

Qualitative and Quantitative Longitudinal Research and Resources in Belarus

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Abstract

The authors briefly describe the current situation in the field of quantitative research in Belarus and analyse the existing qualitative resources in this country.

The major finding of the paper is that sociologists in Belarus have not yet adopted a professional culture of sharing research information. Therefore, the resources of most surveys are not available for observation and use for anyone else

except for the "owner" of this information. The authors conclude that a specially elaborated strategy for involving

Belarus in European-wide research activities and the inclusion of Belarusian scholars in all-European professional associations is needed: it may help to bring the professional culture of sharing data into professional practice in Belarus, and make qualitative research more transparent to all scholars and the public in Belarus.

Keywords: Data resources, data archiving, qualitative data, longitudinal and repeat research, Belarus

Introduction

The Republic of Belarus is a typical post-soviet state that inherited a tendency for soviet sociology to be non-transparent and with poor public funding for quantitative research. Being an independent state for almost 20 years (since 1991) Belarus has still not joined any professional sociological structures in Europe in order to help its own social scholars to adopt and follow European research standards. In the case of quantitative research it means that Belarusian sociologists are not members of any groups or organisations that can help to inculcate such norms of professional work.

Currently there is no common practice of archiving data

In Belarus there are no social research data archives available for external users. Each research organisation archives its own data and materials for internal re-use only. Usually the head of this organisation has the right to decide who can use the data, and for which purposes.

Research culture is therefore rather closed. Data sharing is not prevalent as there are no traditions or official (or professional) policies to propagate research information – whether this relates to the research topics, data

received or potential users of the data. Regardless of the fact that the generation of such data is publically funded (i.e., should serve the needs of a whole society) such data are viewed as the intellectual property of particular organisations or even individuals. Therefore, as a rule, nobody, except the putative owner of the data can check this information and use it for any purposes.

Secondary analysis of the data collected by someone else is very rare: it can take place only in the case of personal negotiations between the owner of received data (research organisation or a researcher) and the potential user (also research organisation, researcher or other person). However, such negotiations take place only in relation to quantitative data. As for qualitative data, they are considered exclusively “personal” and not available for any “external” re-use. Additionally, qualitative data are often kept in a format that makes their re-use impossible by anybody else except for the person who collected them. For this reason, university staff do not even ask each other to share data within their own department in order to use such data for teaching sociology. Therefore, students often know qualitative methods more “in theory” than in practice.

Currently, there is no common practice of archiving data in Belarus. The raw data sets were sometimes destroyed after the completion of the research report because the research organisation simply did not have space to keep them. This reason dwindled during last years. Another reason for such action can be “professional security”. Some heads of sociological firms or other organisations are afraid of any “loss of data” and their external use without his or her permission, especially data related to the political sphere or research that was “ordered” by the state. Under the current conditions, the loss of such data or their re-use by someone else can be punished.

Last but not least, a lot of quantitative data were lost in the early 1990s, when Belarusian sociologists started to use personal computers and didn't know how to shift the “old” data to the new electronic platforms or didn't have resources for this because of the deepest economic crisis.

National policies on research data archiving and sharing

The national policies on research data archiving and sharing apply mainly to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2011). The National Statistical Committee collects the current statistics (according to the approved list of the indicators and spheres to research), conducts some special demographic, social and economic surveys, and publishes the main results in statistical books. Interested organisations or private persons may buy some unpublished results, but they never have access to the raw data and full statistics. The National Statistical Committee has its own archive of population and sample surveys. However, it does not conduct qualitative research.

The Belarusian Government provides some financial support to a number of research organisations such as:

- The Science and Research Economic Institute that belongs to the Ministry of Economics²
- The Science and Research Institute for Labour and Social Defense that belongs to the Ministry of Labour and Social Defense³
- Minsk Science and Research Institute of Social-Economic Problems of the Minsk-city Government⁴
- The Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences.⁵

All these institutions conduct research for the state (a particular Ministry or Department or the Academy of Sciences) and/or their private customers (in the case of commercial research). They archive the collected data and raw research materials, and – again – do not share their data with any researchers from outside (regardless of the affiliation with the state institution or private firm). Similar practices are followed by all other research organisations, regardless of their ownership (i.e. state-owned or private-owned). Currently, there is no rule or habit to keep, archive and share the data that is gathered with state funding. Therefore, no organisation does it under its own initiative.

Qualitative data sources

There is no infrastructure for archiving and sharing qualitative data in Belarus on either the national or regional levels. Therefore, in this report we would like to review the main qualitative sources that may be potentially available.

- The majority of qualitative research projects are carried out by the marketing agencies, whose customers are usually private companies (quite often international and transnational trade companies).
- The main fields of research are the following: marketing, consumer behavior, and media functioning/ effectiveness.
- The main methods of research are focus groups and in-depth interviews.
- The methods used in organisational and corporate research are non-structured and/or participant observation.
- In the field of political research the prevailing method is in-depth (deep) interview.

All the data gathered for this marketing and political research is considered to be the property of the customers. Besides, most of the marketing agencies are included in the international marketing networks and can't make their own decisions concerning data sharing. They follow some corporate ethics within their network.

However, in some cases the state institutions, international organisations/ foundations (UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, etc.), and non-government organisations (especially those with international links) can commission qualitative research and pay for the information. We consider this kind of research as the most appropriate for data sharing and archiving, because these international organisations are familiar with the legal rules on archiving and sharing in Europe and world-wide. Therefore, they can provide the data—probably—after some negotiations or after the official agreement with some Belarusian organisations or the government.

The main potentially available qualitative sources are:

Institute of Sociology, the National Academy of Sciences (n.d). The state-funded Institute of Sociology conducts quarterly the so-called Quantitative repeat cross-sectional study. Usually they use a mixed methodology: population survey and in-depth interview. Their research includes the following topics (among others): (1) “Social and Political Situation in the Republic of Belarus” (annually).

The commissioner is the national government. Methodology: cross-sectional sample survey. However, some additional information for this study is collected with qualitative methods.

(2) "Means of Private Ownership, Wealth, and Prosperity" (2007)
Method used: case study in a rural settlement.

Sociological and Political Research Center at the Belarusian State University (n.d). According to their own estimations, qualitative research comprises up to 20% of all research done by this Centre. Marketing research prevails. However, when the national elections take place, the Centre is always commissioned by the political parties to organise qualitative research. They have their archive of qualitative data (papers, typed records, and films), although currently they are not ready to share their data.

Laboratory for Axiological Research NOVAK (n.d). The Laboratory regularly conducts qualitative studies for commercial organisations, state bodies and international organisations and foundations. The most used methods are focus groups and in-depth interviews. The main fields are marketing, media, and social studies. The topics of their social research in 2008–2009 were the following:

- "Social Contract" (method: focus groups, customer - the Institute of Belarusian Studies, Vilnius)
- "AIDS" (method: in-depth interviews; customer: the Ministry of Health of Belarus and the World Health Organisation)
- "Integration Processes between Russia and Belarus" (method: focus groups, customer - Eurasia Foundation)
- "Children with Special Needs" (methods: focus groups and in-depth interviews, customer - UNESCO)

Faculty of philosophy and social sciences, Belarusian State University (n.d)
The Departments of Sociology, Social Psychology, and Information and Communication affiliated with this Faculty, regularly conduct some small-scale qualitative research for their own needs – primarily for teaching. Methods used: in-depth interviews, observations, case study, and focus groups. However, their staff is often involved in some out-of-university consultancy.

The research information is usually available for the department's staff (only those involved in the collection of data) and for students for writing research papers, diplomas, dissertations, etc.

Additionally, there are some PhD studies conducted in Belarus on the basis of qualitative research and data collected by the authors:

- Oksana Shelest (Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Sciences) "Arising of new kinds of religiosity" (2005–2006), method - in-depth interviews.
- Ludmila Yakusheva (BSU, Department of Sociology) "Women Trafficking in Belarus" (2005-2006), methods: life histories and in-depth interviews concerning trafficking problems.
- Julia Lahvich (BSU, Department of Psychology) "Social and Psychological Factors of Successful Adoption" (2008-2009), mixed methodology: sample survey, sentences completion method, narrative interviews, in-depth interviews.

Longitudinal data sources

There is no infrastructure for the management and re-use of longitudinal data in Belarus.

Nevertheless quantitative panel research studies are rather widespread, especially in economics and marketing. For instance:

- The Households Panel of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.
- The Media Audience Panel and the Customers Panel of the Laboratory for Axiological Research NOVAK.
- The Stores Panel of the A.C. Nielsen Belarusian branch, etc.

In 1983–1998 the four-waves sociological longitudinal project "Paths of Generation" related to the high school graduates of 1983 has been conducted by the Institute of Sociology (1st and 2nd waves) and the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, BSU (3rd and 4th waves), under supervision of Elena Borkowskaya. Overall, it was a part of a bigger Soviet (after 1991 – a cross-cultural, international) research study in which three Baltic republics were involved, together with Belarus.

The panel Belarusian-American Thyroid Cancer Project has been conducted regularly since 1999. It was devoted to the population of Belarus exposed to ionizing radiation due to the Chernobyl accident (1986).

Repeated qualitative and mixed methods research

The only repeated qualitative study we know is "Gender aspects of violence in refugees' midst" conducted by the Belarusian Young Christian Women Association in 2004 and 2009. The method of this research was focus groups. The commissioner: the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The same organisation ran a research project on "Home Violence against Women" in 2010 using qualitative methods (50 in-depth interviews). This study was funded by international sponsors with the intent to repeat it in a few years time.

As for mixed methods research, they are also not common and depend on the public needs and financial opportunities. Thus, in 2001, the first wave of the international project (12 countries involved) organized by the Minsk city narcological dispensary and funded by the World Health Organisation, was arranged in Minsk. The topic was called "Express-Estimation Intravenous Drugs Consumption in Minsk": it included of 2 surveys of drug users, 7 focus groups with drug users, 3 structured observations, and a series of in-depth interviews with experts in this sphere (medical doctors, policemen, NGO members and other specialists). The second wave (in 2003) included only two qualitative surveys (400 drug-users). The third wave of research is expected in the coming years, also with mixed methodology. Additionally, there is publicly available information about some repeat research studies run by the Institute of Sociology:

- "Civil society in perception of Belarusians", repeat study of the same object and design: the first wave was in 2005; the second wave was carried out in 2009. Mixed methodology: survey and in-depth interviews with selected respondents.
- "Belarusian National Identity", Repeat study of the same object: the first wave was in 2004; the second wave was in 2008, sentences completion method.

Development planning

Priorities for the next three years are:

- Creation of the first open data archive at the Belarusian State University (Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences).
- Drawing up some rules and/or procedures to enable archived data and materials to be shared.

- Promotion of the idea of data sharing in the professional communities of researchers and data owners.

The main barriers seem to be the following: lack of experience, keeping the old (Soviet) tradition, conservative culture that forbids data sharing, archiving and re-using; and deficiencies in information about data sources and owners.

The existing foreign archiving organisations could be of some assistance in sharing experience in data archiving, procedures of data sharing, and ways of persuading research organisations and owners to give data for archiving and sharing. They could also help in establishing contacts with such international organisations as UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, which would enable work in Belarus to develop in tandem with best practice elsewhere and so that archivists can learn from the experience of others.

Conclusion

In common with all other European countries, Belarus badly needs research information of high quality about the social, political, and cultural processes that take place in the country. For these purposes the scientific community has to provide the state branches and the research organisations with objective social information. However, the Republic of Belarus is not rich enough to provide its researchers with the modern instruments that are necessary for collecting, archiving and sharing qualitative information in the social sciences. Additionally, since the country was politically isolated for almost fifteen years, the community of sociologists did not have a real possibility to join the international professional organisations or to develop their work with the support of such organisations. Therefore, there was no professional demand to adopt the existing professional rules and professional culture of sharing research information.

The existing situation in the social sciences is characterized by the lack of national public and/or scientific data archives (both quantitative and qualitative), the low level of awareness of the need for sharing the research data, their professional control (checking their quality), and the potential for data re-use. There are some researchers and even centers that try to follow the international standards in data collecting; however, they do not share their data.

Overall, Belarus badly needs to start the creation of data archives and join the European community of qualitative archives of social data. However, currently, the country does not have enough experience, resources and professional information to start the process. The help of the international community of social scholars and international organisations is badly needed.

In March 2009 Dr. Kevin Schürer, Director of the UK Data Archive, paid a short visit to Minsk as part of CESSDA project activities. He met the leading persons at the State Committee on Science and Technology – the so called “Ministry of Science” and had a talk with the staff. Then he visited the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, BSU where he discussed the possibility of starting the archive (both qualitative and quantitative) at this university. Dr. Schürer promised to provide some necessary information and organisation support to BSU in organizing the data archive. However, there was no more information from his side as it was necessary to await funding decisions for CESSDA. Currently the Faculty expects that some information on how to start the data archive will be provided from GESIS and CESSDA.

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2 For further information see: http://w3.economy.gov.by/Work_web/niel.nsf/

3. See: <http://www.instlab.org/>

4. See: http://www.minsk.gov.by/cgi-bin/org_ps.pl?mode=ind&k_org=3636

5. See: <http://sociologyby.org/structure.html>