

World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR)
Ad Hoc Committee Report: Review of allegations concerning IISEPS data fabrication

November 22, 2016

On August 17, 2016, Dr. Oleg Manaev, president of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), an organization conducting surveys in Belarus, contacted WAPOR regarding allegations of data fabrication made against his organization in a program aired on Belarus Television on August 1, 2016 (<http://www.belta.by/society/view/eksperty-o-nisepi-fabrika-podloga-203967-2016>).

To investigate these allegations, the WAPOR Council set up an ad-hoc committee comprising four survey research and polling experts, including three members of the Council:

- Tamas Bodor, Chair of the WAPOR Membership Committee
- Claire Durand, Vice President and President-Elect of WAPOR
- Timothy Johnson, Chair of the WAPOR Standards Committee
- Eugene Kritski, who is a long-time member of WAPOR and a native Russian speaker

A synthesis of the allegations made in the program was prepared. One type of allegations concerned information IISEPS provided about its coordinates – the address of its offices, for example -- and some financial information. The second type pertained to WAPOR's main interests, i.e., data fabrication by interviewers, missing or inadequate information on aspects of fieldwork (for instance, interviewers' identification, routes, and response rates). This report focuses on the latter type of allegations.

Checking for data fabrication can include checking for a high proportion of duplicates or incoherent answers to key questions. In addition, investigating whether question wording is biased and validating the results against external data also shed light on the possibility of data fabrication.

To examine the possibility of interviewer fraud, the Committee asked Dr. Manaev to provide a data file of a survey conducted during the period when data fabrication allegedly occurred and to include interviewers' IDs in the file. Committee member Kritski checked this file for the presence of duplicates by interviewer. He found indications of data fabrication from one or two interviewers. On a sample of 1,500 respondents, about 50 to 60 records (3%-4%) seem to be duplicates. This level is considered to be within tolerable limits and not abnormal in surveys conducted face to face. These data records could either be investigated further or be deleted from the file. Since the record contains no information regarding the identity of the supervisors, it is impossible to determine whether specific supervisors are more responsible than others. In addition, Dr. Kritski examined tabulations of key variables and concluded that between 5% and 8% of the respondents gave inconsistent answers; but again, this situation is at a tolerable and quite usual level.

Dr. Kritski also examined the questionnaire used and concluded that the questions were well-worded and neutral. Finally, he examined the trend results that are published on IISEPS's website. These trends appear to be supported by the data at hand and do not seem to be outliers compared to what is known or expected in the Belarus context.

The Committee also contacted two scholars – Dr. David Rotman and Dr. Christian Haerpfer – who were interviewed in the Belarus TV program, scholars which were presented in a way that may have led viewers to believe that they were criticizing IISEPS’ work. These researchers were in fact interviewed about survey methodology in general. They did not know that their interview would be used in the context of this program and linked to allegations related to IISEPS’s work.

Finally, the Committee asked Dr. Manaev to provide information on the procedures that are in place to control for data quality. According to Dr. Manaev, IISEPS engages in the following measures of quality control: control of interviewers’ work, i.e., control of filters in the questionnaires; control of the adequate execution of instructions, of route sheets and of closing statements by regional supervisors and network managers; spot-checks (up to 10%) of the conducted interviews, involving telephone calls or second visits by supervisors or third parties; logical control of the aggregated results; and data reweighting. These means did not allow for the detection of these small levels of possible data fabrication (less than 5% of duplicates).

Conclusion

In examining the available information, the Committee uncovered no evidence of data fabrication that would have been orchestrated by IISEPS. However, allegations such as those against IISEPS highlight the need to document how opinions polls are conducted. The Committee wants to stress that the more sensitive the situation, the more important the documentation relative to the methodology used. As requested by WAPOR’s Code of Ethics, Article 20 (see Appendix 1), all researchers and pollsters need to safeguard their work and insure that all operations have been conducted properly and double-checked. They should keep detailed information on the work of supervisors and interviewers, including information on sample members, contacts that are made and their results, refusal rates and response rates, etc.

The Committee wants to reiterate WAPOR’s commitment to the freedom to conduct and publish opinion polls. Criticisms lodged against opinion polling as such and against polling methodology should not prevent the conduct and publication of public opinion polls. On the contrary, it is through open transparency of methods and procedures that polling and public opinion research can provide their greatest service to the public.

Appendix 1. Article 20 of WAPOR's code of ethics

20. Every complete report on a study should contain an adequate explanation of the following relevant points:

- (a) for whom the study was conducted and by whom it was carried out;
- (b) the purpose of the study;
- (c) the universe or population to which the results of the study are projected;
- (d) the method by which the sample was selected, including the type of sample (probability, quota, etc.), the specific procedures by which it was selected and the actual size of the sample;
- (e) the degree of success in actually carrying out the sample design, including the rate of non-response and how it was calculated or a comparison of the size and characteristics of the actual and anticipated sample;
- (f) a description of estimating procedures (if any) and/or weighting procedures used to adjust raw data;
- (g) a full description of the method employed in the study;
- (h) the time at which the study was done, and the time span covered in collecting data;
- (i) a copy or printout of the questionnaire, interview schedule or other data collection instrument(s) including instructions.
- (j) which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than the whole sample;
- (k) a description of the precision of the findings, including, if applicable, estimates of sampling error.