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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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