

CHALLENGES TO POLLING IN EASTERN EUROPE

By Mary E. McIntosh and Ronald H. Hinckley

The fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Empire have brought enormous changes to the people of eastern Europe. Joining the new politics and new economics of the region is the phenomenon of public opinion polls. One cannot pick up a major newspaper or journal in the region without seeing one or more polls being cited. As in the West, these publicly reported polls are only the tip of the iceberg. The United States Information Agency (USIA) alone has commissioned 29 surveys in the region in the last three years on a wide range of topics covering everything from foreign policy to domestic issues to personal values. Our experience indicates that the quest for reliable east European survey data has often taken a path as byzantine as the region's pursuit of democratic politics and free markets.

Polling in the "Old" Days

The best way to appreciate the current polling environment in Eastern Europe is to look briefly at polling prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989. Polling was conducted under the communists, but the type and quality of survey work was highly variable. At its most extreme the interests of the Party and the people were deemed identical, so polling was decreed unnecessary. Some remnants of this notion persisted until recently. An Albanian sociologist explained to us that he had attempted to publish a survey research book just before the former regime collapsed, but was refused permission because he suggested in the manuscript that interviews should be anonymous. "Our socialist citizen does not have ideas to hide," opined the government official who found the document unfit for publication.

Most surveys conducted before the revolutions of 1989 focused on non-political topics such as media use, or youth

and worker attitudes. When surveys on political topics were conducted, they were often limited to internal (party) distribution. Only in times of political reform, such as in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or in Poland in the early 1980s, were pollsters encouraged to ask probing political questions. Also, samples were often ones of extreme convenience. A Bulgarian sociologist described the major surveys conducted in his country as dinosaurs. They had large bodies (often more than 10,000 people were interviewed) but small brains, since, according to him, little attention was paid to the selection of the respondents, questionnaire construction, or data analysis.

Early Problems

It is against this background that USIA started polling in the region in spring 1989. We were quite concerned about this new venture, and our fears were not unfounded. In the process of sponsoring these first polls, we learned there was often a big difference between what we were told would be done and the actual execution of the survey.

Many of these differences were due to misunderstandings of terms and the lack of exposure to western polling methods. "Probability sampling" often meant that there was a very high probability the interviewer would interview friends, family, or neighbors. Moreover, there was an equally high probability that the interviewer was a long-time loyal supporter of the former communist government. In some cases, face-to-face interviews meant self-completion of the questionnaire. Ideas like making three call-backs before making a replacement in the sample, checks on whether the interviews were actually performed, translation of the questionnaire into the minority as well as the dominate language, a complete briefing for interviewers, and double entry of the

data, were often new ideas—and too often rejected as unnecessary.

Building the Necessary Base

It was apparent that to do quality work in the region, USIA would have to invest resources to train people. We began searching for those who had some academic training as well as personal experience in survey research. We wanted people who were open to conducting polls by western standards, and who did not have a political agenda — either for the old or the new governments in the region. Many of those at the state research institutes, where polling had been conducted previously, were slow to change their ways. But we also found that some of the new pollsters were overly zealous in using data to promote the interests of the new governments, often at the expense of presenting a balanced look at public opinion.

We were successful in identifying some researchers who were ready to strike out on their own. For example, in Czechoslovakia we had met a young academic who was working part time at the state research institute and who was also conducting his own poll on attitudes toward the political changes that were occurring. It became clear that, although he had never had an opportunity to conduct a nationwide poll, he understood the principles involved. We offered him the contract to do our spring 1990 survey in Czechoslovakia. Though very hesitant to take the risk, he finally agreed. Later, he formed the first private polling firm in Czechoslovakia and is now doing a booming business with domestic and foreign clients.

In other countries it wasn't as easy. We often had to work with a couple of groups before we found one that suited us. In some countries we still have not found

a group that can handle all phases of the survey. Consequently, we have had to subcontract various pieces of the work. One group is hired to translate the questionnaire, another to conduct the interviews, and yet another for data processing. Out of necessity, we work very closely with our contractors, with on-site monitoring of all phases of a survey.

In some countries we have run into another problem that is similar to those faced in the changing political and economic system. Some of the old polling institutions have persisted under new names, populated by old faces with old ideas and heavily subsidized by the state. This has embittered the new pollsters, who claim that many of the people who profited under the old order are now advantaged under the new system. These state-owned polling firms can and do undercut the prices of the private firms, because the state already pays the salaries of their staff and the rent on their facilities. This puts new private survey organizations at a tremendous disadvantage.

A Never-Ending Adventure

While the previously mentioned experiences made polling in Eastern Europe extremely challenging, they were not unexpected. However, three years of working in the region has also brought us many unforeseen problems. Power outages have resulted in a day's data processing being lost. Inadequate transportation systems in many countries often make it impossible to get to rural areas. In Albania, for example, we were offered the choice of riding a mule or going miles by foot to conduct interviews in many rural areas. Then, there is the telephone system.

It is generally understood that low phone penetration rates make telephone surveys useless for most research efforts. But we also learned that this also makes communicating with our contractors exceedingly difficult, and makes monitoring the field work nearly impossible. Polish pollsters joke that half their countrymen are waiting for a phone, while the other half are waiting for a dial tone. In Moldova, one has to book an international

call 24 hours in advance, and then one has no control over the exact time the line will be available. Our bedrooms have become an extension of our offices; we regularly receive calls at all times of the day or night, even at 2 am in Washington.

In some countries the shortage of paper makes it impossible to print questionnaires. We printed the questionnaire for our last Albanian survey in Washington and sent it to Tirana by diplomatic pouch. Even when paper is available, typewriter ribbons or ink for the copy machines are often not. Some pollsters in the region have adopted the practice of making just one copy of the questionnaire for each interviewer and then instructing the interviewer to record the responses on a separate sheet of paper. While this is a creative solution, we find it too error prone.

We have had problems with chickens, too. It was a wintery day in rural Poland when an interviewer was conducting a poll with an elderly woman. Unwittingly, he had failed to close the front door completely. Within minutes, the room was filled with chickens seeking warmth. The respondent's rage over the carelessness of the interviewer culminated in his being out in the cold, not to mention short a completed interview.

The Public's Response

We were initially concerned about whether publics would be willing to express their opinions after so many years of living in a closed society. We adopted a combination of standard methods to try to address this issue. We asked interviewers if they thought each respondent was being truthful. Most did, most of the time. Consistent with findings in surveys worldwide, responses to questions about demographics and political behavior proved to be the two areas where most thought the respondent was not fully honest. As another measure of willingness to express their opinion, respondents were asked if they thought their neighbors and friends would feel comfortable expressing their political views in public. Most indicated they did. We also asked about confidence in a fictional person in a set of questions

about political figures. Just one in ten expressed an opinion about this non-existent figure, which suggests that relatively few felt pressured to give an opinion when they did not have one.

Initially, response rates were not a problem: They were high, around 90%. But they have dropped over the last three years to about 80% and, based on present trends, are likely to continue to drop. We find that a disproportionately large percentage of old people refuse to be interviewed, and we have trouble reaching young men. Also, people are working more now and crime has increased dramatically, making it more difficult to obtain interviews, especially in urban areas.

We speculate that another reason it is more difficult to conduct interviews is the proliferation of polls of questionable quality. In Moldova recently, a major newspaper ran a half-page article about polling. The sociologist who wrote it quoted the Moldovan Sociological Association, which quoted the Romanian Sociological Association, which quoted the American Sociological Association about the ethics of survey research. The article emphasized the importance of informing the public about how polls are conducted and of distinguishing between scientific and unscientific polls. It clearly warned pollsters and journalists that polling would fall into disrepute if they did not follow ethical practices.

What Have We Learned Substantively?

Despite all of these challenges, we believe that through careful question construction, training, and supervision, it is possible to obtain reliable data in eastern Europe. and we at USIA have begun to see the fruits. In early 1990, for example, we found that most east Europeans thought they would quickly join the West. Publics knew the transition would be difficult but believed it would not radically affect their standard of living. As reality began to set in, however, public jubilation began to whither.

Over the last two and a half years, public discontent has been growing rela-

tive to almost all key political and economic indicators. Overall, majorities of east Europeans say both their life in general and the economic situation in particular are worse now than under communism. Still, there isn't longing for the return of communist rule. Majorities say the present political system is better than the former communist one.

A key to understanding the public's growing disillusionment is knowing what kind of society people want. In particular we are interested in how committed east European publics are to democracy and to a society based on individual responsibility and opportunity. We have found that publics support democratic values, but that they define democracy mainly in economic rather than political terms.

A central issue is the relationship between the individual and the state. Tension exists between those who do not want to give up the security and stability provided by the state to which they were accustomed, and those who want greater individual freedom and responsibility even though it entails uncertainty and risk. To examine this issue, we created what we call a "preferred society" scale. At one end of the scale are those who welcome an "individual opportunities" society, while at the other end of the scale are those who prefer a "state guarantees" system.

We have found that people in some countries tend to cluster on the opportunities end (the Czech lands and Poland), others are split fairly evenly along the

continuum (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary), and one clusters solidly in the state guarantees camp (Romania). Education is the best predictor of whether one supports a state guarantees or individual opportunities society. The higher the level of educational attainment, the more likely one is to favor the latter.

Our data suggest that if severe economic hardship continues to plague east Europeans over the next several years, it is possible that many may be tempted by promises of economic security at the price of some democratic freedoms. Though it is unlikely that publics will want to reestablish the old order, they may opt for a form of society closer to a state guarantee system than to an individual opportunity society.

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