

## POLLING AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE SOVIET UNION:

### INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER GASPARISHVILI

**Editor's Note:** Dr. Gasparishvili, a senior researcher at the Public Opinion Research Center of Moscow State University, is spending 1989-90 in the US. He visited the Roper Center twice in the fall of 1989. His colloquium presentation on polling and public opinion in the Soviet Union was a fascinating tour of the subject. Following that presentation, Gasparishvili sat down with the editor of *The Public Perspective*. Excerpts from the interview follow.

In the next article, J. H. Zhu, a Chinese national doing doctoral work at Indiana University, paints a very different picture of recent developments in opinion research in China. Polling as we know it can't operate in a repressive society because — as Gasparishvili observes — "You can talk about public opinion only if you don't repress individuals' views."

**Public Perspective:** To begin with, would you tell us a little about the role of public opinion in the Soviet Union? Many Americans see public opinion as a phenomenon of the western style of democracy. What is its status in your country? How is it changing?

**Gasparishvili:** First of all, when we speak about public opinion, we have in mind the existence of varying views and the possibility for different people and groups to express them without inhibition or worry about the consequences of "a wrong answer." Along with a whole range of problems, we had only a simple reflection in mass consciousness of the will of those in power—so called, the opinion of the "designated majority." Public opinion is a phenomenon which exists only in a democratic state. If you don't have democracy, you don't have public opinion either. You can talk about public opinion only if you don't repress individuals' views. So, until recently, as I see it, we didn't have public opinion. Now, though, we do have it.

**PP:** One problem that many survey organizations in the West have been having is an increasing reluctance of people to take part. Are most of the people you seek to interview cooperative? How much diffi-

culty do you have getting people to take part?

**Gasparishvili:** We don't have serious problems now, but I don't know what will happen in the near future. People participate gladly, because it is something new for them. But when it becomes old hat, they may not pay much attention to the polls and refuse to participate.

**PP:** But right now people seem excited about the possibilities.

**Gasparishvili:** Yes, because they see these questions as personal, and they want to deliver a personal opinion, and they are very proud to have this opportunity.

**PP:** What percentage of those you approach refuse to participate?

**Gasparishvili:** In telephone polls, we have about 10% refusals—consistently a very small proportion.

**PP:** Are people still reluctant to say what they really believe? Do they try to give what they think is the expected answer?

**Gasparishvili:** Today, one can get honest answers to almost all questions.

**PP:** Really? There must still be sensitive areas. There certainly are in the United States—plenty of them. How about the role of the Communist Party? Or, the possibility of having opposing parties? How would those subjects be greeted among a general public?

**Gasparishvili:** Maybe there was some exaggeration on my part. Speaking about "honest answers to almost all questions," I meant that the biggest part of our population is no longer shy about expressing its opinions. The opportunity now exists to conduct reliable polls on a very wide array of issues. As for a multi-party system, that is being publically debated anyway. By the way, we recently conducted a poll on the attitudes of students and faculty at Moscow University towards the Democratic Union. This organization considers itself a party.

**PP:** What kinds of survey work does your center do?

**Gasparishvili:** We conduct polls mainly for newspapers and magazines—among them, *Moscow News*. We have published our data in two popular magazines—*Lunost (Youth)* and *Druzhiba Narodov (Friendship of Nations, or Nationalities)*. When we do reader surveys for a newspaper, the typical number of respondents is 2,000. When we do telephone polls, about 1,000.

**PP:** When *Moscow News* or some other paper wants a survey, do they come to you with only general ideas that they want you to explore, or with very specific questions they want asked? Who determines how questions are framed? Who determines what gets published?

**Gasparishvili:** Sometimes a newspaper or magazine wants to know the opinion of its readership. They ask us to make a questionnaire for them. Sometimes they suggest questions, but only as general topics. We develop the questionnaire, and our word is final. And we write up the results.

**PP:** Are you able to do telephone surveys? How much of the population has telephones?

**Gasparishvili:** It depends on the city. In some cities like Moscow, Lenigrad, and Kiev, the percentage of telephone owners is high—70% to 80%. But in small towns, the percentage of owners is typically 40% or less, and satisfactory telephone polling is simply impossible.

**PP:** Your center is based at Moscow State University. Does this affiliation help in getting people to take part in surveys?

**Gasparishvili:** I think it is a real advantage with respondents for us to be affiliated with Moscow State University, because the University enjoys high prestige. Besides this, the University has good scientists in different fields, and we can enlist their specialized help. Also the University has one of the biggest computer centers in the Soviet Union.

**PP:** Describe the use of survey research by policymakers in the USSR.

**Gasparishvili:** That's a difficult question. We don't have the tradition of using such results in our governmental decisions. We are just starting in this field. As for my center, we publish our results in newspapers and in magazines, and then really don't know much about the attention paid to them. The one thing I am sure of is that the general public

needs to have information about their society.

**PP:** So in terms of your involvement, it's just education.

**Gasparishvili:** Yes, but the public must have this education.

**PP:** What research has been done on attitudes of nationalities in the Soviet Union?

**Gasparishvili:** Again, that's not easy to answer. Unfortunately, there aren't such archives of survey data in the Soviet Union as you have at the Roper Center. Therefore, it's difficult to be well-informed about polls conducted on this or that subject. As far as I know, there haven't been many surveys on the nationalities problem in recent years. The main work I know of was conducted by the Institute of Sociology, the Academy of Political Science, and by a research group at Minsk University. My center prepared a questionnaire on this subject for the *Druzhiba Narodov*—a magazine very popular among all Soviet nationalities.

**PP:** When you visited the Roper Center earlier in the fall, you referred to the popularity of various political figures in the Soviet Union — Gorbachev, of course, but also, for example, Boris Yeltsen. I think you said that Yeltsen was very well known and popular outside Moscow—in the country at large. Is this correct?

**Gasparishvili:** Yes. At one time Yeltsen was popular in Moscow but not so in other parts of the country, but now he has become popular throughout. There are surveys that confirmed this; however, I don't know his current popularity rating.

**PP:** What about Gorbachev himself? Are there data that allow one to describe how different groups evaluate him: young vs. old; people in different occupations; those in different sections of the country?

**Gasparishvili:** Yes, it's possible. The Center for Public Opinion Research, attached to the Academy of Social Science has, for instance, conducted such polls on the popularity of various Soviet political leaders, including Gorbachev.

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