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Why Navalny's Allies Overestimate Europeans' Support for Putin

By Roni Greenfield

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People take part in a Ukraine peace rally in Berlin. Activists call to stop sending weapons to Ukraine and negotiate. **Kristina Zorkina / TASS**

Ahead of the three-year anniversary of the attempted assassination of Alexei Navalny, the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) released the results of a survey analyzing attitudes to President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine in France and Germany.

The researchers discovered a surprisingly high level of pro-Russian sentiment. According to the survey, published on Aug. 15, in both countries more people have a "rather positive" view of Putin than a "rather negative." In France, 43% view Putin positively, with just 35% registering a negative answer. In Germany, the result was 35% and 34% respectively.

They also found that 32% of Germans would agree Putin is a "strong leader." Only a third would call him a "killer," and even fewer would consider attending an anti-Putin rally under that slogan. Most shockingly, in both countries, when asked who started the war in Ukraine,

respondents were more likely to blame the United States than Putin.

The FBK team believes these results have far-reaching implications. It seems to confirm that Kremlin narratives are much more popular in the West than currently thought. "He [Putin] hopes to flip public opinion in Europe undermining his support for Ukraine. And, as you have seen, he has reason to believe in his strategy," Navalny's longtime aide and former FBK head Leonid Volkov said.

The results are especially surprising because they paint a completely different picture from almost every other piece of research on the topic. Citizens of France and Germany are regularly polled on the same and similar issues, and the results from a diverse range of reliable pollsters contradict the FBK findings.

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A recent poll by Civey found that over 60% of Germans think Putin is a threat to their country. Another opinion poll by the Institut Français d'opinion Publique in June 2023 found that German and French citizens overwhelmingly have a negative view of Russia. Among German responders, only 21% had a positive view, and the number in France was even lower at 15%.

An overwhelming majority support aiding Ukraine with weapons and blame Russia for the war. Finally, a comprehensive study by the Pew Research Center confirms this trend — 86% of Germans and 82% of French citizens have an unfavorable view of Russia, with around 50% of all responders opting for "very unfavorable."

What might explain such a significant discrepancy with the FBK survey, which found a diametrically opposite result? This is likely explained by significant flaws in several key aspects of FBK's methodology. Volkov refused to disclose their methodology in detail, but even the publicly available information is enough to conclude that their survey was bound to produce extremely unreliable results.

First, FBK's surveys used relatively small sample sizes. Ranging between 554 to 800, they are approximately three times smaller than alternative polls. While this alone isn't a deal-breaker, it leads to a higher margin of error, meaning results are less accurate.

Furthermore, the ambiguous phrasing of the questions themselves makes it hard to draw reliable conclusions. For example, FBK finds that few people would call Putin a killer. However, the answer in each case would depend on the interpretation of the word "killer" — which could mean a person who has killed someone with their own hands, directly ordered for someone to be killed or is complicit in killings. Likewise, those who agree Putin is a "strong leader" don't necessarily condone his actions, but may be making a morally neutral observation.

Another problem is sample selection. Professional pollsters try to ensure that their sample is as random as possible, usually conducting surveys by phone. FBK opted for an online survey. The webform was randomly advertised using internet algorithms, leading to self-selection bias, as those who had particularly strong opinions were much more likely to participate in the survey, thus skewing the sample.

Web surveys are also prone to a "snowball effect," where people with an interest in a topic share the survey with their friends, or others with similar interests, who then share it themselves. This distorts the sample even further in favor of people with strong interests and opinions. As a result, the sample FBK used is almost certainly quite skewed, leading to inaccurate results.

But even the most carefully picked sample isn't perfect. This is why reputable pollsters weigh their samples by multiple factors which could influence a person's response. The FBK study only employs quotas by age and gender. For the results to be properly representative, FBK would have to also weigh by geographical region, political affiliation, income and education, and ideally at least a few other key parameters. Without that, it's impossible to say, for example, if the sample overrepresented far-right AfD supporters, or underrepresented university graduates. Unfortunately, this lack of proper weighting effectively renders the result completely meaningless.

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Volkov and members of FBK defend their findings. They also examined attitudes in Lithuania, arguing that their results are in line with what other polling has shown. Furthermore, they claim that the same technique was already successfully tested to predict the result of the recent Turkish elections. While they did correctly predict Erdogan's re-election, this does not address the very serious issues with their approach.

Ultimately, it is almost certain that FBK's survey methodology is extremely flawed, and as a result, it widely exaggerates the effectiveness of Russian propaganda. It is hard to disagree with Volkov's conclusion that Western governments must do more to combat pro-Russian narratives. But we need reliable data to design policies that do that.

FBK does incredibly important and often dangerous work. They shouldn't risk undermining their hard-earned credibility by trying to make a point with numbers that don't hold up to scrutiny.

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