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Pleines, Heiko

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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/).

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

Anna Biriukova (Anti-Corruption Foundation)

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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-