How to manage public opinion: theoretical and applied tasks of the sociology of public opinion

Viktor Burko*

Perm National Research Polytechnic University, 29, Komsomolski Prospekt, Perm, 614990, Russia

Abstract. The article deals with theoretical and applied problems that exist today in the field of interaction between government bodies and public opinion. At the end of the last century, the existence of the sociology of public opinion was questioned by many Russian sociologists, who considered public opinion to be a kind of state of public consciousness that did not have specific scientific categories. Such a theoretical paradigm made it difficult to find ways to effectively interact with public opinion. At the same time, many problems of the sociology of public opinion about which the many authors spoke at one time still exist today. In particular, the problem of determining the role and place of the subject of public opinion remains important, especially in the field of interaction between power, management structures and the population. Today, in the era of digital communication, the importance of an innovative approach to building a representative sample is growing, when surveys are increasingly conducted online and the results of such a survey cannot always serve as the basis for making effective management decisions. And, finally, there remains an important problem of improving the professionalism of public opinion researchers (pollsters) working in the fields of both political and industrial marketing. The author makes an attempt to draw the attention of management specialists to the need to take these problems into account in cooperation with specialists representing the field of sociology of public opinion.

1 Introduction to the problematic

In the ordinary consciousness of the inhabitants of Russia, the concept of *public opinion* has long been associated with sociology and sociological polls. This is both good and bad.

Good, because more than 30 years ago the words *sociologist* and *sociological* sounded exotic in the speech of Russians. And now these concepts have become familiar to the majority of the population.

But this is also bad, because the study of public opinion is not the study of all the processes taking place in society, which sociology has been doing for over 200 years and having accumulated a rich arsenal of knowledge about society. Another negative side of the confusion between the concepts of *public opinion research* and *sociology* is that the process of studying public opinion is seen by many only as conducting a population survey on topics of interest only to a sociologist or the customer of such a survey. Although, in fact, professional preparation and conduct of a public opinion poll requires knowledge of both theoretical and applied aspects of the sociology of public opinion. Without this knowledge, it is impossible to professionally compose a survey questionnaire to study **public opinion**, build an accurate (in terms of quality and number of respondents) sample for conducting a survey, prepare interviewers (questionnaires), conduct the survey itself and, finally, correctly process the results. At the same time, we do not belittle the dignity

of specialists who specialize only in conducting mass polls (by the way, abroad they are more often called not sociologists, but *pollsters*. Highly professional pollsters are specialists who provide great assistance to politicians, businessmen and scientists. However, in our opinion, if a good sociologist can become a good pollster, then even a highly professional pollster cannot always be a good sociologist.

The existence of the sociology of public opinion as a branch of sociology is still a subject of discussion among sociologists, many of whom consider public opinion to be only one of the forms of public consciousness. From our point of view, the sociology of public opinion has every reason to be considered a special section of sociology along with the sociology of labor, education, etc., since it has its own field, object and subject, about which one of the begetters of the study of public opinion in Russia, B.A. Grushin [1]. We can also refer to the opinion of another well-known Russian sociologist Yu.A. Levada, who, like B.A. Grushin, was among the organizers of the All-Union (now - Russian Public Opinion Research Center - VCIOM). Yu.A. Levada, in one of his public lectures on the website Polit.ru, called the study of public opinion “lesser sociology” [2].

The main thing that distinguishes a professional sociologist from a pollster is an understanding of the nature of the phenomenon of public opinion. This is how, for example, A.A. Osolon, who successfully combined both professions in one person—pollster and sociologist: “... If you think about it, the concept

* Corresponding author: victor-burko@yandex.ru

of “public opinion” turns out to be not so simple. On the one hand, it implies heterogeneity, mosaicism, since it combines the opinions of many people (“how many men, so many minds”). On the other hand, public opinion can exert pressure as if it were the will of some special and very influential instance (would B.N. Yeltsin have gone into early retirement without the influence of public opinion?)” [3].

In one of his articles, B.A. Grushin stated about two fundamentally different approaches to the study of public opinion—**traditional and sociological** [4]. The first approach involves the study of public opinion at the level of the operational consciousness of the population (probes aimed at studying the changing problems of politics, economics, culture, etc.). The second approach aims to fix some stable relations in the mass consciousness that influence the formation of public opinion on a particular problem.

The history of Soviet and Russian sociology developed in such a way that Russian sociologists during the existence of the USSR paid the greatest attention in their research and scientific and practical developments to the second, in Grushin's terminology, sociological approach. The traditional approach to the study of public opinion was widely developed in Russia only in the late 1980s after the formation of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) and the formation of numerous services for the study of public opinion in various regions of Russia [5,6]. Although the first large-scale developments in the sociology of public opinion began in the USSR back in the 60s, they were mainly of a fragmentary-sectoral or search nature. It is hardly legitimate to speak about the massive use of the results of public opinion polls in the system of political administration.

The appearance in the media of the results of all-Union and then all-Russian polls, the participation of sociologists in election campaigns of various scales, and the development of the sociology of marketing have exacerbated the problem of the place and role of the sociology of public opinion in political processes. This is especially true of those sociologists who began to actively engage in public opinion polls.

An effective solution to this problem is hampered by the presence of the following negative factors. First of all, this is the absence of fundamental scientific and methodological works on the sociology of public opinion. Over the past 30 years, only two works by domestic researchers of public opinion have appeared in Russia, in which the subject of this branch of sociology is thoroughly and deeply analyzed: the works of M.K. Gorshkov and D.P. Gavra [6, 7]. For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that in the same period in the Russian sociological scientific journalism, several periodicals appeared, in which scientific and applied problems of the study of public opinion are considered [8, 9, 10]. Another serious reason that impedes the effective use of the results of public opinion research in the practice of social management is the sociological illiteracy of the “users” of public opinion. And although the situation here has begun to change in recent years, it seems that cardinal changes are not coming that early.

And, finally, one cannot but reckon with such an important factor as the current state of Russian society, which is characterized by the instability of social, economic and political processes. Discussing the epistemological aspects of public opinion on the website of the Public Opinion Foundation club in the early 2000s, B.A. Grushin wrote: “I must say that in connection with my birthday, it's scary to say, on my 75th birthday, the Levada Center on its Internet site addressed me with a message, which, among other things, included the following words: “Boris Andreevich once wrote in his hearts that there is no public opinion in this country, but it was he who did almost more than anyone else to ensure that this public opinion exists.” Thank you, of course, for such a high assessment of my work, but I would like to object. Boris Andreevich wrote this not in his hearts, but, as they say, of sound mind and firm memory. At the same time, I formulated two maxims: in the affirmative form “Not every poll of the population is a poll of public opinion itself” and in the interrogative form “What do we really study when we think or pretend that we are studying public opinion?” In this regard, I would like to turn to the questions of Viktor Aleksandrovich Burko and partly Nikolai Katsuk regarding the place in social knowledge, in sociology, of the so-called population polls. **The fact is that population surveys are an independent branch of social knowledge that does not coincide with sociology. It arises at the junction of sociology proper, social psychology, demography, mathematics and a number of other sciences** (highlighted by myself, V. Burko). It is instrumental in nature and provides a solution to all sorts of purely pragmatic tasks in the field of politics, economics, culture, etc. **On the other hand, the study of public opinion as one of the modes of mass, I emphasize, not public, but mass consciousness is carried out not only in the form of polls and is a section of sociology or social philosophy, along with other sections: the sociology of the family, politics, etc.**” (highlighted by V. B.) [11].

All of the above obliges us to turn to the main scientific categories of the sociology of public opinion: its nature, object, subject, structure and functions.

2 Methods of Research

The work uses general scientific methods of dialectics, analysis, synthesis, analogies, as well as elements of the theory of comparative analysis. Also, the method of analysis of documents (texts) presented in monographs of the pioneers of public opinion research in Russia was used, and content analysis of speeches in the media by pollsters, representatives of domestic public opinion research services.

3 Results and Discussion

The subject of the sociology of public opinion, definition. Discussions about the subject of the sociology of public opinion are central to the debate between sociologists and pollsters. The recently

published work of G.B. Yudin contains an assertion that “sociological science does not engage in public opinion research and, moreover, regularly sharply criticizes such research” [12]. Statements of this kind among domestic sociologists were cited even at the time of the beginning of the practice of polls in the USSR, i.e. from the middle of the XX century and, as we can see, they take place in today's discourse. Particularly active discussions about the subject of sociology of public opinion were conducted among Soviet sociologists in the 60s and 70s, when such prominent sociologists as B.A. Grushin, A.K. Uledov, Yu. Vooglaid, V.S. Korobeynikov, V.A. Mansurov, M.K. Gorshkov and others. A peculiar result of those discussions on the subject of this branch of sociology was summed up by D.P. Gavra in his monograph [7]. The author examines the subject of sociology of public opinion from three sides: epistemological, sociological and ontological. If we generalize these three approaches to the nature of public opinion, then we can formulate the definition of the subject of public opinion as follows: **public opinion is an interested-value evaluative attitude (activity) of a social subject to information-accessible, debatable, information-accessible objects that affect his interest, functioning in the spiritual or spiritual-practical form. Public opinion is a specific social institution that ensures the inclusion of this activity in the processes of social regulation, playing a special role in this system, having its own functions and the nature of interaction with other institutions, capable of functioning in all spheres of the society** [7].

The object of public opinion is the discussion of approaches. Among the categories considered in this section, the category of the object of public opinion appeals to sociologists the least discussion. Even in his monograph “Opinion about the World and the World of Opinions”, which is basic for our presentation, B.A. Grushin very deeply and thoroughly examined the concept of an object of public opinion and formulated the main approaches that allow the researcher to single out among the many facts, events, phenomena and processes that surround us, those that can be called objects of public opinion, as opposed to simply objects of attention of a social researcher. Grushin, summarizing the approaches of his colleagues in the field, formulated the following criteria for attributing an object of public opinion: public interest, discussion and competence. These criteria did not cause much discussion among Russian researchers of public opinion. We only note that later in his work, which was discussed above, D. Gavra proposed to clarify the formulation of the third of the named criteria, proposing to name its information accessibility, which is more consistent with the characteristics of the object of public opinion as opposed to the subject.

Who can be the subject of public opinion? This category has caused, perhaps, the greatest controversy and discussion among sociologists specializing in the study of public opinion. The reason for this is the existence of public opinion not only in the field of sociology as a science, but also, mainly, in the field of politics as a political institution. Researchers of public

opinion constantly face the following questions: what social community can be called the subject of public opinion? at what stage does such a social community become an actor of political action? How does the formation and “disintegration” of the subject of public opinion take place? And many other questions as well concerning the role and place of public opinion in the life of any society. The question about the subject also has an important methodological significance, the answer to this question in applied sociological research is especially important, since in this case the subject of public opinion simultaneously acts as an object of empirical research, a source of necessary information, and in practice represents a general population to which the researcher's conclusions apply.

The main disputes and debates in the discussion of the problem of defining the subject of public opinion occur around two positions: can any social group adhering to a certain point of view on the object of public opinion be considered a subject of public opinion, or can only the “popular majority” (Gorshkov) be the subject of public opinion? Selkova E.P. in her recent work made an attempt to summarize the numerous discussions about the subject of public opinion, considering this problem both in historical and substantive terms [13]. In it, the author, among other things, cites the point of view of D.P. Gavra, noting his synthetic approach to defining the subject of public opinion, calling it a subordinate-pluralistic approach. The essence of this approach is that, on the one hand, it proceeds from a pluralistic paradigm that recognizes the potential for a plurality of subjects of public opinion. On the other hand, it requires the observance of a certain subordination in the structure of the subject and proposes the people and the popular majority as the leading and main subject.

Thus, highlighting the subject of public opinion in a specific sociological study, we must consider it in two aspects: sociological and political. In the first case, we conduct a sociological analysis of all groups of respondents who adhere to one point of view or another on the object of public opinion (Grushin calls such an analysis differentiating and integrating). In the second case, it is necessary to additionally conduct a political assessment of the degree of influence of all subjects of public opinion on the socio-political situation affected by the object of public opinion.

The study of the functions of public opinion is the most important aspect of the sociology of public opinion. Public opinion, being one of the key factors in the life of society, performs many functions, the significance of which is not always taken into account by researchers. Pollsters and politicians, when conducting opinion polls, most often investigate cognitive and evaluative functions. It is important for them to know, firstly, what the population, the public think about this or that fact, phenomenon or event, and, secondly, how the population estimates the significance of this fact, phenomenon or event for themselves. The sociological approach to assessing the functions of public opinion consists in analyzing the entire spectrum of functions inherent in public opinion. In the Russian sociology of

public opinion, there are several approaches to the classification of the functions of public opinion. The most complete systematization of all possible functional possibilities of public opinion was given in his monograph by D.P. Gavra [7]. The author, first of all, proposed to classify the groups of functions into epistemological and sociological, institutional and non-institutional. Further, depending on the goals and objectives of the study, the author proposes to distinguish a large number of functions: from the simplest in content (for example, evaluative) to complex ones, such as, for example, the functions of socioregulation.

A very important research stage in the process of analyzing the functions of public opinion is the stage of compiling tools for obtaining sociological information aimed at assessing the manifestation of a particular function. Grushin called this stage the logical connection between function and expression. This means that it is necessary to formulate evaluative indicators not only from the point of view of formal logic, but also taking into account what function of public opinion the judgment is aimed at. For example, the judgment: "Do you trust the governor of the region" allows you to implement the evaluation function and the nomenclature function. And the judgment: "What needs to be done to increase the degree of public confidence in the authorities?" allows the analytical and constructive functions to manifest.

4 Results and Conclusions

When, in the distant 80s of the last century, the pioneer of the study of public opinion in Russia B.A. Grushin published the article on two approaches to the study of public opinion, at about the same time a famous French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu gave a lecture, the text of which he later published with a somewhat provocative title: "Public opinion does not exist" [14]. Bourdieu considered the main arguments for such a statement to be politicization in public opinion polls and the low professional, in a sociological sense, level of pollsters. The above-mentioned monograph by G. Yudin also examines the problems of studying public opinion in a modern interpretation [12]. All these works are united by the fact that the authors, each in his own way, actualize the theoretical and applied problems that still arise before the researchers of public opinion.

1. If we talk about theoretical problems that are today in the center of attention of sociologists studying public opinion, then, as mentioned above, the basic problem here is **the lack of research interest** among Russian social scientists in the nature of the phenomenon of "public opinion". And although publications related to public opinion constantly appear in the domestic media, almost all of them concern only the presentation of the results of one or another public opinion poll. It is difficult to recall works of a theoretical nature, which would offer a new view of nature, the object or subject of public opinion. The only exceptions are the few speeches and articles of well-known Russian

sociologists, journalists and political scientists, in which an attempt is made to analyze the features of the manifestation of the phenomenon under consideration. Some attempt to draw attention to this problem is, perhaps, the above-mentioned work of G. Yudin, which is more political than sociological in nature. At the same time, we must pay tribute to the author, who devoted a significant part of his work to a very important applied problem of the sociology of public opinion—the representativeness of the results obtained in the course of public opinion polls. In this regard, we note that a great deal of work on familiarizing Russian researchers of public opinion with foreign authors is carried out by VCIOM and Public Opinion Foundation, with the assistance of which many translated monographs have been published [see, for example, 15, 16, 17]

2. The most important problem of the sociology of public opinion, which is both theoretical and applied in nature, is the problem of determining the **subject of public opinion**. In the previous section, we have already touched upon this problem, noting its dual nature—sociological and politological. G.B. Yudin devotes a significant place in his work to this problem. The author in great detail in the historical and substantive aspects examines two main approaches to the analysis of the influence of public opinion on the life of society: from the point of view of democratic and bourgeois theories. Figuratively speaking, the difference between these two theories lies in the placement of a punctuation mark at the end of the famous expression "Vox Populi - Vox Dei". The supporters of the democratic theory put an exclamation mark here, and the supporters of the bourgeois theory put an interrogative one. In other words, the first theory is the desire to transfer power into the hands of the people, and the second is to make politics rational and built on respectful discussion. This contradiction is of a dialectical nature and does not have an unambiguous solution—in different historical periods, for different states, this or that structure of public power is more acceptable. And here the role of social scientists (sociologists and politologists) is very important, as they can help politicians outline more effective tactics and strategies in making managerial decisions.

3. Another very important problem in the practice of studying public opinion is the problem of determining the **method of obtaining sociological information**. At the beginning of the XXI century B.A. Grushin put this problem at the center of attention of Russian sociologists [18]. And although since that time the public consciousness of Russians has undergone serious changes towards greater stability and competence in understanding the society in which they live, new "pitfalls" have arisen making it difficult to obtain in the course of public opinion polls reflecting the true point of view of the population on this or that socially significant problem. These "pitfalls" include: the socio-political conditions in which the public opinion survey takes place, the professionalism of the developer of the public opinion survey program, the presence (absence) of the necessary method and survey instruments, the skill of the interviewer (questionnaire).

4. And, finally, the problem of paramount importance in Russia today is the **cooperation of researchers of public opinion with social and political institutions of the country**. Active steps towards each other will give a synergistic effect of both scientific and applied nature [19, 20]. And the main condition for the success of such cooperation, in our opinion, is the interest of management structures at all levels in receiving and analyzing the results of public opinion polls.

Today, no one needs to be convinced that public opinion exists and can be measured. All the more responsibility sociologists and pollsters assume when they begin to study public opinion. The truth and adequacy of the results of their public opinion research depends only on them, on their understanding whether they correctly identified the object of public opinion, what functions of public opinion are supposed to be revealed in the course of the research, how the general and sample populations that are selected for the survey will relate, whether the method is public opinion research is the most effective for obtaining adequate results and, finally, to what extent the results of the survey will help to solve the problems of managing the social and economic development of the country.

14. P. Bourdieu *Sociology of politics*. (Moscow, 1993)
15. G. Gallup, S. Ray. *The pulse of democracy. How public opinion polls work*. (Moscow: VCIOM, 2017)
16. W. Lippman, *Public opinion*. (Moscow: Institute of the Public Opinion Foundation, 2004).
17. J. Zaller, *The origin and nature of public opinion*. (Institute of the Public Opinion Foundation, 2004)
18. B.A. Grushin, *Nezavisimayagazeta*. (2000).
19. V.A. Burko *Proceedings of the XVII (dist.) All-Russian scientific conference in memory of prof. Z.I. Feinburg*, Perm National Research Polytechnic University, pp. 50-55 (2019)
20. A. Efimova, D. Strebkov *The International Spectator*, 1–19, (2020)
doi:10.1080/03932729.2019.1700040

References

1. B.A. Grushin *Opinion about the world and the world of opinions*. (Moscow: Praxis, 2011).
2. Yu.A. Levada "What sociology can and cannot do" Retrieved from: <https://polit.ru/article/2005/01/04/levada/>
3. A.A. Osolon *Journey into the world of public opinion* Retrieved from: <https://bd.fom.ru/report/map/gur050108>
4. B.A. Grushin *SotsIs*, **4**, 53–58 (1988)
5. J. P. Willerton, L. Sigelman, *Journal of Communist Studies*, **7**(2), 217–234. (1991) doi:10.1080/13523279108415085
6. M. K. Gorshkov *Public opinion: History and modernity*. (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988)
7. D.P. Gavra *Public opinion as a sociological category and social institution* (SPb.: ISEP, 1995).
8. Wikipedia *Bulletin of public opinion* Retrieved from: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/?curid=1249743&oldid=105744043>
9. *Monitoring of public opinion* Retrieved from: https://book.wciom.ru/zhurnal_monitoring/
10. *Social reality* Retrieved from: <https://corp.fom.ru/socreal>
11. *Personality: Grushin Boris Andreevich* Retrieved from: https://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/sci_sci/sotsiologiya/gur050106
12. G.B. Yudin *Public Opinion, or the Power of Figures* (SPb.: Publishing House of the European University at St. Petersburg, - 174 p).
13. E.P. Selkova *Theory and practice of social development*, **6**, 84–86 (2012)