

Survey Research in Russia: In the Shadow of War¹

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This version: October 31, 2022

Word count: 5,551

Abstract

Amid ongoing uncertainty, regular surveying in Russia continues to date and collaborations with western academics have too. These developments offer some basis for cautious optimism. Yet they also raise critical questions about the practice of survey research in repressive environments. Are Russians less willing today to respond to surveys? Are they less willing to answer sensitive questions? How can we design research to elicit truthful responses and to know whether respondents are answering insincerely about sensitive opinions? This article lays out some of the existing evidence on these important questions. It also makes the argument that cross-fertilization with other fields can help to ensure a rigorous understanding of and response to changes in the environment for survey research in Russia.

Keywords: survey research, public opinion, Russia, war, nonresponse, misreporting, preference falsification

¹ Paper prepared for consideration for special issue provisionally titled 'Conversations within the Field: Russia's War Against Ukraine and the Future of Russian Studies' edited by Tomila Lankina.

Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Kremlin swiftly enacted a raft of repressive measures aimed at stifling criticism of the government and opposition to the war. It criminalized with up to 15 years imprisonment the dissemination of information contradicting official government sources, including use of the term 'war' to describe what it calls a 'special military operation.' In short order, the context for publicly expressing political opinion, and consequently for survey research in Russia, changed dramatically.

At this writing, Russia's war in Ukraine goes on, and has been ongoing since 2014. This longer period since the annexation of Crimea has also brought important changes in Russian society, a tightening of political control and deteriorating climate for free expression. Laws intended to crack down on the opposition, and subject to broad interpretation by police and courts, have multiplied (McCarthy 2022). Several important recent contributions to the literature on repression (e.g., Tertychnaya forthcoming) and survey research in Russia (e.g., Frye et al. 2022) reflect on the cumulative impact of these changes.

This article, like the special issue as a whole, focuses on how the ongoing phase of the war, launched with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is impacting the field of Russian studies. However, it also speaks to the challenges faced by scholars of Russia already for some time given longer trends in Russia's political climate (Lankina in this volume, p. 19; Libman in this volume, p. 7). While recent events have no doubt made Russia harder to study, they have also, as Vladimir Gel'man writes in this volume, elevated the importance of our field. They have raised the stakes of such difficult-to-answer questions as the depth of Russians' support for the war and added new urgency to understanding of the sources and durability of regime support.

To answer these questions, scholars of Russia, working across several disciplines of the social sciences, rely on surveys. As La Lova's contribution shows, studies empirically based on survey data make up nearly a third (32%) of all articles about Russia published in the top 10 disciplinary journals in political science and international relations over roughly the past decade. With Russia's repressive turn, even longtime practitioners of survey research in Russia have wondered openly – as Reisinger et al. put it in this volume (p. 1) – whether we have reached the end of the “productive, decades-long period when survey research was a leading method of analyzing Russian society and politics?” (Reisinger et al. in this volume, p. 1). Will “scholars outside Russia...have little chance to conduct survey-based analyses of Russia for an indefinite period?” (Reisinger et al., p. 1).

The stakes are high, both for Russian studies and the disciplines—for the reasons Libman discusses in this special issue (p. 4) and for the reasons I elaborate below. The ability to do reliable and complex surveys, as Libman notes, has made Russia a prominent setting for experimentalist research in both political science and economics. This agenda from within Russian studies has left a mark on broader disciplinary debates. It has likewise encouraged a wider embrace among area experts of recent trends within the quantitative social sciences.

Partnerships between US-based and Russia-based researchers have undoubtedly become more difficult to sustain. Uncertainty after the first days of the invasion (February – March) prevented many scholars from fielding independent, author-commissioned studies at a time when the Russian public's views of the conflict were perhaps more fluid. Given concerns about the feasibility of payments to Russia-based organizations, research teams have had to turn to international polling companies such as Lucid, Qualtrics, and Pollfish, increasing reliance on online as opposed to face-to-face probability-based samples.

Yet regular surveying in Russia continues and at least some collaborations with western researchers have too.² The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Center conducted a joint survey about a month into the war and issued co-authored research findings in April 2022 (Smeltz et al. 2022). US-based academics placed questions on the Levada Center's regular omnibus survey in summer 2022, and the Levada Center has continued to express a willingness to collaborate with the Russian Election Study team on new research. The Levada Center has continued its monthly omnibus survey and has made its data and documentation publicly available on the Discuss Data platform (Levada Center 2022).

Importantly, Russian authorities have not to date sought to directly regulate household surveys. The Russian government does not control what topics or questions can be asked, unlike in China, and there are no known cases of the Russian government targeting individual survey respondents for expressing opposition, either to the war or to the authorities. This offers some basis for cautious optimism. Yet we must still ask ourselves critical questions about the practice of survey research in repressive environments and prepare for the situation to evolve, perhaps quickly.

This article briefly reviews the evidence on several important questions.³ Are Russians less willing today to respond to surveys? Are they less willing to answer sensitive questions? How can we design research to elicit truthful responses and to know whether respondents are lying about sensitive opinions? I also make the argument that cross-fertilization with other disciplines can help to us to respond with rigor and inventiveness to the changing environment for survey research in Russia.

Have Russians become less willing to respond to surveys?

Concern that fear will make Russians less willing to answer pollsters' questions has echoed in many corners since the start of the war. That "The war will inevitably affect survey response rates in ways that are linked to people's opinions about the war," is a reasonable worry (Reisinger et al. in this volume, p. 1). The paucity of evidence on this question in public debates

² At least some of the initial obstacles to joint research following the imposition of Western sanctions now appear solvable in at least some instances (for example, with respect to making payment on contracts, though the situation varies by university and by state in the US and clearly the experience of US-based researchers may differ from the experience of researchers based elsewhere). Still other obstacles, like limitations on the use of grants by some Western governments for research in Russia, remain.

³ That this evidence is piecemeal, and the answers may change over time should be clear.

about polling in Russia has fueled widespread speculation⁴ since the start of the war. To understand how serious this problem may be, I briefly review available data on whether securing the cooperation of Russian respondents has in fact become harder since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The figure below, which reports data from the Levada Center, shows roughly consistent levels of cooperation before and after the war. Crucially, the response rate, contact rate, and refusal rate of the Levada Center's face-to-face surveys through July 2022 are all generally consistent with past readings since January 2021. As the authors of a joint Levada Center-Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey on attitudes toward the war wrote in their April report, "there is no clear evidence that Russians have become less willing to cooperate with pollsters since the war started" (Smeltz et al. 2022, p. 8).

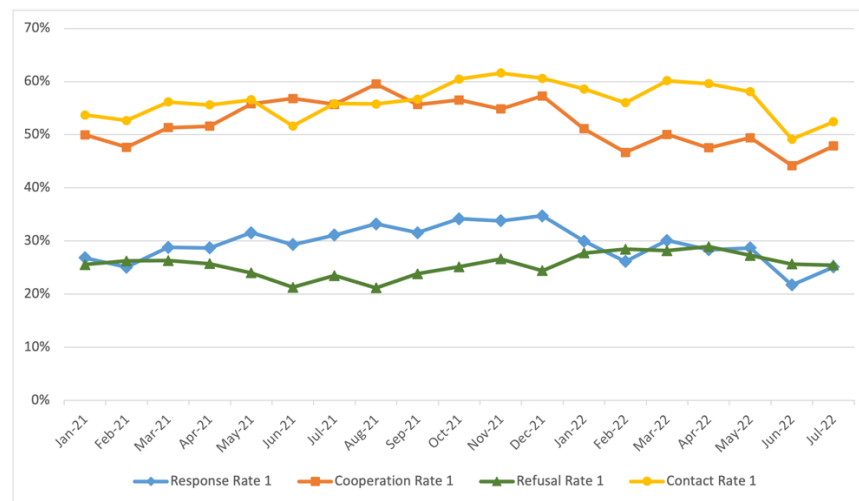


Figure 1. Survey response rates were relatively stable before and after the war. All measures follow the standard AAPOR definitions and are taken from nationally representative face-to-face surveys conducted by the Levada Center. Source: The Levada Center.

After six months at war, we see that potential respondents are not significantly less willing than they had been before the war to cooperate with the country's most prominent independent polling organization in a face-to-face survey. Perhaps they are more reticent in online surveys or have become less likely to cooperate with polling organizations that are associated with the government, such as the prominent state pollsters FOM and VCIOM. While these data do not reflect on Russians' willingness to cooperate with other pollsters⁵ or in other modes of interview, Zvonovsky (2022), which reviews data from regular surveys conducted by FOM and VCIOM as well as groups of independent researchers, finds similarly that refusals to participate have not increased since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

⁴ Indeed, the absence of (known) evidence, has sometimes been taken as evidence of declining response rates, i.e. that pollsters have something to hide.

⁵ To the best of my knowledge, other polling organizations with regular survey programs have not published this data. They should.

It is also conceivable that response rates have risen among some groups even as they have declined among others, with the aggregate data masking such trends. These are important questions. But our conclusions should be based on evidence rather than faith. For example, Zvonovsky (2022) finds that the share of young people interviewed in VCIOM's Sputnik surveys declined from roughly 7% before the war to 6% after – a statistically significant difference – which suggests that young people are less inclined to participate in surveys today. How does such a shift in sample composition impact the conclusions we draw from post-war survey data? The answer will depend on the research question at hand. However, some bounds on the likely impact of such shifts can be established using simulation.

All of the data discussed above are from regular omnibus surveys by Russia's most prominent polling organizations. One notable issue that potentially affects response rates and respondent fear in academic survey research is the ethical requirement to obtain informed consent. While pollsters have discretion about the information they convey in obtaining consent (or whether they include such language at all), ethics requirements at academic institutions are generally more stringent even if procedures for ensuring that research is ethical and, indeed, the particular institutional arrangement for doing so vary widely in the US and abroad. The frequent requirement that research be approved by a university's institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee often means in practice that several parties have the power to weigh in on the language used in obtaining informed consent. In response to the war, many universities have become understandably cautious about approving research in Russia.

One issue worth bearing in mind is that ethics requirements to include more specific or vivid risks to respondents could plausibly impact the quality of survey samples. The process of obtaining informed consent may introduce new information or prime respondents with unsettling information, which could heighten their fear at taking part in a survey. If obtaining informed consent causes participation to decline more among certain types of respondents (say, those who oppose the war) than others, it would bias the representativeness of the sample in ways that could be difficult to detect.

To investigate this issue further, we designed an experiment which we fielded in summer 2022 (with Isabelle DeSisto, Jacob Tucker, Grigo Pop-Eleches, and Graeme Robertson). Interestingly, we found little evidence that 'scary' consequences (in particular, regarding the potential for police surveillance of a respondent's personal information resulting from their survey participation) have any effect on sample composition.

Why? Part of the story is inattention; many potential respondents pay scant attention to the specific language of the informed consent. More interestingly, however, the supposedly 'scary' information that we offered seems to already be part of respondents' decision-making process and to have little effect on their choice to take part in the survey. People who are attentive are no more likely than people who are inattentive to choose the risks of survey participation correctly from a list. The evidence thus suggests that privacy risks broadly and potential state surveillance specifically have been widely assumed for some time and that a willingness to

participate (in spite of them) was already baked into response patterns before repression rose at the start of the war.

Finally, it is essential to bring context to response rate trends in Russia – not only local context, but comparative context too. Levels of survey non-response have been rising around the world so any decline in participation evident in Russian polling must be parsed from more general trends (Brick and Williams 2013). Our focus on the conditions the Kremlin has imposed for survey research since beginning its aggression against Ukraine should not lead us to ignore the extent to which declining response rates are a function of broader trends in attention or concerns about privacy that are more widely shared. These are important alternative explanations alongside politically motivated fear.

Survey researchers across several disciplines – most prominently sociology, statistics, and public health – have investigated how privacy, interest, and burden concerns affect refusals to participate in survey research (e.g., Bates, Dahlhamer, and Singer 2008). Their example can aid us in developing better research designs for studying the causes and consequences of survey non-response that is politically motivated.⁶

Are Russians less willing today to answer sensitive questions? Are they lying to pollsters?

The next set of critical questions for survey-based research in the field of Russian studies deals with the sincerity of those who *do* make the choice to participate in surveys (Frye et al. 2017). Building on Reisinger et al.'s contribution to this volume, I next provide a brief review of the (still rather thin) evidence on response bias in the wake of Russia's war. Bias can arise from respondents both lying (i.e. misreporting) and declining to answer (i.e. item non-response) (Reisinger et al. in this volume). Any fear that respondents have about expressing politically sensitive opinions could manifest in either way, and one strategy may substitute for the other.

When respondents don't say what they mean

With respect to misreporting about support for the war and for Putin, recent evidence suggests that it is now unwise to rely solely on direct questioning. Chapkovski & Schaub (2022), for example, find that online respondents are significantly more likely to express support for the war when they are asked directly than when they are asked indirectly, using a list experiment to protect their privacy (Blair & Imai 2012). They interpret this result, following standard practices,

⁶ While obtaining a sample that is representative of the target population is key, we must at the same time keep in mind that a high-quality representative sample does not facilitate the analysis of all groups equally. To study numerically smaller groups, which may nonetheless exercise outsized political importance, specialized samples and oversamples will continue to be critical. Lazarev's study of Chechnya (2019) or Smyth's (2021) study of protesters highlight the innovative use of such sampling techniques within our field.

to mean that respondents hide their opposition to the war, artificially inflating estimates of support based on direct questioning by approximately 10 percentage points.⁷

Meanwhile, Frye et al.'s recent report, based on ongoing research about the trustworthiness of Putin's approval ratings, finds that "there is considerably more uncertainty about Putin's true support than was apparent in 2015" (2022, p. 1). Based on data collected in that year, the authors concluded in a widely cited study that Putin's high approval ratings mostly reflected sincere support (Frye et al. 2017). However, Hale (2022) in a new analysis of data also collected in 2015 finds that misrepresentation was an important driver of the apparent surge in support for Putin after Russia annexed Crimea.

Skeptics have long wondered whether people feel free to say what they think in Russian surveys. In most situations, though with notable exceptions including those studies discussed above, researchers have lacked proper tools to evaluate the impact of preference falsification. That approach is no longer tenable. Better understanding the dynamics of preference falsification constitutes an important avenue for further research in the field of Russian studies. To what extent do people lie because they fear social sanction (social desirability) versus political reprisal (political desirability) in Russia today (Buckley et al. 2021)? What types of people with what personality characteristics are most likely to falsify their preferences (Hale, Rosenfeld, & Tertytchnaya 2021)? These questions have important implications for our understanding of how regimes sustain the appearance of support and how it might unravel—topics of the utmost policy relevance in light of the war.

When respondents refuse to answer

Reisinger et al.'s contribution to this volume draws attention to the "don't know" and "refuse to say" responses that are often overlooked in analyses of survey data. Indeed, as Reisinger et al. rightly note, "High levels of missing values, if omitted from analysis, will create the impression that reluctance to answer accurately is less than it actually is" (p. 8). While it is certainly plausible that fear of punishment for 'politically incorrect views' could drive higher levels of item non-response, which would in turn affect the reliability of (especially recent, post-war) surveys in Russia, again we need to examine the evidence and continue to keep a close watch.

Turning to the data, Levada trends show no rise in the level of nonresponse to questions regarding the country's direction (right/wrong) or in Putin's approval rating since the start of the war.⁸ The share who declined to answer several questions regarding the likelihood that they themselves would participate in political or economic protests in May was no more than about 3%.⁹

⁷ In an online sample that is younger and more educated than the population, the authors find that true support for the war is approximately 61%, compared with 71% who report support for the war when asked a direct question.

⁸ See <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>.

⁹ See <https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/17/protestnye-nastroeniya-5/>.

How surprising are these patterns? Shen and Truex (2019) demonstrate that “For many authoritarian systems, citizens do not display higher rates of item nonresponse on regime assessment questions than their counterparts in democracies.” However, they also underscore that in more closed systems, such as China, nonresponse levels are higher.

In sum, then, there is little indication that the war imposed a sudden rise in self-censorship among survey respondents in Russia, as expressed through non-response. Still, non-response to potentially sensitive questions could increase with time. We must continue to monitor and report it as we analyze Russian survey data.

What is to be done?

While this article’s discussion is rather more optimistic than others about the possibilities for survey-based research in Russia under current conditions, it should also be clear that we cannot just go on as we did before. We must think carefully about what research designs are most suitable in response to the increasing criminalization of dissent (Frye et al. 2022). Popular indirect questioning techniques like list experiments may help to increase the candor of survey responses (Rosenfeld, Imai, Shapiro 2016), but other recommendations of techniques old and new also follow.

At least three forms of triangulation hold promise as we seek to build confidence in our conclusions. A first form of triangulation is with other approaches to generating evidence. Researchers using survey data, should, as Morris writes in this volume, “become ‘hungry’ for more ethnography (Aronoff and Kubik 2013: 25) to triangulate their data” and shed light on “the concrete details of interaction” that produce politics locally. Of course, just as the war has impacted survey research, it has also impacted our ability to field and fund focus groups and conduct ethnographic work.

Second, one of our comparative advantages as scholars of Russia has long been the ability to triangulate patterns across multiple polls (see e.g., Zheleznova’s interview with Aleksei Titkov, 2022). Thus far, at least, the war seems to have brought more rather fewer polling entities into view in Russia. The Russia Watcher¹⁰ survey project at Princeton, for example, was launched after the invasion to collect high-frequency public opinion data from Russia. With a daily sample of 200 respondents, its high frequency allows researchers to observe how Russians react to events as they develop on the ground.

Third, we can triangulate patterns across multiple modes of interview. A large interdisciplinary literature examines the effect of survey mode on respondent candor (e.g., Weisberg 2005, Tourangeau and Yan 2007, Kays et al. 2012). Face-to-face, telephone, and online polls are all possible today in the Russian market. Ideally, as Reisinger et al. point out in this volume, “It will be vital to develop better knowledge of how survey mode influences response rates in

¹⁰ See <https://russiawatcher.com/>.

autocratic settings such as Russia” (p.11). In the near term, researchers can compare similar questions across multiple modes of administration, looking for a central tendency (i.e. consistency) in response patterns—such an approach also remains a critical validation step for increasingly popular online panels and new methods like Random Device Engagement. Growing reliance on online, as opposed to face-to-face probability-based samples raises concerns about sampling bias and respondent attentiveness, which triangulation with surveys conducted using longstanding methods that have been subjected to many decades of detailed investigation can help to address.

Yet another design choice that can help us to better understand how respondents receive and process the topics we study and questions that we wish to ask using traditional surveys is to collect additional observations from focus groups and/or cognitive interviewing (Beatty and Willis 2007). These methodologies can shed additional light on what topics are sensitive, and why.

With this knowledge in hand, it follows from the discussion above that the use of indirect methods to solicit responses to sensitive questions should become even more widespread in Russian studies.¹¹ Most prominent among these is the list experiment (also known as the Item Count Technique or ICT), but it is not the only technique that can be used to veil respondents’ sensitive attitudes and behaviors. Used alone, it may not even be the best or most reliable of available methods (for recent critiques see, e.g., Frye et al. 2022, Kramon & Weghorst 2019). In an empirical validation study of the three most popular indirect questioning techniques in political science, Rosenfeld, Imai, & Shapiro (2016) find that the list experiment does reduce response bias, but that it does so less efficiently and reduces bias less than alternatives. Moreover, if the topic is very sensitive, the inclusion of the sensitive item can distort responses to the entire list, causing the design assumptions for the technique to fail and estimates to be biased.

The advice to combine list experiments with other indirect questioning techniques is not new (Blair et al. 2014) but is seldom implemented. This approach has the advantages of both triangulation and greater precision. Given current sensitivities, it deserves our attention. Other indirect questioning techniques like randomized response (Blair et al. 2015) and endorsement experiments (Bullock 2011) do too.

A variety of survey-based techniques, still making their way from the field of psychology into the study of political psychology and authoritarianism, also hold promise. Implicit Association Tests (IATs) which measure affective, subconscious responses to stimuli have been used to gauge sensitive attitudes toward the military regime in Egypt (Truex and Tavana 2019) and the Xi’s government in China (Huang, Intawan, and Nicholson 2022). To measure individuals’ implicit attitudes (i.e. those that exist prior to deliberative thinking), the most common form of IAT uses variance in reaction time to a categorization task (Karpinski and Steinman 2006). Combined with explicit questions used in existing survey research, IAT like other indirect

¹¹ See also Andreenkova (2020) on comparatively studying the sensitivity of survey questions.

questioning techniques allow for the study of attitude dissociation (Baron and Banaji 2006; Cunningham, Preacher, and Banaji 2001; Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006, 2011), or what is more commonly called “preference falsification” in the political science literature (Kuran 1991). Another related technique, Word Association Tests (WATs), in which respondents are presented a series of cue words and asked to provide other words that come to mind as quickly as possible, have been used effectively to study sensitive opinions about the Chinese communist party (Han, Liu and Truex 2022). Implicit measures of government sentiment that emerged from research on political advertising and are based on theories of affect transfer hold similar promise (Stockman, Esarey, and Zhang 2018; Brader 2006).

“Surveys don’t show what people think, but what they are ready to say, how they are prepared to carry themselves in public,” Denis Volkov, director of the Levada Center, said shortly after the invasion.¹² Indeed, direct questioning may shed greater light on a person’s willingness to express certain views publicly than on what they privately believe. However, research designs that elicit subconscious responses to stimuli allow scholars to also investigate the deeper motivations behind attitudes and behavior.

Past as Prologue

Finally, even if opportunities to collaborate with Russian polling organizations on new survey research wither – and this is a real possibility¹³—there is always the truly massive quantity of survey data that has been collected in Russia over the past 30 years to be re-discovered and analyzed. Indeed, one consequence of the publication bias in favor of ‘original’ or author-collected data as well as the recent emphasis on experimentation has arguably been to privilege asking new questions over assembling trends.

We have perhaps lost touch with our own comparative advantage in Russian studies of having unequaled access to polls conducted over many years, including several excellent election panel surveys. With these data, we have both the ability to study change over time within a brief but critically important interval around an election as well as patterns that have evolved over decades.

The Russian Election Studies, to give just one example, have been ongoing for nearly thirty years. While the original RES Pls set out to study voting and party politics in a country that was democratizing (e.g., Colton 2000; Colton & McFaul 2003), the RES is today the longest running election study in an autocracy. Surveys such as the RES thus provide a unique angle on the study of electoral authoritarianism (Colton & Hale 2009; Frye et al. 2019). They offer the best available micro-level evidence anywhere on the consolidation of a dominant party system and

¹² See <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-do-so-many-russians-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine>.

¹³ At the time of this writing, the picture appears rather more optimistic than it did just after the start of the war and imposition of sanctions. Some collaborative survey research continues, approved by university ethics boards, and opportunities to contract with and make payment to at least some Russian partners appear to have returned.

shed light on the challenges of maintaining a majority as the popularity of that party fades (Reuter 2017; Hale 2006; Hale & Colton 2017).

Survey data, and the evidence surveys in Russia have provided on individuals' attitudes and behavior have been at the heart of many of the research programs in Russian studies that have most influenced the field of comparative politics and the study of nondemocratic regimes more broadly. The future is uncertain. But even if it becomes infeasible to do new studies for some time, there is ample work to be done in our survey archives.

Many Russia surveys are already digitized and organized in established (but not always well-known repositories). Among them: The Joint Economic and Social Data Archive (JESDA, <http://sophist.hse.ru/>), ICPSR (which includes the long running Survey of Russian Elites)¹⁴, Harvard Dataverse (which includes the RES), and The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Roper alone houses an incredible collection of Russian survey research, including historical polls such as the USIA Digital Report Collection (<https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/usia-digital-report-collection>) that trace foreign policy attitudes back to Russia's independence.

These archives provide a partial answer to how we can prepare and advise our PhD students given the “serious practical obstacles to empirical research” (Smyth in this volume) since the start of the war. For our Ph.D. students, and others hit hardest by limits on new fieldwork, much important work remains to be done in existing survey archives.

Conclusion

Given the heightened policy relevance this crisis has conferred on Russia research (Gelman in this volume, p. 2), it is imperative that we continue to produce the highest quality research amid adverse conditions. As others have suggested in this special issue, engaging with research outside of mainstream political science and incorporating more centrally methods of inquiry from other disciplines can aid us in meeting these challenges (Lankina in this volume). Even in our recent bailiwicks – in the study of public opinion, elections, protest, and voter behavior – greater interdisciplinarity and an openness to new insights and approaches from psychology, sociology, statistics, and public health can help to provide practical solutions to some of the problems we now face more acutely than ever in designing and analyzing Russian survey data.

For many of the promising lines of inquiry discussed by contributors to this volume, survey research -- whether new studies or from the archives -- is likely to be of central importance. To take just one example, it is hard to imagine the study of identity and the sources of collective belonging or perceptions of leaders and the craft of group identity formation (the line of inquiry discussed in this volume by Sharafutdinova) without the evidence that surveys supply.

¹⁴ Zimmerman, William, Rivera, Sharon Werning, and Kalinin, Kirill. Survey of Russian Elites, Moscow, Russia, 1993-2020. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor]. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03724.v7>.

An important public conversation is now transpiring about the weaponization of polling and the Kremlin's use of surveys to demobilize opposition and embolden those with extreme views who are most staunchly pro-war (Alyukov 2022, Zavadskaya 2022). That polling can be manipulated to lead rather than reflect opinion does not discredit the entire survey research enterprise. If anything, it heightens the importance of academic survey research, and the standards of transparency that it embraces.

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