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Morris, Jeremy

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

Jeremy Morris (Aarhus University)

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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, deactivating 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 mediatised hyper-

tingoism, 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 Williams’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 Post-socialism* (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.

Further Reading

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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.