM and VTsIOM: overall refusals to participate have not increased following Russia's February assault on Ukraine, though refusals by Russian youth do appear to have grown (https://www.extremescan.eu/post/6-respondents-cooperation-in-surveys-on-military--operations).

## Do People Decline to Respond to Potentially Sensitive Questions or Give Evasive Answers?

Even people who agree to be surveyed may refuse to answer politically sensitive questions. Smart consumers of Russian polling should look out for respondents who hide their opposition to the Kremlin with "don't know" answers. To date, however, such evasive non-response generally remains low for potentially sensitive questions. There has been no marked rise in evasive responses to questions regarding the country's direction (right/wrong) or approval of Putin.

Analyzing data from six post-war waves of the Chronicle, Nadia Evangelian and Andrei Tkachenko conclude

that "don't know" responses more likely reflect respondents' lack of clear opinions on the war (and other political issues) than a fear of expressing opposition (https://www.extremescan.eu/post/14-the-first-phase-of-a-special-military-operation-in-the-minds-of-russians).

Research by Xiaoxiao Shen and Rory Truex shows that while, in many authoritarian countries, citizens are about as likely to avoid questions about their government, democracy, and respect for human rights as citizens in democracies, self-censorship is higher in those countries with the most closed political systems. In short, then, nonresponse in Russia could still rise, concealing opposition to the war.

## Can Survey Responses Be Believed?

As political or social pressure to express a particular opinion grows, respondents become less likely to decline to answer pollsters' questions and more likely to misrepresent their views.

Most survey questions are asked directly, as in "Do you support or do you not support the decision to undertake the special military operation in Ukraine?" (VTsIOM) or "Do you approve of the activities of V. Putin as President of Russia?" (Levada). And most of what the media report in Russia and abroad about Russians' support for Vladimir Putin and the war is based on direct questions.

There are better ways to ask, however. Research shows that direct survey questions can lead to substantial underreporting on sensitive topics. It also shows that asking questions indirectly, in ways that protect respondents by veiling their individual responses on the sensitive issue, provides a picture that is closer to the truth.

Russia's war in Ukraine has, of course, been ongoing since 2014. The period since the annexation of Crimea has witnessed a tightening of political control and a deteriorating climate for free expression. Even before the full-scale assault on Ukraine began in February 2022, there was a need for caution when it came to interpreting direct questions about Putin and his policies. Mixed evidence on the sensitivity of political questions in Russian opinion polling has existed for some time.

On the one hand, there is evidence that, in more "normal" times, Russian survey respondents were less fearful and less prone to lie than commonly assumed. Using three different approaches to gauging support for Putin (including two types of indirect questioning), I found consistent evidence in ongoing research that just under two-thirds of Russians supported him in December 2021, on the eve of the war. I also found that responses to direct questioning mostly reflected sincere support.

Similarly, political scientist Timothy Frye and his coauthors once determined that Putin's high approval ratings were largely sincere. On the other hand, the same scholars' ongoing research concludes that "there is considerably more uncertainty [today] about Putin's true support than was apparent in 2015." Indeed, even the sincerity of support for Putin after Russia annexed Crimea has recently come into question. Henry Hale's new analysis of Russian surveys conducted in 2015, several months after Frye et al.'s, finds that misrepresentation was an important factor in the post-Crimea surge in Putin's approval rating.

Recent survey evidence from Russia suggests that surging support for the war may also be partially insincere. Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, for example, find in an online sample that is younger and more educated than the general Russian population that support for Putin's special military operation may barely reach a majority and that direct questioning inflates support by approximately 10 percentage points.

Research in social psychology suggests that the appearance of broad support for the war will beget even greater support as people take their cues from others or strive to fit in. The Kremlin's weaponization of polling, as Maxim Alyukov explains, exploits this fact.

Bandwagoning does, however, appear to have limits. Cues about Putin's popularity did little to enhance people's support for him in a recent study (https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/Working_Paper_132.pdf). But cues about a decline in his popularity caused both stated and sincere support to fall.

## How Do Survey Findings Square with Other Sources of Information?

Findings from a single survey question are flimsy. Reliable insights come from what survey researchers call "triangulation." One can triangulate across multiple questions. Comparing questions on the war shows that wording choice can increase/decrease support by up to 20 percentage points. Whether a question asks about the decision (i.e., by Putin) to begin the "special military operation;" or primes support for the troops by asking about the actions of the Russian Armed Forces; or uses the Kremlin's language of "special military operation" (or drops the word "special"); or forces people who have no firm opinion to take a position (especially a stark binary position)—all produce different figures on support.

And one can triangulate across multiple survey questionnaires. Comparing the order in which questions are asked across "split-ballot" samples (i.e., different groups of similar survey respondents) shows that "ordering effects" drive differences in support of up to 10 percentage points. Ask about the war at the top of a survey, before priming other political considerations, and it is lower.

One can also triangulate across pollsters and modes of interview (online, telephone, face-to-face). As the amount of survey data from Russia has grown, so too have the methods employed. Surveys based on newer methods, such as the high-frequency polling project Russia Watcher, which recruits respondents using in-app advertisements (https://russiawatcher.com/methodology), appear alongside surveys based on traditional methods. Surveys from probability-based samples in which respondents are chosen at random from a defined population are reported alongside surveys in which respondents are recruited online using non-probability methods. This makes it even more important to ask whether survey questions by different pollsters point in the same direction and to cross-validate results, as Russia Watcher is doing.

In this symposium about polling, it is also important to note that we should not rely solely on surveys to understand Russians' opinions about the war. Combining surveys and other systematic insights—from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and observed behavior (for example, on social media or in online searches)—yields a more compelling and reliable picture. Finally, whatever the current situation with opinion polling, it could evolve, perhaps quickly.

*About the Author*

Bryn Rosenfeld (@brynrosenfeld) is an assistant professor of government at Cornell University and a principal investigator of the 2021 Russian Election Study. She is the author of The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy (Princeton University Press, 2020).

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# Public Opinion Still Does Not Exist; War in Ukraine and Dictatorship in Russia Can Help Us Acknowledge That

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For me, the war lays bare many serious problems with survey research on Russia. There have always been methodological questions in social research about the representativeness of surveys; how they are administered; and how the results are processed, filtered, and presented. These are compounded by the opaque nature of polling services (not just) in Russia and their narrow profile (a small professional group carrying out highly specialized work without much external scrutiny). While academics doing research often commission their own polls and use sophisticated techniques to ensure reliability, this does not necessarily avoid problems (not least in relation to response rate and refusals, and the reliance on particular demographics who are more likely to take part—facts often downplayed). But the technical critique is not the main thing. Here, I will make a more general objection to the framing polling creates; the way in which it oversimplifies how we think about Russian society; and how it leads to a dangerous dependency on a simplistic and resource-light way of producing knowledge. I am not saying that survey methods have no value. But their best use is only in concert with other "softer" yet more penetrating tools for getting at how people think. All these other tools require more substantive fieldwork, and some—such as ethnography and observation—require immersion in the field.

First, permit me to rehearse the classic criticism of public opinion made by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu fifty years ago (the same argument was made in the 1950s by C. Wright Mills). This is necessary because the media, politicians, and people in general continue to accept uncritically the Gallupian paradigm of public opinion: that cumulative preference exists and can be measured meaningfully. To summarize: the survey assumes all people have opinions, which is by no means a given. Sentiments, dispositions, ineffable values, and (dis)tastes might all be preferable ways to think about how people articulate themselves, without resorting to the language of rationality, preference, and calculable "interest," which are often the hidden prior assumptions that polling makes about people. Second, Bourdieu makes the obvious but controversial observation that not all opinions are of equal value. Take, for example, polling about trivial matters that suddenly gain prominence in the media. Just because a survey can elicit and then aggregate a response from thousands of people, this does not mean the result is sociologically meaningful. Instead, what are often produced are "meaningless artefacts," where the immediate context of the poll (a political scandal, say) "pushes" people to respond in a particular way. Third, the "question" might well—if couched in a different way, asked at a different time, or posed in concert with other information—elicit a completely different answer. Finally, there is the issue of what is worth asking, or the "consensus" question. Who decides on the preferences between which survey respondents choose? After all, the ideal spectrum of possible "opinion" is impossible to capture.

If anything, the "observer" problem of science, a major challenge to positivism even in physics or psychology, is much more of an issue in opinion research than scholars admit. Such criticisms go beyond terms like the "Hawthorne effect" (people act differently when they know they are observed), "confirmation bias" (polls are inadvertently designed to confirm expectations), "secondary observer effects" (where the interpretation of data sets up biased results), or "circularity" (where poll results become "true" merely by being disseminated). The problem is that no question exists that is not capable of being reinterpreted in highly divergent ways by the people asked it. According to relational and intersubjective sociology, an approach going back to Blumer in the 1930s, opinion depends on who is asking, where, when, and how! Aggregation of answers into collective opinion is suspect and "opinions" are in any case not invariant individual properties. The more emotive and anxiety-inducing the issue, the more difficult it becomes, as in the case of polling about the war. Even in so-called democratic states, the blunt conclusion is that polls "construct a fictitious public mind to serve the ends of the powers that be."

How can we take them seriously in Russia? Verbal opposition to war is criminalized; expressing political dissent is socially undesirable, dangerous, and discomfiting. Why take polling seriously in a society notorious for well-founded suspicion of strangers asking questions and doubt as to the anonymity of even online polls? And this does not even get into the issues of how a tendency toward "agreeableness," as Samuel Greene has argued, or a desire to express loyalty in times of crisis affect polling. The conclusion drawn by scholars working in an emancipatory tradition of social research, like myself, is that polling serves mainly as an instrument of disempowerment—closing off options and imagined worlds, chan-

neling interpretation to unrealistic narrowness, devoicing and neutering the politics of the dispossessed. Even the most careful and sensitively crafted survey instrument carries out symbolic violence (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic_violence)—the imposition of the norms of the powerful upon the subordinate group. And polling on Russia's war on Ukraine is no exception.

At different points of the war, I have made interventions expressing reservations about polling as a way of showing whether Russians support the aims of Putin in Ukraine. I will condense them. In March, in conversation with a pollster from Moscow, we observed how polling was inadequate on several counts (https://postsocialism.org/2022/03/17/moscow-war-diary-part-4-incriminating-evidence-or-polling-fallacies/). First, because of its limited framing: for example, some people were still not aware of the scale of the conflict and therefore using the term "Special Military Operation" skewed results (though once again, the degree of delusion and denial is unknowable). Then there is the problem of fear: of giving the "wrong," or unpatriotic, answer and the influence of the media in distorting the "reality" upon which an opinion is given. Third, there is dishonesty among pollsters about the extreme difficulty in finding respondents (https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/14/atomizirovannaia-bomba), which, following Greg Yudin, we could call the "10 percent problem": as if the self-selecting 10 percent of people who are regularly willing to take part somehow represent the population; such polling actually expresses communication with the state in terms of highly truncated preferences, and not real breadth of opinion. Later in March, I went into more detail (https://postsocialism.org/2022/03/21/don't-trust-opinion-polling-about-support-in-russia-for-the-war-on-ukraine/), having interviewed numerous polling experts about the deprofessionalization of surveying.

In mid-January, I reviewed some astonishing results from Levada (https://postsocialism.org/2023/01/09/a-third-of-russians-feel-they-bear-moral-responsibility-for-aggression-against-ukraine-wtf/), presented in an interview between *Der Spiegel* and Levada science chief Lev Gudkov, that seemed to show that 34 percent of those polled express feeling moral responsibility for the deaths of civilians and destruction in Ukraine. Once again, the "yes/no" presentation of responses does more to obscure and mislead than to enlighten—observers were either appalled or, like me, encouraged that even in a pressure-cooker atmosphere of mediatized hyperjingoism, a whole third of people effectively admitted responsibility for a neoimperial war. That this should *not* in fact be the interpretation was borne out by other polling, which showed strong support for the actions of the Russian armed forces to have remained nearly unchanged over time. Much more likely, many of those who answered "yes" to the question about moral responsibility had highly divergent, if not opposed, interpretations in mind (e.g., some think bombing and subduing Ukraine is a good idea and take responsibility for it).

The results from Levada were, ironically, produced from in-depth interviews, but presented by both *Der Spiegel* and Levada as bloodless statistics. In the interview, Gudkov made this situation worse, rehashing a long-disputed thesis, beloved by old-school Levada sociologists, about the exceptionally maladaptive amorality of Russian society in general. Gudkov ignores evidence, even in his own poll, to the contrary. At the very least, this and other polls focusing exclusively on support for the war are irresponsible, not only because their findings are highly questionable, but because polling becomes an ideological weapon, easily reinterpreted to present Russia in orientalist terms as an inherently "barbarous" society.

Surveying could be effective if it were firmly married to other methods, including experimental ones like informant diary-writing, traditional ethnographic observation, and in-depth interviewing. The problem is, as I recently pointed out in an article for *Post-Soviet Affairs*, it generally is not. Academic and financial imperatives favor getting attention-grabbing results without undertaking messy, lengthy fieldwork. In my view (having conducted them professionally), even focus groups are often a poor substitute for better sociological immersion. Social observation of the positivist type, of which surveying is just the most obvious example, can miss—or, even worse, distort the meaning of—waves, currents, and change in society, something captured well in Raymond William's phrase "structure of feeling." You can tell by his choice of words that such an approach is antithetical to quantification, and yet Williams developed this influential idea at the height of sociological positivism in the 1950s. It is a starting point for thinking about popular responses to official discourse as dynamic. It also evokes how different ways of thinking can emerge, come into contact, and—even if never fully articulated—strongly influence how people see and respond to the world.

*About the Author*
*Jeremy Morris* is Professor of Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. His most recent book is *Everyday Postsocialism* (Springer 2016). He has also published widely on Russian labor politics, the informal economy in the post-

Soviet space, and many other anthropological and sociological topics relevant to the region. He is currently completing a book on capitalist realism and micropolitics in Russia.

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# Levada Polls on the Discuss Data Online Platform: Accessing and Discussing Russian Surveys of Public Opinion

Heiko Pleines (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

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Discuss Data is an online repository for data collections on Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. It goes beyond the functions of traditional data repositories by engaging the academic community in the archiving process, as well as in a discussion of data quality and opportunities for secondary data analysis. (For details, see Heinrich et al. 2019.) To this end, data collections on Discuss Data are assigned to categories. For each category, a curator supports the preparation of data collections for upload to the repository and checks the data collection prior to publication.

At Discuss Data, I am the curator responsible for "opinion polls." In this position, I have supported, among other things, the online publication of 14 data collections from the Levada Center—the only renowned polling institute in Russia that is independent of the state. The data collections are arranged by topic and include questions from several polls conducted in different years, the earliest starting in 1994. All in all, these data collections present results from over 50 different opinion polls, which are available online—mostly in open access: https://www.discuss-data.net/dataset/search/?q=levada&countries=&keywords=&languages=&categories=&methods_of_data_analysis=&methods_of_data_collection=&disciplines.

I have also supported the publication of the Levada Center's controversial polls about the full-scale Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on DiscussData. Currently, the raw data from March to December 2022 are available online in open access.

## Discussing Levada Polls

Generally speaking, Discuss Data is open to any data collection that meets academic and ethical standards, does not violate copyrights, and fits into our regional profile. In addition to publishing data collections online, Discuss Data—as its name indicates—aims to promote a discussion of data quality and the potential for secondary data analysis. In our view, it should be the academic community that makes these decisions, not a repository or a curator. This is why Discuss Data offers the "discuss" function, which is an integral part of each data collection published online.

Comments are displayed together with the data collection. They are generally specific to a given data collection, as in this example:

In the poll conducted in January 2018 (2018cur01), which is included in this dataset, 58% of respondents claimed to have voted in the parliamentary elections of 2016. Of those who claimed to have voted 63% indicated that they had voted for the pro-Kremlin party United Russia (a further 11% refused to name the party they had voted for). Official election results (which have suffered from at least a bit of ballot stuffing) indicate a voter turnout of 48% with a vote share of 54% for United Russia.

So the difference between polling data and election results (not counting ballot stuffing) is 58% vs. 48% for voter turnout and 63% vs. 54% for the share of United Russia. Levada polls in 2017 have led to similar results. Accordingly, Levada polls systematically overestimate voter turnout and votes for United Russia. If the poll is representative, then something like social desirability bias leads 10% of respondents to falsely claim to have voted for United Russia (https://discuss-data.net/dataset/046fbb44-87c4-41a6-9d99-e33636d19e02/discuss/).

Reacting to the debate about the validity of opinion polls in Russia, as responsible curator I have added the following comment to all more recent data collections from the Levada Center that include questions related to politics:

It is important to note that even the most professional pollster cannot solve issues related to selected respondents declining to take part in a survey or giving dishonest answers. For the case of Russia, it has been claimed that only a small part of the populace, between 10% and 30%, is willing to take part in public opinion surveys (Napeenko, 2017).

At the same time, in a public opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center itself in July 2016, only 30% of respondents stated that they would always honestly answer to questions related to politics; furthermore, only 12% of them assumed that other people would do so (Levada Center, 2016). (see e.g. https://discuss-data.net/dataset/6fe27952-0181-4314-b2cf-32bbf6aed1a8/discuss/).

To provide the basis for a more substantial discussion, especially in relation to the controversial Levada polls about the Russian population's attitude toward the war in Ukraine, the data collection "The War in Ukraine in the Perception of the Russian Population" contains an excerpt from a working paper published by Denis Volkov, the director of the Levada Center, and Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, that outlines their arguments against an alleged decline in the validity of Levada surveys. Moreover, the data collection contains a file detailing the response and rejection rates of the Levada omnibus surveys conducted in the first quarter of 2022, with a discussion by the Levada team. The data collection also contains a description of an experiment conducted by the Levada Center to assess the willingness of the Russian population to participate in surveys (available only in Russian) (https://discuss-data.net/dataset/947f9970-7a50-493c-bc78-057f0f5eedf7/).

To date, the debate about the validity of public opinion polls in Russia has taken place mostly in academic journals, including a forthcoming special issue of *Post-Soviet Affairs* and this issue of the *Russian Analytical Digest*. In addition, many comments have been published on Twitter. For a frontal critique of the Levada polls on the war, see the Twitter thread by Jeremy Morris of Aarhus University (re-published at https://postsocialism.org/2023/01/09/a-third-of-russians-feel-they-bear-moral-responsibility-for-aggression-against-ukraine-wtf/).

At Discuss Data, however, we think that the best place for comments—or at least for links to relevant publications—is next to the actual open-access data collection.

## Conclusion

My personal conclusion about the validity of the Levada Center's polls is that they still achieve a fair degree of representativeness, but since 2012, if not before, they have not captured what people really think and do, only what they are willing to say "in public" (i.e., to a person they do not know personally). Over the years and depending on the topic, this difference has become increasingly relevant. However, this does not render the polls useless or misleading. Instead, they have to be taken for what they are. They present publicly voiced opinions—and with that, a collective assessment of acceptable opinions. This is highly relevant to answering many research questions. As such, we will continue to publish Levada Center polls in open access on Discuss Data, enabling researchers to decide for themselves whether Levada polls are relevant to their work. We hope that these researchers will then post their assessments next to the data collection under study.

*About the Author*

*Heiko Pleines* is head of the Department of Politics and Economics, Research Centre for East European Studies and Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Bremen. He curates the category "opinion polls" for the DiscussData platform (https://www.discuss-data.net/categories/opinion-polls/).

Discuss Data is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and operated by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen and the Göttingen State and University Library.

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# Telephone Surveys in Contemporary Russia: The Approach of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation

Anna Biriukova (Anti-Corruption Foundation)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000599408

The public opinion research department of the ACF runs nationwide polls using the method of telephone surveys. We have been operating since 2013 and have data from a decade of observations.

The bitter truth is that already ten years ago, many colleagues expressed reasonable fears that a random sample would be biased due to a specificity of the Russian political reality. The regime uses polls as a tool of manipulation and propaganda, which leads to an unwillingness on the part of the population to participate in polls. Other effects include anomalies in the number of socially acceptable answers and outright lies. A unique characteristic of retirees, who have the highest response rate, is a conviction that pollsters are in fact representatives of the authorities.

Since the end of March 2022, we have conducted monthly nationwide polls. We are fully aware of the biases in the sample, related both to a reluctance to pick up a phone call from an unknown number (which is very sensitive for young men, whom our organization has itself urged not to answer the phone to avoid mobilization) and to a fear of punishment for dissent. In April 2022, we noticed an intense decline in support for liberal and democratic values such as same-sex marriage and freedom of speech, as well as in approval of liberal politicians. Those respondents who already tended to be reluctant to pick up the phone, a group that we have always singled out separately, did not become conservative traditionalists; instead, they stopped participating. The risks of answering polls honestly were too high because no one could guarantee their anonymity. We have no hopes of getting these people back into the pool of people we can reach.

The second thing we immediately noticed was a refusal to respond to all questions related to Ukraine. As soon as questions about the war appeared in the questionnaire, we saw an abnormal amount of interruptions.

Therefore, our "hack" was as follows: at the beginning of the war (approximately the first four months), we openly offered respondents the option of skipping the portion of the questionnaire related to Ukraine. This option was exercised by up to half of respondents. In this way, the maximum possible number of respondents reached the end of the questionnaire, allowing us to receive answers from those who had not agreed to talk about Ukraine. We are not really interested in the president's approval rating among those who decided to talk about the war and, therefore, are more likely to support it than not.

Following the announcement of mobilization in the Russian Federation, we slightly reformulated the questionnaire, offering to skip some—but not all—questions about the special military operation. The new wording did not significantly impact the response rate, even though respondents were required to answer questions about the mobilization, its necessity, and whether the special military operation met their expectations.

It is worth mentioning that whereas at the beginning of the war, half of respondents agreed to answer questions about Ukraine, in our most recent poll, only 30 percent decided to skip this block of questions, while 70 percent chose to answer it.

The last thing I want to mention is the importance of observing trends over time, which is what we, as a political organization, focus on. We admit we can-

not (and no one can) accurately answer the question of "How many Russians support the war?" For ten months, we have seen a clear trend of growing dissatisfaction with what is happening on almost all war-related issues. The number of those who support the war is decreasing and the number of those wishing for peace negotiations is increasing.

We primarily perceive our data as a study not of society as a whole, but of those who mainly support government policy. The fact that even among them we see a steady trend toward criticism and disappointment helps us maintain an objective view—and, frankly, inspires optimism.

*About the Author*

*Anna Biriukova* has been the head of the Anti-Corruption Foundation's (https://acf.international/) public opinion research department since 2013. She leads its telephone and online surveys team, which conducts up to 20 nationwide polls in Russia per year, as well as its qualitative research team, which carries out interviews and focus group discussions across Russia.

# What Is the Sociology of War?

Elena Koneva and Alexander Chilingaryan (ExtremeScan, Cyprus)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000599408

When the war in Ukraine ends, it will take time to gather evidence, bring those responsible to justice, and understand the roots of the war. It will be time to investigate the underlying causes of conflict and prevent similar events from occurring. The critical issue to be examined is the mindset of Russian society before, during, and after the war.

## Studying History

This future is one of the main reasons for beginning the sociology of war: to measure the truth of history for history. The so-called "Special Military Operation" mobilized independent sociology. In response to censorship, regulations, and repression, independent sociologists in Russia began volunteering their time and expertise, despite the risks they faced.

This movement became a crucial step toward bringing those responsible to justice and understanding the roots of the war. Opinion polls have become a powerful instrument of Kremlin propaganda. Tamed research institutions and organizations portray a unified majority of 70–80 percent supporting the war and Putin's leadership.

This sophisticated propaganda targets high-profile domestic and international audiences, seeking to convey the monolithic consolidation of society around a strong leader.

Opinion polls can come from various sources, such as online surveys conducted by Western research centers from abroad and even telephone surveys conducted by Ukrainian centers. Official VTsIOM projects are occasionally published and "secret polls" under the Federal Security Service brand leaked to the media. This diversity indicates that sociology has become a weapon in the information war.

Russian political scientists, journalists, and public figures formulate their opinions on these numbers in various ways: "we can't trust polls today," "polls today are meaningless," "polls should be banned," and "polls help Putin." At the same time, they analyze the society that the propagandist sociology has sought to portray for them.

The notion of an "overwhelming majority" is a widespread myth imprinted by Russian propaganda.

## It Is a War, Not an Operation

An analysis of Internet search trends reveals that the term "war" is overwhelmingly more prevalent than "military operation" among the Russian audience.

Artfully imposed legal restrictions and prosecutions of free speech by the Russian government make it impossible to gauge attitudes toward the war by posing directly the question "Do you support the military operation in Ukraine?"

Changing the wording from "military operation" to "war" would likely result in a significantly different result. But calling this war a "war" is forbidden; any attempt to do so results in repression, such as fines or even detention. And both researchers and respondents have found themselves at risk of prosecution.

"Thank you for giving me the right of silence," said one of our respondents on being provided with the "refuse to answer" option.

## What's the Point?

In our publications on the ExtremeScan website and with our partner Chronicles, we went beyond regular research reports to provide actionable insights based on

an unbiased understanding of the state of mind of Russian society in wartime.

This information holds significant value for future policymakers as they work to design measures that will help prevent future conflicts.

## Understanding the Genesis

War is a unique and extreme situation that requires a different approach to the audience than that taken by traditional or Kremlin-linked pollsters.

It is crucial to thoroughly comprehend the social and psychological factors that drive support for and opposition to it.

## Resistance to Propaganda

The war in Ukraine has been fueled by well-funded propaganda campaigns. These started in the Russian media and continue in the minds of people around the globe.

Sociology is essential to counteracting Russian propaganda and shaping strategies to convey truth to the public.

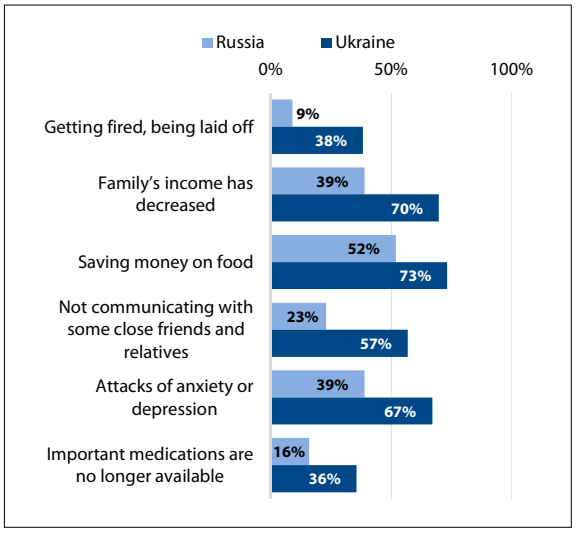
## Learning Archetypes

War is an extreme state in which society finds itself, providing a rare opportunity to delve into deep archetypes that are not palpable under normal conditions.

## Obtaining Statistics on Humanitarian Issues

When traditional statistical data are unavailable, incomplete, or falsified, sociological surveys can provide an alternative source of information about the impact of war.

**Figure 1: Humanitarian Impact of the War on Russia and Ukraine, Eight Months Later**




*Source: ExtremeScan survey in Russia and Ukraine, September–October 2022,* https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone.

## Difficulties and Limitations

Collecting accurate empirical data during the war is complex, and interpreting responses obtained under strict censorship requires meticulous attention to detail and consideration of the context.

## Sample Bias and Deformation of the General Universe

War disrupts standard societal patterns and creates conditions that make it challenging for researchers to survey the population uniformly.

Contrary to our expectations, we have not observed a decrease in cooperation from respondents or a significant decline in response rate during the eleven months of our monitoring.

At the same time, the general universe's deformation may affect the polls' representativeness.

A notable example is young men. The October poll revealed a 40 percent loss in the youngest male demographic (18–25 years old), which dropped from its usual 11.5 percent to 7 percent, which is 3 million people in absolute terms.

This loss comprises individuals conscripted into the army, those who have left the country, and those who have changed their SIM cards or avoided communication from unknown telephone numbers.

## War Biases Minds

The most significant difficulty is interpreting and comparing the data with the situation before the war.

People's opinions may be strongly influenced by their feelings about the war, making it more challenging to measure their views on other issues accurately.

We have identified signs of Putin's approval rating and the war dominating many dimensions: economic optimism, assessments of financial well-being, and attitudes toward the government and its decisions. Even such adverse events as the announcement of mobilization in September 2022 and the evaluation of the war's negative impact on personal life have dominated these dimensions.

The biggest challenge is the phrasing used when interacting with respondents and interpreting their responses, especially when comparing them to pre-war conditions. For instance, an improvement in a respondent's self-assessment of their financial status without external factors may indicate an adaptation to difficulties, consolidation of values, or a reevaluation of values.

## Refusal to Answer Sensitive Questions

The number of respondents who are hesitant or refuse to answer questions has hugely increased during the war. Respondents who oppose military actions tend to avoid answering questions rather than express their attitudes openly.

In October 2022, 30 percent of women aged 18–35 expressed support for the war and 18 percent openly opposed it. Meanwhile, almost 52 percent avoided answering this question.

The most vocally supportive audience were men aged 55 or older. Eighty percent of them proclaimed their support for the "military operation" and only 11 percent refused to answer.

Overall, 33 percent of respondents to the October 2022 poll declined to answer questions about their support for the war.

The primary focus of our analysis has been the level of Russian citizens' support for the war and their justifications for this.

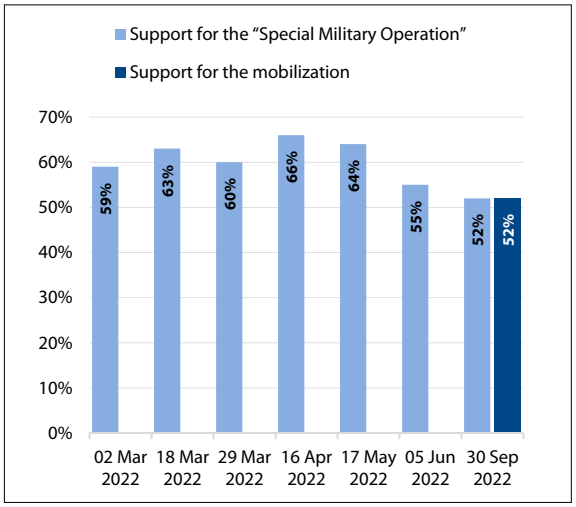
Mass media in Russia and abroad persistently broadcast that 70–80 percent of Russians support the war. When we asked Ukrainians what percentage of Russians supported the war, we received the same estimate: 80 percent.

Despite its widespread circulation, we are confident this figure needs to be corrected.

The notion of an "overwhelming majority" is a widespread myth imprinted by Russian propaganda.

The share of people who answered positively a direct question about support posed by the Chronicles Project (https://www.chronicles.report/) is significantly lower than the widely circulated "official ratings": 60–65 percent through the invasion, falling to 50 percent by Autumn 2022.

**Figure 2: Support for the "Special Military Operation" and Mobilization by Russian Citizens**




*Source: Support for the "Special Military Operation" and mobilization by Russian citizens, survey by ExtremeScan/Chronicles, Russia, October 2022,* https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone.

This difference from most polls can be attributed to our addition of an explicit "refuse to answer" option to the questionnaire. This measure does not provide insight into actual support for the war, but if it is not provided, then support for the war is usually inflated. Further analysis revealed a segment of genuine supporters who were directly or indirectly interested in the continuation of the aggression against Ukraine.

## Conscious Supporters

are people who

- are personally willing to participate in the war
- OR donate money to the Russian military and supplies
- OR expect to derive "personal benefit" from the victory over Ukraine.

They comprise **30–40 percent** of the population.

## Belligerent Russians

Attitudes toward mobilization reveal that part of the Russian population is willing to go to war. We refer to this segment of genuine militarists, who comprise around **20 percent of our respondents**, as "hawks."

**Figure 3: Core Support of the War with Ukraine among Russians**

| "Hawks" as core support of war—19 percent | |
|---|---|
| | |
| Support the mobilization | 52% |
| AND | |
| Expressed their willingness to participate in hostilities | 37% |
| AND | |
| Not willing to accept Putin's potential decision to interrupt the military operation without achieving its objectives | 35% |

*Source: Core support of the war with Ukraine among Russians. Survey by ExtremeScan/Chronicles, Russia, October 2022,* https://www.extremescan.eu/post/15-call-of-duty-research-in-warzone.

They are Putin's platform and the core audience of an extremely effective propaganda campaign.

"Hawks" in our surveys express euphoria, a feeling of supremacy, exaggerated masculinity, and the anticipation of an inevitable glorious Russian victory over Ukraine.

Propelled by propaganda, this profile is wrongly attributed to all Russian citizens.

## Russians, Who Are They?

State propagandists' manipulation of public opinion and subsequent polls is not the main problem. The main challenge is understanding the mindset of Russian citizens.

We are still learning to count the supporters and opponents of the war and to interpret and extrapolate our findings. How should we interpret the following statement by a conscription-age man that he is ready to go to war? "We have done so much harm to Ukraine that the Ukrainians will inevitably come with weapons to our territory, and then I will have to defend my home." Can this confession be considered support for war and an expression of willingness to fight?

*About ExtremeScan*
*ExtremeScan* is a non-profit, non-governmental international collaboration of independent researchers and academics that aims to inform the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping countries in the war zone. It conducts public opinion polling in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to provide unbiased data on the general mood amid the escalating crisis. Its partner and primary research source is the "Chronicles" project.

*About the Authors*
*Elena Koneva* is a social-political psychologist and sociologist with 30 years of research experience.

*Alexander Chilingaryan* is a mathematician and data scientist who founded the software company DataTile. He has 15 years of hands-on experience in software development for scientific applications, data analysis, and integration.

*Further Reading*
- ExtremeScan, https://www.extremescan.eu/.
- Chronicles, https://www.chronicles.report/.

# Methodological Issues of War Polls in Russia

Aleksei Miniailo (Chronicles, Moscow)

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Polls in Russia during wartime are tricky—especially when it comes to questions that are not just sensitive but perceived by many as associated with felony. Researching Russians' attitude toward the war is a vital and socially important task that requires prompt action. But attempts to uncover what lies beyond the fog of war also raise a number of methodological issues, including—but not limited to—confirmation bias, intricacy of interpretation, trade-offs between the gold standard of scientific rigor and obtaining relevant data, and the difficulty of explaining the complexity of the data to a broad audience.

## Who We Are and What We Do

On February 24 we initiated the Chronicles project. We knew that the Putin regime would weaponize the polls to create the illusion of a majority, so as to help Russian society accept the war. We also reckoned that established pollsters would not tune their methods to the wartime reality with sufficient speed (for more details, see https://twitter.com/AlekseiMiniailo/status/1597919707361075200 and https://twitter.com/AlekseiMiniailo/status/1600067182628548608). We therefore decided that society needed honest, professional, and war-tuned research. Since February 24, we have conducted 9 phone polls and 1 data analysis of social networks.

The results are presented on our website, https://chronicles.report/en. We also publish questionnaires, analytical reports, and anonymized raw data on GitHub: https://github.com/dorussianswantwar/research1.

Our team consists of two social scientists, a consultant with a long track record in polls, a PR manager, a press secretary, and a project manager. In addition, we regularly consult with several prominent social scientists. All team members hold an anti-war position, which might lead to confirmation bias. Our product is not a series of publications in scientific journals (though I hope these will come), but a narrative for the media, which requires boiling down the data to a few key statements. Both points will be discussed further.

## Method

Polls were conducted by phone using a random sample of phone numbers distributed between mobile phone operators. The sample size was 800–1,800 respondents, distributed according to official statistics on age, sex, region, and type of settlement. The sample might be skewed toward conformists, but we have little proof that would allow us to state this with confidence. The response rate—calculated according to AAPOR guidelines—was 5–19 percent. The difference in response rate likely depends on the length of questionnaires but might also be influenced by season and other contingent circumstances (probably including fear of repressions, though we do not have enough data to confirm this).

We did our best to adapt our questionnaires and interpretations to get relevant results. For example, when we found out that a significant proportion of those who declared support for the war preferred not to answer the question of support for the war when given this option, we included this option in later polls and excluded

"don't-wants" (refusals to answer) from the group of "supporters" (more on this topic on our website at https://www.chronicles.report/en/chapter2). This is one of the reasons that the proportion of supporters appeared to decline over time (by between 7 and 18 percent).

Having discovered that the "support" question provided almost meaningless results, we started to use different approaches to stratify groups of "supporters."

We were the first to use concrete questions (not "Do you support…" but "Would you donate to the army…," etc.) and questions about choices for a hypothetical future (eg., "Should the Russian army fight until the AFU capitulates or end the 'special military operation' as soon as possible without reaching military goals?"). We used different combinations of questions to stratify the "support group," which helped us to learn that the core of the support group ("supporters" who have at least something of an emotional or rational reason for supporting the war) comprises around 25–30 percent of the population. This figure remains more or less stable with various approaches to stratification.

We also invested a lot of effort in not just presenting the data, but also explaining what the data might mean, because without such interpretation, the general audience would take the "support" figure at face value—leading to an entirely inaccurate perception of reality.

While I believe we have achieved significant success and have been able to obtain and conceptualize data in a way no other pollster has, we have run into a number of obstacles along the way.

## Which Research Questions Are Meaningful?

Let's conduct a small experiment. Imagine that you're an American and you get a call from a pollster. You say you support Donald Trump. What exactly do you mean? That you would vote for him? That you hate Mexicans? That attacking the Capitol was a good idea? Or maybe you're just there with a gun? The same goes for the question "Do you support the 'special military operation'?" Respondents' positive responses might conceal motivations as diverse as "I am lying out of fear" to "I'm enlisting in the army." After some time, we concluded that an important goal for us was to identify and stratify various groups of "supporters." But that also raised a number of methodological issues.

## Confirmation Bias

The entire team has a strong anti-war stance. This may have influenced both the research design and our interpretation of the data we collected. Triangulation might have helped, but most researchers whom we knew also had an anti-war position and "official" pollsters refused to cooperate with us (we encountered the same problem on another project: "official" economists and bureaucrats were too afraid to talk despite having established trusting relationships with members of our team). So both sides are likely to be under the influence of confirmation bias.

## Adaptation or Mess?

We had to adapt our methodology on the run. To give one example: in order to track changes in social phenomena over a period of time, scientific rigor requires using the same method every time, including questionnaires. On March 4 a package of war censorship laws was passed that included criminal charges for holding an anti-war position. We identified through an experiment that a significant segment of those who declared support for the war were probably doing so out of fear of prosecution: when we provided the option "I don't want to answer this question" to half of the sample, the share of supporters decreased by 7 percent. If, to satisfy the requirements of scientific rigor, we had ignored this finding and kept the options as "I support" and "I don't support" without adding "I don't want to answer the question," we would have collected misleading data. And though one can debate whether "don't-wants" are against the war or not, those who—given such an option—do not even declare support in a poll can hardly be included in the group of "supporters."

To my mind, to hold to scientific rigor in this case would be to condemn a project to rigor mortis. Many pollsters did this and got data that meant little. We adapted our methodology every time we designed a study. We believe that this allowed us to get more relevant results and penetrate the fog of war better than others. It helped us to validate our findings by comparing our data with those of other pollsters who asked different questions on the same topic. But that also raised the issue of interpretation.

## Interpretation Issues

In most polls, we tried to identify various groups within "supporters" and used different approaches. On the upside, we achieved a measure of triangulation. On the downside, we ran into interpretation issues. Is it correct to compare those who say that they would donate money to the army with those who declare readiness to enlist? Maybe we can compare "enlisters" with those who say they are ready to donate 10 percent or more of their monthly income? Are "militarists" those who support the war and the mobilization but would not support Putin's decision to withdraw without reaching military goals? Or maybe those who would not support the withdrawal are militant enough and there is no need to use additional questions? Such complexity is acceptable within the scientific community, where you explicitly describe your methodology and write an extensive dis-

cussion, but our final product is not articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, but short and accessible pieces for the broader public.

## "Scientist Rapes Reporter"

As we believe that the data we have obtained are, first and foremost, socially and politically important, we have invested a lot of effort in communicating our findings to a wide audience. But cooperation with journalists on complex issues is tricky. Though we have been successful in spreading the word and getting published in the key Russian "free" media and influential foreign media (*The Sunday Times*, *The New Yorker*, the main Brazilian radio station Jovem Pan, Japanese *NHK*, etc.), we have often run into the same problem. Almost every time our press secretary explained the complexity of the situation and the meaninglessness of the "Do you support" question, there would come a point where the interlocutor would reply, "OK, I get it. So how many Russians support the war?" After almost a year, we have managed to educate several key journalists and bloggers, but it has been a tough job. The meme "Scientist rapes reporter" is funny on Reddit, but hardly so in real life, especially when it comes to vital and socially important data.

## Conclusion

Wartime polls are of both scientific and practical use. Scientifically, their data contribute to methodological discourse in social science and to study of wartime societies. They might also make a valuable contribution to the discourse on conformity and obedience in social psychology (the most prominent studies being the Milgram experiment, the Zimbardo experiment, the Asch experiments, and the BBC Prison study).

We hope that scientific discussion of wartime social research will provide an opportunity to rethink and enrich peacetime social research. For us, meanwhile, scientific debate is a great tool for reflecting on what we do and how to improve it.

Practical implications include the use of this data to deal with such post-war problems as responsibility for the war and denazification policies in Russia.

Lastly, for the Russian anti-war resistance, it is a glint of hope that our actions are not a lost cause, but rather sparks of a future light that might still shine despite all odds.

*About the Author*

*Aleksei Miniailo* is a Russian opposition politician. Between 2012 and 2019 he was a social entrepreneur and aided NGOs in establishing social projects with corporations. As a volunteer, he trained more than 8,000 political activists and civil leaders and participated in 15 elections as an observer. In 2017–2019 he participated in a PhD program at IEDC Bled School of Management, but he did not graduate because in 2019 he was jailed for 2 months as part of the so-called Moscow Case, on charges that would have carried up to 15 years in prison (he was ultimately released thanks to an anti-repression campaign). In 2021 Aleksei ran to become a deputy in the Russian Parliament. He has co-founded everal anti-war projects.

*Further Reading*

- Chronicles website (in English): https://chronicles.report/en
- Results of our research Twitter-style in English: https://twitter.com/AlekseiMiniailo/status/1523952941002067968
- The New Yorker: Why do so many Russians say they support the war in Ukraine? https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-do-so-many-russians-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine
- ExtremeScan — our partner who aggregates and conceptualizes polling data on the war: https://www.extremescan.eu

# Studying Public Opinion Among Migrants: Challenges and Opportunities

Emil Kamalov and Ivetta Sergeeva (both European University Institute, Florence), Margarita Zavadskaya (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki), and Veronica Kostenko (Haifa)

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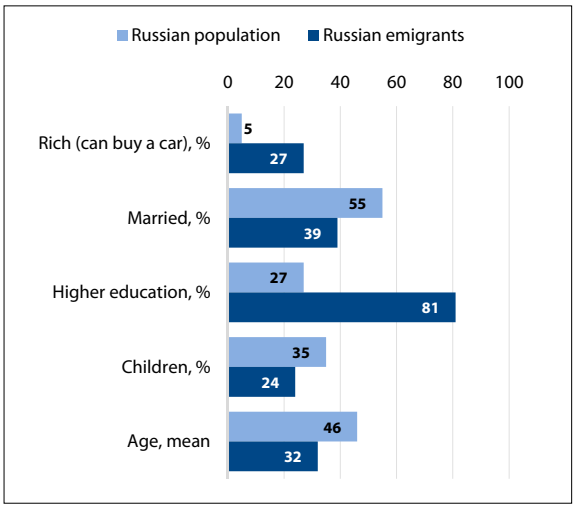
The number of Russian emigrants who fled the country after February 24, 2022, is difficult to estimate, but it is reported to be among the largest brain drains from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union (https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/25/how-the-war-in-ukraine-is-accelerating-russias-brain-drain). The current emigration wave is different from the general Russian population (see Figure 1), consisting mostly of representatives of the middle class, highly educated people with wide networks and more liberal political views than the average Russian (https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-2022-anti-war-exodus-the-attitudes-and-expectations-of-russian-migrants/).

**Figure 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Emigrants and the Russian Population**




*Source: OutRush survey (https://outrush.io/), March 2022, N=1680, Levada, January 2022, N=1603.*

Within the framework of the OutRush project (https://outrush.io),[1], we managed to complete two survey waves—in March and September 2022—that consisted of more than 3,000 respondents across more than a hundred countries recruited via online social networks.[2] In this research note, we seek to discuss the major methodological challenges of data collection and the biases that these may induce, as well as potential solutions.

## Making the Most of Non-Representative Samples

Migrant communities are notoriously difficult to survey. Precise information on migrant populations is rarely available due to the dynamic nature of contemporary migration and the lack of comparability in registration procedures and migration legislature. Migrant populations are usually relatively small, making it hard for them to be well represented in national surveys. This problem may be overcome if up-to-date and high-quality census data are available, as this allows for more precise targeting. In the absence of such information, alternative sampling methods—such as snowballing or time-location—are expensive and unfeasible for simultaneous panel surveys in many countries. On the bright side, the new wave of Russian emigration has a number of features that allows it to sample a diverse stratum of respondents at relatively low cost, despite challenges that are not common for conventional surveys.

We recruited our respondents online through a variety of channels in Telegram messenger. Recent Russian emigrants use Telegram on a massive scale. Telegram recently became very popular in Russia; as of March 2022, it was even reported to be the most popular messenger in the country (https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2022/03/20/914320-telegram-oboshel-whatsapp). Telegram is popular primarily among young, educated urban dwellers (https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14555), a population that comprises the majority of new Russian emigrants. It is difficult to imagine an emigré who does not have Telegram installed on her smartphone.

Telegram is used by migrants to obtain up-to-date information about how to emigrate (https://www.inastana.kz/news/3468918/spisok-telegram-catov-dla-relokantov-iz-rossii), as well as how to move around and get settled in new locations. Within Russia, Telegram is largely used to track border restrictions (https://devby.io/

1 A research group conducting original surveys targeting people who left Russia after February 24, 2022. OutRush project is so far the only Russian migrants' panel survey: www.outrush.io/eng.

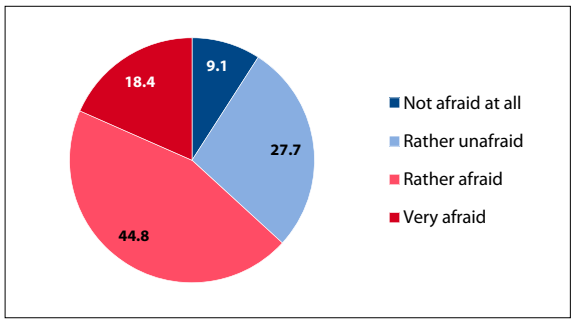
2 We cannot claim that our sample is representative of the general population of all Russian migrants who have left Russia since February 24, 2022. Due to a lack of information about the general population, it is impossible to create a probability sample, thus a convenience sample is the only option. Our sample is likely biased toward the younger and Internet-active population. We recruited people who have left Russia since February 24, 2022, including those who have already returned to Russia, as well as those who are leaving Russia soon. Only those who completed at least 50 percent of the questionnaire were included in the final analysis. We eliminated suspicious questionnaires, such as duplicates and those filled out too quickly.

news/tg-kanal-pogranichnyi-kontrol-gde-rasskazyvaut-o-prohozhdenii-granitsy-stal-liderom-po-kolichestvu-novyh-podpischikov-1663857738). The largest emigrant NGOs, migrant movements, and relocation groups deploy Telegram as their main medium of instant communication and coordination (eg., Kovcheg, Feminist Antiwar Resistance and Relocation Guide). Emigrants create shared chats on Telegram for each host society to support each other, as well as separate chats for each city and town where Russians arrive.[3]

Recruiting via Telegram cannot ensure a representative sample, but our recruiting strategies provide an adequate representation of the emigrants' universe. Post-stratification techniques may be applied to the data once statistics on migration flows in hosting societies are available in 2023.

When recruiting migrants fleeing authoritarian countries, one has to deal with respondents' suspicion of surveys. In authoritarian regimes, especially in wartime, people are afraid to give sincere answers or reluctant even to participate in any kind of survey (https://russianfield.com/beregiterossiy). Recent emigrants are no exception. According to our data, 63 percent fear possible repression from the Russian government even when abroad (see Figure 2). Thus, the reliability of the research team is especially important for respondents fleeing repressive regimes. We collaborate with a number of nongovernmental organizations, migrant communities, and influencers. Not only does collaboration make it possible to reach out to broad audiences quickly, but it also shows the trustworthiness of the researchers by signaling independence from the Russian government.

**Figure 2: Fear of Repression for Manifesting Political Views**




*Data: Outrush survey (https://outrush.io/), September 2022, N=1929.*

## Maintaining the Panel

Panel surveys are difficult to maintain. Any panel survey suffers from attrition bias—but particularly emigrant surveys, as their respondents move around a lot and may lose/change their status.

In panel surveys, it is useful to design a questionnaire carefully and neatly, to deploy non-mandatory questions, and to communicate the value of the study to respondents. It signals empathy and consideration to respondents and helps to sustain their engagement in the panel. It is also important to communicate the data protection procedures openly, in detail, and in simple language to soothe respondents' anxiety about possible data leaks and de-anonymization.[4]

Dissemination of the results beyond academia is a way to ensure respondents' commitment because it quickly provides results that are accessible and interesting to the respondents themselves. It takes a lot of work to analyze the data relatively rapidly and to put together non-academic materials. Distribution of the results among respondents requires effort and resources to set up an infrastructure and bypass spam filters but helps to sustain communication in the subsequent waves of the survey.[5]

By applying these strategies, we have managed to achieve relatively high levels of respondent satisfaction (4.2 out of 5—see Figure 3) as well as completion rates (80 percent).[6] Fifty-three percent of respondents said they would surely circulate the survey link among their networks. The initial retention rate for our panel survey is 60–70 percent,[7] which is comparable to, for instance,

3 The general chats are used to share information about legal issues and the integration process. In more specific local chats, emigrants discuss their daily life, share information about daycare and schools, look for jobs, offer their services, plan leisure activities, and make new connections. This is how a 25-year-old manager in Tbilisi explains his daily practices of Telegram usage: "I've been added to the chat room, and there are already 33 people there, and I'm at almost every new meeting that we have there… I meet new people every time. I've never had so many new acquaintances, because I'm quite a closed person."

4 In our research, safe and ethical data storage was ensured by following the recommendations of the Ethical Committee and the data protection officer of the European University Institute.

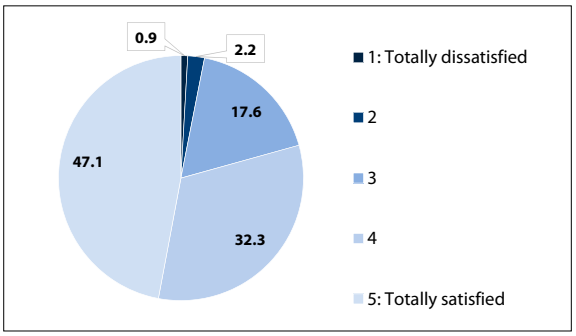
5 In the OutRush project, we distribute survey reports for each survey wave using a media platform of the respondents' choice (e-mail, Telegram or WhatsApp).

6 Some respondents shared in open feedback that they found the survey "therapeutic" or "helpful."

7 In the first wave of our survey, of the 1,680 new Russian emigrants who completed the survey, 1,032 left their contact information. Of these, 70 percent took the second wave of the survey and 60 percent fully completed it. We test our panel sample to ensure there is no sample bias. The sampling bias of regular respondents may arise because not all respondents who left contacts responded in the second wave. We make sure that the difference in important social characteristics between these two groups (those who have responded to the second wave and those who have not) is not statistically significant. The results of the sample bias test show that there is no statistically significant difference in such variables as gender, age, income, plans to return to Russia, and uncertainty about plans for the future. In other words, respondents and non-respondents in the panel survey do not differ from one another statistically on these variables.

the averages of the German Internet Panel, which is managed with significantly more resources.

**Figure 3: Respondents' Satisfaction with the Survey**




*Data: Outrush survey (https://outrush.io/), September 2022, N=2008.*

## Conclusion

The current wave of Russian emigration is politicized, fast-paced; very educated people left their homes under circumstances of exceptional crisis. This creates both research difficulties, because the population is mobile and cautious, and opportunities, due to the group's homogeneity in Telegram usage and engagement. Compared to similar projects, the OutRush project stands out as the only panel survey of new Russian emigrants that traces the dynamic of their situation in more than a hundred countries. Ethical, respondent-friendly, and transparent research practices have proved their effectiveness at retaining panelists and recruiting new participants. The shortcomings of data originating from surveys of Russian migrants are not specific to the Russian context and are well-known to the students of emigration. Imperfect data are always better than ungrounded speculations, although it is of the utmost importance to be transparent about limitations and challenges.

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