

1 Introduction

*Dagestan: the most dangerous place in Europe.*¹

*In situations of captivity, the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator.*²

How can we safely acquire reliable responses for research on delicate issues in dangerous settings? This Element demonstrates how social scientists can reduce incentives among respondents to conceal their true preferences by applying unobtrusive experimental methods designed to elicit truthful answers for threatening, risky, and taboo research topics.³ In this Element, we explore civilian support for Islamic rebels in Dagestan, an issue about which an open discussion could potentially get respondents and interviewers killed, imprisoned, or kidnapped. Studying dangerous and difficult topics in unstable societies requires significant sensitivity, but it is feasible, as we suggest, using unobtrusive experimental methods. We illustrate how it can be done by integrating an original study of civilian support for the insurgency in the Russian North Caucasus (in Dagestan) with a broader discussion and comparison of various experimental methods for exploring sensitive subjects.

What determines civilian support for rebels? Our framework characterizes civilians as “hostages” to their respective rulers, with no exit options, hence the title *Defection Denied*.⁴ Sticky ethnic and religious identities, economic dependence, and security concerns curb the ability of civilians to switch loyalties. Since civilian attitudes largely follow from these social structures, direct victimization increases support for the perpetrators of violence.

This leads us to expect intimidation tactics, such as direct victimization, to be associated with *increased* support for perpetrators, such as jihadis, who abuse civilians. Civilians have limited exit options: their loyalties and identities are very sticky. Furthermore, their security, well-being, and access to resources depend on local networks. Therefore, once they find themselves in one of the warring camps, they cannot easily “defect” (i.e., change their assigned label and

¹ L. Ash, “Dagestan: The Most Dangerous Place in Europe.” *BBC News*. November 24, 2011. www.bbc.com/news/magazine-15824831.

² J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 2015, p. 75.

³ Removing incentives to conceal the truth, which this Element addresses, is a somewhat distinct problem from creating incentives to *reveal* the truth, which often requires imposing some penalties on respondents. The indirect questioning techniques discussed in this Element create incentives to reveal but do not remove incentives to conceal. Another problem is nonparticipation, which is distinct from the issue of non-response, and can lead to a different kind of selection bias.

⁴ “No Exit” draws on the title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1944 play, *Huis Clos* (No Exit).

switch sides). Civilians are locked into silos under the loose control of either the insurgency or the pro-Russian counterinsurgency forces. As a result of these constraints, civilian victimization does not engender resistance, but instead solidifies loyalty, dependence, and obedience. In doing so, we explain why direct civilian victimization may serve as an effective tool of social control in irregular wars.

The insurgency in Dagestan had two goals: independence from Russia (a nationalist goal), and implementation of Sharia law (a religious goal).⁵ Both aims rendered them enemies of the Russian state and also put them at odds with secular elements of Dagestani society. Still, like most insurgencies, they had a civilian support base. We naturally wondered which Dagestani civilians supported or opposed the rebels and why. However, as will become clear over the course of this Element, using regular surveys with direct questions on support for the insurgency would have put respondents and enumerators at significant risk. It would also most likely have produced an unacceptable level of non-response and sensitivity bias.

Indirect questioning techniques have a long tradition in social sciences, mostly psychology and sociology, and in survey methodology research (Bernard, Johnsen, Killworth, Robinson 1989, 1991; Chaudhuri and Christofides 2007, 2013; Greenberg et al. 1969; Miller 1984; Raghavarao and Federer 1979; Swensson 1974; Warner 1965). In this Element, we will discuss a variety of alternative approaches and also mention some of the many applications of these techniques across the social sciences. Our focus will be on showing why we decided to use, and in the end how we used in the context of a very unfriendly research environment, one of the most serviceable of these techniques: the endorsement experiment.

In pursuit of better understanding civilian support for the insurgency in Dagestan, we considered various unobtrusive experimental survey techniques. In Section 4, we assess their strengths and weaknesses. Using direct questioning as the baseline, we compare four techniques specifically designed to reduce sensitivity bias. The techniques discussed include: (1) the unmatched count technique (list experiments), (2) the randomized response technique, (3) sealed envelope methods, and (4) endorsement experiments. We ultimately elected to design a series of endorsement experiments. Instead of asking respondents whether they support a sensitive actor, the survey instrument therefore asks whether respondents support a policy that is – through randomization – sometimes “endorsed” by a sensitive actor and at other times just endorsed by a

⁵ On the persistence of sticky identities in war-torn environments, see Chaisty and Whitefield 2017.

neutral control of “some people.” To put it differently, instead of probing the support for an “actor” (rebels, for example), the surveyor asks whether the respondent endorses something the “actor” stands for, thereby indirectly measuring the respondent’s support. We will present and explore the endorsement experiment approach – and several other techniques – in greater depth throughout the rest of the Element.

An endorsement experiment is a fancy name for something that is intuitive to understand and grounded in decades of research in social psychology (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983; Chaiken 1980; Cialdini 1984; Petty, Wood, and Kallgren 1988). Endorsement experiments detach the respondents from the sensitive actor (e.g., rebel group) issue or item by asking them about their support for policies rather than about their support for the sensitive actors themselves. In the experimental version of the survey instrument, respondents are told that the sensitive actor “endorses” the policy, whereas in the control version, there is no mention of the sensitive actor at all – just the policy.

One of the key reasons the “endorsement” technique works is that it lessens incentives for respondents to conceal their true preferences. Therefore, it reduces sensitivity bias and non-response – the two key problems when probing delicate issues and tricky social actors. In the treatment version, the respondents’ support for policy hides support for the actor, and for this, respondents are spared the potentially adverse consequences of expressing support directly. Randomization of respondents to control and treatment groups and differences in the levels of endorsements revealed by the experimental technique enable us to extract latent levels of support for the sensitive actor without actually asking directly about it. By exploiting this “evaluation bias in human judgment” (Rosenfeld, Imai, and Shapiro 2016, p. 3), the endorsement experiment aims at revealing the true attitudes of respondents in regard to a host of sensitive actors and taboo topics. Evaluation bias means that people generally value the same thing more if it is linked to a positive person or thing.

One of the first political science applications to use endorsements focused on race relations in the USA (Sniderman and Piazza 1993). More recent articles that used endorsement experiments examined support for the Taliban and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) counterinsurgency forces in Afghanistan (Lyal et al. 2013), and support for using violence, conditional on climate change effects in Kenya (Linke et al. 2018). We focus on civilian support for the insurgency in Dagestan to illustrate how endorsement experiments can be used to advance research and knowledge of highly relevant but difficult-to-probe social phenomena, while simultaneously providing protection to the human subjects involved in the studies, both respondents and enumerators.

To understand why direct survey questions were not feasible in the first place, let us briefly describe the context of our study. In 2015, when we implemented the survey in Dagestan, threats to civilians came from three sides: the highly potent and abusive pro-Russian government forces, and two competing insurgency movements with related but divergent radical ideologies: one a homegrown Islamic separatist organization, the Caucasus Emirate (a.k.a. Imarat Kavkaz – IK); the second, a branch of the Middle Eastern extremist organization Islamic State (IS) (a.k.a. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – ISIL).⁶ The government’s aggressive counterinsurgency campaign in this peripheral region meant that eliciting truthful answers to questions on support for the insurgency would represent a serious challenge, regardless of the methodological approach adopted. In 2006, the Russian government officially introduced Article 205.2 into the country’s Criminal Code, which outlaws any material or *verbal* support for rebels, and therefore puts in danger respondents who express any support for the insurgency.

The law explicitly forbidding any verbal support for the insurgency and making it a punishable crime rendered any direct questioning impracticable – and, indeed, irresponsible. For comparison, in very dangerous circumstances in Afghanistan at the time of the counterterrorism campaign, voicing support for the Taliban was not a crime and, in some quarters, may have been even safer than expressing affinity with the government and ISAF. While Afghanistan is a failed state, Russia is an authoritarian state, where laws exist and are enforced, but are habitually bent to suit the needs of the government. This implies substantial uncertainty about the consequences for any individual who speaks their mind openly on many topics.

At the time of our research study, rebels both from IK and IS were struggling for influence, and civilians were being targeted on a regular basis. This

⁶ Although IK did not cease to exist, IS integrated some former IK fighters, and one new *jamaat* decided to join IS instead of IK. The “competition” between the groups also occurred in Syria and online. As our survey took off, IS established a branch in Dagestan. See “IS Claims Deadly Shooting in Russia’s Caucasus: SITE.” *Middle East Eye*, December 31, 2015. www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/claims-deadly-shooting-russias-caucasus-site-1293027991. On this period, see Mairbek Vatchagaev, “What Caused the Demise of the Caucasus Emirate?,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 18, 2015. <https://jamestown.org/program/what-caused-the-demise-of-the-caucasus-emirate-2/>. See also Mairbek Vatchagaev, “The Islamic State Is Set to Replace the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 8, 2015. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-islamic-state-is-set-to-replace-the-caucasus-emirate-in-the-north-caucasus-2/>. Yet even years later it continues in a diminished form. See Valery Dzutsati, “Despite Demise of Insurgency, Authorities Still Wary of Its Remnants,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 20, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/despite-demise-of-insurgency-in-north-caucasus-russian-authorities-still-wary-of-its-remnants/>.

unfavorable context arguably made it all the more critical to utilize some form of indirect questioning; thus, after examining the various options that we discuss further in [Section 4](#), we determined that endorsement experiments were best suited to this topic and setting. While this Element focuses on war zones and other violent contexts, we mention a variety of other applications in the social sciences and hope that our discussion will inspire some readers to use these methods in their own research and in other contexts.

No indirect questioning technique can eliminate all risk to respondents and enumerators or completely assuage their fears. However, scholars can take a number of steps at the design stage of their research to increase the validity of their inquiry and to protect human subjects. One of the least explicitly discussed steps is the importance of integrating qualitative domain knowledge and area expertise with survey techniques, which ensures that we understand how locals are likely to perceive the questions, particularly in terms of the risks that providing truthful answers may entail for them and their families. Qualitative research is important when we craft the questionnaire, but is also virtually indispensable when it comes to interpreting the results.

When designing our study, we integrated our own qualitative knowledge and expertise, but also consulted with a local survey organization in the North Caucasus to design the questionnaire in a manner that would minimize risks to both respondents and enumerators, and would ensure that we were using the correct terms for the concepts that we sought to capture in our study. We teamed up with a well-known scholar and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Khasan Dzutsev, who until recently ran an established survey organization in the region with a reputation for academic and ethical integrity that has been doing survey work in the North Caucasus for three decades. Although our partners went to great lengths in order to protect the identities of respondents in order to minimize risks, no research of this kind can eliminate all risks.

[Cronin-Furman and Lake \(2018\)](#) discuss the ethical implications of such research and have provided extensive guidelines on how to conduct ethical research in fragile states and dangerous settings while mitigating risks.⁷ Weak states present particular challenges for Western researchers who possess advantages that can facilitate research (primarily economic resources), but also potentially create exploitative and dangerous situations.⁸ Power imbalances and perverse motives create hazardous incentives for all participants and unethical environments for researchers, especially when it comes to accessing victims, ex-combatants, and vulnerable populations ([Cronin-Furman and Lake](#)

⁷ For other work in this area, see [Campbell \(2017\)](#); [Kapiszewski et al. \(2015\)](#); [Sriram et al. \(2009\)](#).

⁸ Access to humanitarian networks to evacuate Western researchers rapidly if a security situation deteriorates is an option that is not available to local researchers.

2018, p. 608). In repressive states, complying with government regulations can present tradeoffs between the need to avoid surveillance and harassment and the expectations of research transparency.

It is equally important that dangerous situations and populations should not be “exoticized.” Although far from a panacea, collaborating with respected local research partners is an important strategy for reducing risk and conducting ethical research in conflict-ridden areas and dangerous settings. Frequently, such organizations and partners play a critical role in the design and implementation of research projects, since they are far more attuned to local social and political expectations, risks, and conditions than outsiders. However, rarely are such partners acknowledged beyond a footnote in the published research output, even though their participation was essential for the project to be realized in the first place. Western researchers can easily rectify this issue by giving greater credit to local research partners who take risks and possess invaluable expertise.

To minimize risks to our respondents and partners, and to maximize the benefits for science, we worked closely with our partners in the field and studiously researched the region of interest. We found that at least some of our respondents were curious about our research topic and eagerly offered their expertise and participation in the study, which we believe reflects the importance of insurgent violence in public life in Dagestan. Respondents were likely also pleased to have an opportunity to reflect on some of the pressing issues of their day-to-day lives, on which the authorities have largely ignored their viewpoints.

The Element has seven sections and proceeds as follows. [Section 2](#) delves into a discussion of the Dagestani context as an example of a dangerous research environment, where direct questioning techniques would not be appropriate, safe, or effective. It outlines the logic of our case selection, which points to the need for using indirect experimental approaches while also exploring questions of comparability and generalizability. [Section 3](#) articulates a theory that links civilian support for the insurgency and their exposure to violence. We explain why direct civilian victimization can turn into an effective tool of social control in irregular wars. When civilians cannot switch sides (between jihadis and pro-government forces) due to thick religious and ethnic loyalties, security concerns, and local economic dependencies that embed them into the warring silos and limit their agency, defection is effectively denied. The theory also expects the effect of exposure to violence on civilian support for the insurgency to depend upon its *source* (the insurgency or the counterinsurgency violence), as well as on the type (whether it is experienced *directly* or *indirectly*). [Section 4](#) explains why we opted for endorsement experiments over several alternatives,

which we also evaluate in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, both in general and as applied to this specific study. [Section 5](#) outlines the design considerations and the endorsement experiments for the specific context. [Section 6](#) examines the main empirical results and their broader implications. [Section 7](#) summarizes the Element's main contributions and offers several suggestions for future directions in experimental research using unobtrusive questioning techniques to probe sensitive topics in dangerous settings, where some of the most exciting and significant research in the social sciences is yet to be done. Although our specific emphasis in this Element is on why and when civilians support insurgent groups during irregular wars, we hope that readers will see its utility for studying a wide range of similarly difficult to elicit attitudes about taboo topics in dangerous settings. These methods provide scholars with important tools that can simultaneously reduce sensitivity bias and provide a high degree of safety for respondents, enumerators, and researchers.

2 Danger in Dagestan

Throughout the 1990s, Dagestan was relatively and remarkably safe, particularly when compared to many other republics in the Russian North Caucasus region ([Figure 1](#)). However, diffusion of violence from the neighboring Chechnya, along with the creation and solidification of the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz) in the 2000s, led to the rise of religious extremists. It transformed Dagestan into a dangerous place and, later, into a hot spot of global jihad. Dagestan is a poor, diverse, and geographically isolated region of Russia, famous for its internationally renowned mixed martial arts fighters. During the conflict, Dagestani civilians could not flee, migrate, or hunker down in safety – their choices were tremendously limited. Three factors, which we elaborate upon in this section and the next, shed light on why civilian options were so restricted: (1) sticky religious and ethnic identities; (2) economic dependence and welfare provision tied to clan-based communal life; and (3) security threats both from the insurgents and the government.

Since the late 2000s, Dagestan has become the primary location of Islamic insurgent violence in the Caucasus. While the causes are complex, the conflict has been driven largely by local factors ([Campana and Ratelle 2014](#); [Ratelle and Souleimanov 2017](#); [Rozanova and Yarlykapov 2014](#); [Sagramoso 2012](#)).⁹ Like many other republics in the region, Dagestan is underserved by the central authorities in Moscow, in terms of both public infrastructure and personal

⁹ These include corruption and clan competition for local resources, human rights abuses, religious repression, economic decline, and the spillover effects of the Chechen conflicts.