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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-

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.

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)

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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.

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.

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