The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Why the Kremlin Hates the Levada Center

By Daniel Treisman

May 23, 2013



The older undemocratic regimes become, the more mistakes their leaders tend to make. Cutting themselves off from accurate information is one of the most common — and most self-destructive.

This problem became particularly relevant earlier this week, when Lev Gudkov — the director of the Levada Center, Russia's preeminent independent polling agency — said he feared he may have to shut down operations amid a government crackdown on nongovernmental organizations. Prosecutors warned Levada that it must register with the Justice Ministry as a "foreign agent."

Since it was founded in 1987, originally as the All-Union Public Opinion Research Center, the Levada Center has conducted the country's most credible surveys on social and political topics. It is known around the world for its objectivity and professionalism.

As a Western scholar who publishes articles on Russian public opinion, I am often asked how

one can trust the available polling data. Levada's reputation is usually enough to satisfy questioners.

Even if Levada were to register as a "foreign agent," this wouldn't save it. The Kremlin's goal is to eradicate the top independent polling agency.

Now, prosecutors have ruled that the Levada Center's posting of poll results and analyses constitutes "political activity" because they "influence public opinion." Under a law passed last July, organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in activity deemed political must register as "foreign agents," a label that is synonymous with spies and calculated to evoke fear and distrust among ordinary Russians.

Since less than 3 percent of the Levada Center's budget comes from foreign sources, according to Gudkov, renouncing these grants might seem an easy solution. But that misses the point. The prosecutors' attack is already casting a shadow over Levada's work. Such investigations threaten to scare away the polling center's Russia-based clients, whose contracts make up the other 97 percent of the budget. And poll respondents will not be so eager to answer sensitive questions next time the "foreign agent" comes knocking at the door.

Even if Levada were to comply and register as a "foreign agent," which is understandably out of the question for Gudkov and his colleagues, this would certainly not end the center's troubles. If organizations are out of favor with the Kremlin, the authorities will find other pretexts to shut them down. The goal is not to end foreign dependence so much as to eradicate independence.

It is unclear whether Levada was targeted on direct orders from above or merely fell victim to the broader campaign by law enforcement agents to scare and disrupt the modern, globally connected civil society that President Vladimir Putin now considers his enemy. Either way, the Kremlin itself will be among the victims if Levada closes.

Surprisingly often, authoritarian governments collapse less because of well-organized opposition than because of their own errors. Overconfident and misinformed, leaders stumble into danger and lack the skill and vision to get out.

Consider Chile, where in 1988, General Augusto Pinochet, the country's military-appointed president of 14 years, called a referendum asking the public to authorize him to rule for eight more. Having restored order and prosperity after the chaotic Salvador Allende presidency, he could not imagine how he could lose.

But lose he did. As the results came in, aides found Pinochet "stunned and enraged ... raving that he had been betrayed by his advisers and outflanked by his enemies," in the words of the writers Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela. Although Pinochet tried to persuade his military colleagues to overturn the result by force, the vote had undermined his authority. The other generals refused.

Another example occurred when the Argentine military dictator Alejandro Lanusse called an election in 1973, confident his candidate would triumph. In opinion polls taken just days before the ballot, fewer than 40 percent said they would support the candidate backed by the exiled populist leader Juan Peron. In fact, the Peronist candidate surged to victory.

Why is it so hard for authoritarian leaders to accurately discern public opinion and act accordingly? The explanation lies in the information bubble in which they isolate themselves.

Over time, even leaders who start out open-minded grow accustomed to flattery and servility. Contradicting the boss becomes dangerous. Reports from the ruler's advisers are tweaked to match his preconceptions and to make him look good.

As authority is concentrated at the top, controlling the upward flow of information becomes a source of power for those lower down. Competing for approval, advisers slander each other and deflect criticism at external "enemies." The general public gets more difficult to read.

Even those who manipulate elections need accurate information about public opinion. If they are overconfident, they may manipulate too little, as in the case of Pinochet. If they manipulate too much, they risk provoking popular outrage.

In Russia, two other pollsters — the Public Opinion Foundation, or FOM, and the All-Russian Public Opinion Center, or VTsIOM — generally do respectable work. But their frequent contracts for the Kremlin raise questions for some observers.

At present, Levada serves as an anchor. If the results of other pollsters drift too far in the Kremlin's favor, they risk losing their reputation. Were there no Levada Center, even Putin's political operatives would have to wonder whether the friendly pollsters were slanting results to ingratiate themselves.

Conversely, when Levada polls show, as they have consistently, that more than 50 percent of Russians approve of Putin's actions, this is believable. The fact that Levada predicted a vote of more than 60 percent for Putin in the 2012 presidential election did more to legitimize his return to the Kremlin than any glitzy inauguration.

Shooting the messenger seems peculiar given that many of the messages these days are just what the Kremlin would like to hear. For example, Levada has documented a fall in the readiness of Russians to participate in protests and low popularity levels for all potential opposition leaders.

Ironically, one of the most recent Levada polls found that a majority of Russians favor "tough sanctions," including liquidation for organizations that violate the "foreign agent" law. The authorities could clearly force the Levada Center to close without antagonizing Putin's electorate in the provinces.

But that would be a mistake — not just for Russia, but also for the Kremlin itself.

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