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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)

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 bureau-

crats 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