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Pledge of Honesty

“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.”

Allison Westervelt

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Abstract: This thesis examines the previous crisis responses and political psychology of Vladimir Putin in order to understand his decision-making process leading up to the annexation of Crimea and by extension, explain it based on the agency of the Russian President. This paper argues that before the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the most significant crisis points in the life of the Russian President, which has resulted in his unique post-Soviet geopolitical ideology and revisionist foreign policy. By analyzing Putin's operational code, decision making, sense making, and meaning making in the context of the Crimean crisis, this paper shows that the Russian president makes foreign policy decisions based on the geopolitical dimension and also justifies them to domestic and international audiences via geopolitics, specifically the need to protect Russian "compatriots abroad" as part of a broader *Russkiy mir* movement.

Keywords: Putin, Crimea, geopolitics, political psychology, *Russkiy mir*, crisis response, decision-making process

Kurzfassung: Diese Arbeit untersucht die bisherigen Krisenreaktionen und die politische Psychologie des russischen Präsidenten Wladimir Putin, um jenen Entscheidungsprozess zu verstehen, der zur Annexion der Krim geführt hat und diesen zu begründen. Es wird argumentiert, dass der Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion vor der Euromaidan-Revolution in der Ukraine einer der wichtigsten Krisenpunkte im Leben des russischen Präsidenten war, welcher sich in seiner einzigartigen postsowjetischen geopolitischen Ideologie und revisionistischen Außenpolitik manifestiert hat. Mittels einer Analyse seines operativen Programm, seiner Entscheidungsfindung, Bedeutungsfindung und Sinnfindung zeigt die vorgelegte Studie, dass der russische Präsident außenpolitische Entscheidungen auf Grundlage geopolitischer Dimensionen trifft und diese auch gegenüber dem nationalen und internationalen Publikum mit seiner Geopolitik rechtfertigt, insbesondere mit der Notwendigkeit des Schutzes russischer „Landsleute im Ausland“ als Teil einer breiteren *Russkiy mir* Bewegung.

Schlüsselwörter: Putin, Krim, Geopolitik, politische Psychologie, *Russkiy Mir*, Krisenreaktion, Entscheidungsprozess

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine was the most significant decision of his 20-year tenure as the Russian Federation's leader and most powerful decision maker. Ukraine and many other nations claimed the annexation was in violation of international law and subsequently condemned it. The annexation was contrary to many international agreements to which the Russian Federation is a signatory that protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine, such as the Belavezha Accords, which effectively ended the Soviet Union; the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which was a declaration signed by 35 countries in an attempt to improve relations between the West and the Communists; the Budapest Memorandum, which provided security assurances by its signatories relating to the accession of Ukraine and other countries to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; and finally the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet, which established separate navies for Russia and Ukraine and established the conditions of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea (Dews, 2014).

The significance of Putin's action is that although Russia had intervened militarily and politically in the former Soviet republics before, for example Georgia, it had never annexed a territory it occupied outright, nor had it overthrown the local government as it did in Crimea. Under the assumption that the final authority on whether or not a nation moves in the direction of war or peace rests with individual actors and not within the constraints of circumstances (Bueno De Mesquita, 1988, p. 630), this thesis proposes the following research question: *What factors influenced Vladimir Putin's decision as the leader of the Russian Federation to annex the Crimean Peninsula by force in 2014?* This paper's analysis of the decision-making process and research into the underlying political psychology of Vladimir Putin provides insight as to why the Russian Federation committed this act of aggression. By exploring the contributing factors that influenced Putin's decision as the leader of the Russian Federation to annex the Crimean Peninsula, including leadership characteristics, personality traits, heuristics, and responses to previous crises it is possible to deduce if he will use force as a policy instrument again in the future, an important question as the recent changes to the Russian constitution ordered by Putin would allow him to remain in power as President until 2036 (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Although the annexation of Crimea was an unprecedented step in Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Mankoff, 2014, p. 65), research presented in this paper shows that it was unsurprising. Putin has formed a revanchist worldview and developed

leadership characteristics in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union that reveal he has a high likelihood to disregard pacifying constraints in favor of aggressive foreign policy. Based on the evidence presented by Russian military assertiveness in Chechnya and Georgia under the Putin regime as well as Putin's leadership and personality traits, the geopolitical dimension is the most important for the Russian President. Through his speeches, Putin justified past military intervention in the former Soviet space as well as the annexation of Crimea to domestic and international audiences by presenting the Russian Federation as a "protector" of the Russian diaspora based on the concept of *Russkiy mir*. Putin's operational code, leadership characteristics, and responses to past crises thus explain his decision to annex Crimea but also suggest that he will attempt to resolve future conflicts by pursuing aggressive policies rather than peacefully negotiating.

To answer the question of what factors influenced Vladimir Putin's decision to annex Crimea, this paper begins with a literature review of previous research and analysis of the Russian President's operational code and political psychology. As this paper seeks to apply Putin's political psychology and decision-making process to the annexation of Crimea, a theoretical framework to assess the impact of a leader's decision-making process in times of crisis based in operational code analysis, polihueristic (PH) choice theory, sense making, and meaning making is then presented. Next, this paper will discuss the methodology to apply this theory, specifically identifying consistencies and persistent behavioral patterns that can be applied to a case study of a leader's policy decision during a crisis. The paper continues by applying the theoretical framework to the early life, career, previous decisions and statements of the Russian President to determine the role of Putin's agency in the annexation of Crimea. Finally, the paper concludes by offering predictions on how Putin will respond to crises in the future and presents topics for further research.

Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

While there has been extensive analysis on the Russian annexation of Crimea within the context of the key international relations theories, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism as well as the literature outlined above on the political psychology of Vladimir Putin, Putin's role as an autocratic leader makes it pertinent to assess the role of his agency in the

policy decision to annex Crimea, which is the purpose of this thesis. Operational code analysis and other political psychology approaches have been applied to Putin, but few have directly applied psychological analysis to Putin's decision to annex Crimea.

In "The operational code approach to profiling political leaders: understanding Vladimir Putin," Stephen Benedict Dyson and Matthew J. Parent apply an operational code scheme to over one million words spoken by Putin to determine the relationship between what the Russian president says and what he does and examine his aggressiveness and friendliness towards other nation states. Using their unique computer-enabled content analysis method, Dyson and Parent determined that the Russian president holds primarily standard views of international politics, although he is overly aggressive in response to terrorism and is notably consumed by securing political control (Dyson & Parent, *The operational code approach to profiling political leaders: understanding Vladimir Putin*, 2017). Graeme P. Herd expanded on Dyson and Parent's work with "Putin's Operational Code and Strategic Decision-Making in Russia" by identifying five recurring decision-making traits of the Russian President and including analysis of commonalities between Putin and Russian leaders that came before him. The cognitive traits examined by Herd include Putin's tendencies when making strategic calculations, his understanding of risk, the degree of improvisation when making decision and the Russian president's need for obtaining validation. While Herd's contributions are incredibly valuable, the author does not apply this psychological analysis directly to Putin's annexation of Crimea (Herd, 2019).

In their paper "The Psychological Dimension of Russian Foreign Policy: The Annexation of Crimea" Forsberg and Pursianinen also explore the psychological components of decision making in regard to Vladimir Putin but apply them directly to Putin's annexation of Crimea. Forsberg and Pursianinen conclude that various psychological and cognitive features, including groupthink, assessment of prospects, operational codes, belief systems, personality characteristics and emotions, can be applied in consideration of Russia's actions in the Ukraine crisis and the nation's greater readiness to take risks within the context of the crisis. While their contributions are valuable, Forsberg and Pursiainen admit that their claims should not be mistaken for mono-casual explanations as they instead offer a psychological perspective with a degree of uncertainty. The authors acknowledge that psychological theories are speculative, and it is difficult in these cases to obtain concrete proof. Finally, Thees Pankow and Robert Patman

refute the claim that Putin's annexation of Crimea was prompted by the threat of NATO enlargement in "Rethinking Russia's Ukraine involvement 2013-2016: the domestic imperatives of Putin's operational code" and instead argue that Putin's intervention was caused by his operational code based in complying with the political "rules" of authoritarian regimes. Pankow and Patman conclude that Putin's aggression in Crimea, a "near abroad state," was prompted by fear that Ukraine aligning itself closer to the EU would be destabilizing at home (Pankow & Patman, 2017). Because of the uncertainty of the psychological perspective, Putin's operational code must be considered alongside the evidence presented via poliheuristic (PH) choice theory of decision-making analysis as well as sense making and meaning making in order to draw sound conclusions (Foresberg & Pursianinen, 2017).

Theory

This thesis presents an all-encompassing approach to unpack the political psychology of a leader including operational code analysis, decision making via poliheuristic (PH) choice theory, sense making and meaning making leading up to and immediately following the crisis in question and applying those lessons as an explanation for the decision. By applying this theory to the past experiences and previous decisions of the leader as a means of sketching out political psychology, it is possible to draw conclusions about a leader's decision-making processes and apply them to make predictions about his potential policy choices in the future.

It is helpful to approach the decision making, sense making, and meaning making of a leader after first having examined the leader's operational code as understanding a leader's operational code is necessary to determine the leader's strategic goals. It is generally agreed in the field of international relations that the way in which leaders view the world, perceive other nation-states, and understand global political conflict has significant bearing in how nation-states interact with each other. Therefore, by understanding a leader's operational code – the framework of beliefs about past events that form their worldview – we can better understand the decision-making processes of that leader (George, 1969) and by extension their crisis response. The term "operational code" was first used by the American sociologist and political scientist Nathan Leites, who described it as general rules of conduct, beliefs and attitudes that frame how a leader perceives the world and affects their decisions (Leites, 1951). In this context, the idea of a belief is that which someone holds to be true. Research indicates that pre-existing beliefs act as the primary filter through which new information is processed and that actors process

information in such a way as to affirm their beliefs. As such, political leaders construct their own version of reality based on this belief system and react to this subjective reality rather than the objective reality. Attitudes have a cognitive component based in beliefs, but critically also have a behavioral component that affects an individual's decisions and behaviors (Renshon, 2008).

Poliheuristic (PH) choice theory is an insightful way to approach the decision-making process of an individual as it illuminates the threshold at which a leader would eliminate a choice as unacceptable on the political dimension and suggests what the leader's predilection to use force is. PH choice theory hypothesizes that when making decisions, policy makers utilize a two-step decision-making process consisting of first eliminating alternatives that the policy maker considers unacceptable on a critical dimension by a noncompensatory analysis and second selecting an alternative from the subset of remaining alternatives that maximizes benefits and minimizes risk. The political scientist Alex Mintz, author of the theory, explains that threats to the leader's political survival and political constraints on the use of force are examples of the noncompensatory heuristics that would prompt the leader to initially reject other options in the first stage of the decision-making process (Mintz, *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: A Poliheuristic Perspective*, 2004). PH choice theory is dimensional and order sensitive, meaning in the first step of the decision-making process, the individual actor outright rejects options that they deem to be unacceptable on a critical dimension, such as a political dimension or a military/strategic dimension. Each policy option has consequences associated with the pursuit of that alternative, and the decision maker will eliminate noncompensatory alternatives outright. If a given option has a low score on a certain dimension, but scores high on another dimension, the high score in one dimension cannot compensate for the low score in the other dimension and the option is eliminated. Thus, rather than selecting an alternative that maximizes utility based on a holistic comparison decision-making process such as the expected utility theory, the PH choice theory postulates that policy makers often make foreign policy choices based on rejection of unacceptable alternatives on the basis of one criteria, or at most a few criteria (Mintz, *The Decision to Attack Iraq: A Noncompensatory Theory of Decision Making*, 1993).

In 2008 Jonathan W. Keller and Yi Edward Yang built on Mintz's theory of political decision making by showing via an experimental test that leadership style influences both the noncompensatory threshold at which decision makers reject options as politically unacceptable and to what extent the opinions of constituents affect the final decisions of leaders when making

policy choices. The four leadership characteristics identified by Keller and Yang that are significant in the decision-making process because of the influence that they have on a leaders' willingness to defy political opposition are 1) belief in ability to control events, 2) task vs. interpersonal emphasis, 3) need for power, and 4) self-monitoring. Additionally, two personality characteristics proved to be significant indicators of a leader's inclination to use force: distrust and military assertiveness. Keller and Yang argue that combining leader's scores on the first four leadership characteristics with their scores on distrust and military assertiveness (orientation toward the use of force) would reveal a leader's expected predilection to disregard pacifying constraints in favor of aggressive foreign policy behavior. In their experiment, Keller and Yang assigned 150 participants scores in each leadership characteristic and personality trait via self-assessment questionnaires completed by the participants as well as imaginative stories written by students and analyzed by expert coders (Keller & Yang, 2008).

The political scientists Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius argue that crisis leadership goes beyond only decision making regarding the direction and application of foreign policy and includes meaning making and sense making. Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius describe sense making in *the Politics of Crisis Management* as attempts by a leader to grasp a crisis as it unfolds and the tendency to ask, "How could this happen?" (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sunelius, 2005, p. 18) More concretely defined, sense making is the action of constructing personal meaning as an individual attempts to understand crises that are alarming, complicated or confusing to them (Cornelissen, 2012, p. 118). Sense making is valuable as it sheds light on why a leader perceives a crisis as a threat.

Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius define meaning making as attempts by the leader to exert influence over the public's understanding of a crisis and by extension build public support for their policies. Meaning making is paramount in crisis situations because such situations contain an element of ambiguity. Crises reveal the constraints of established institutional arrangements as well as the psychological structures supporting them. Crises put the legitimacy of these systems at risk as well as threaten the public support of the government and the established order (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sunelius, 2005). It is critical to evaluate a leader's post-crisis meaning making as it reveals how a leader justifies their decision.

Methodology

Through research into a leader's early life, career, past statements and previous decisions, one can identify crisis points in the life of the decision-maker and analyze the heuristic approaches that leader has taken to resolve these conflicts. Inferences made about the decision-maker's leadership characteristics and political psychology can then be applied to a case study of a crisis and utilized to explain why the leader responded to the crisis in the manner they did. By identifying consistencies in stated beliefs and repeated behavioral patterns, predictions can be made about the way a leader will respond to future crises.

Operational Code

Before delving into the political decision-making process of Putin regarding the annexation of Crimea, it is necessary to point out a principal aspect of his operational code that has influenced his decision-making process as it relates to this crisis: his desire to politically control the states of the former Soviet Union and reconstruct a sphere of privileged Russian influence in this area. As others discussed in the *Literature Review* subchapter have offered in depth analyses of Putin's operational code, this paper instead focuses on this aspect of Putin's operational code as it has determined his strategic foreign policy goals and affected his response to the Crimean crisis.

The most significant aspect of Putin's operational code is his belief that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy which has manifested in the Russian President a desire to exert political control over the countries in Russia's neighborhood. As such, the domestic political events of countries in Russia's near abroad that would distance those countries from the former Soviet bastion of power are perceived in Putin's reality as a threat to Russian security. In May of 2000, just before Putin's inauguration, a leaked document titled "Reform of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation" was published on the website of the Russian political newspaper *Kommersant* that revealed Putin's plans for the near abroad. Reportedly, the document was a strategic plan written by Putin's campaign team and would become the layout for Putin's governance of Russia. Although the document was later completely removed from *Kommersant's* website, the document stated in regard to the new Russian President: "If he really wants to ensure social order and stability in the country during his rule, then the self-governing political system is not needed, instead he will need a political structure (authority) within his Administration, which will not only be able to forecast and create 'necessary' political situations

in Russia, but really be able to manage social and political processes in the Russian Federation and in the countries of the near abroad” (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 420-1). Thus, a primary strategic goal of Putin’s presidency is to secure political stability within Russia by controlling the politics of neighboring states. My conclusions about Putin’s goal to control the politics of Russia’s near abroad are confirmed by analysis of his leadership characteristics within the *military assertiveness* subchapter of the poliheuristic choice theory analysis.

Putin has affirmed many times throughout his decades long political career his conviction that the collapse of the Soviet Union is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, a statement which forms his geopolitical strategy: reconstructing the former Soviet space via reintegration of the former Soviet republics. In his annual state of the nation address in 2005, Putin said “First and foremost it is worth acknowledging that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century ... As for the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory” (Associated Press, 2005). As confirmed by analysis of Putin’s response to the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in the *Sense Making* chapter, the loss of the Soviet Union and the power vacuum it created was a crisis point for the Russian President. As such, Putin has a unique post-Soviet geopolitical ideology (Suslov, 2018) with a mission to reconstruct the former Soviet space. Before his second presidential inauguration in 2012, Putin expressed that the reintegration of the former Soviet space was one of his main objectives (Plokhy, 2017, pp. 339-40). Before the 2018 elections, Putin appealed to millions of older and nostalgic Russians by telling reporters that if he was given the opportunity to alter the course of history, he would undo the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. (Reuters, 2018).

As it applies to Putin’s decision to annex Ukraine, in the mind of the Russian president the Soviet Union cannot exist without Ukraine, thus reintegrating Ukraine into Russia is a primary goal of Putin’s policy making and decision making. Critically, Ukraine’s vote for independence in 1991 marked the end of the U.S.S.R.: The first Russian President Boris Yeltsin explained to the George H.W. Bush Administration, without their Slavic Ukrainian brothers in the Soviet Union, Russia would be outnumbered and outvoted by the Muslim republics. In addition, there was no political or economic incentive for the other republics to join a union without Ukraine nor Russia and by extension without their vast sources of energy (Plokhy, 2017, p. 322) (Westervelt, Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective Take Home Exam,

2020). The Russian President believes that just as it was in 1991, the Soviet Union cannot exist without Ukraine. Based on Putin's geopolitical ideology with a goal to revive the former Soviet Union, Ukraine's drift westward away from Russian influence is a red line for Putin.

Decision Making

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to use force to annex Crimea is best explained using poliheuristic (PH) choice theory, a noncompensatory theory of decision making. Many of the preeminent political decision-making theories are based in economics, but the serious economic repercussions of Putin's actions in Ukraine make any political decision-making theories based in economics inappropriate as a means of explaining this policy decision. Especially relevant to the case of Vladimir Putin's decision-making processes regarding Ukraine is the dimensional aspect of PH theory. In the first step of the order-sensitive PH theory decision-making process, the individual actor outright rejects options that they deem to be unacceptable on a critical dimension, such as a political dimension or a military/strategic dimension. As the analysis presented by this thesis shows, Ukraine's closer alignment with the common West is noncompensatory for Putin. The criteria by which Putin rejected Ukraine's closer alignment with the common West is that it would have prevented Putin's strategic goals to control the politics of and reintegrate the former Soviet state into Russia, which is indicative that the geopolitical dimension is the most important to the Russian President.

As it is not possible to apply Keller and Yang's pretest to the Russian President, this thesis identifies Putin's heuristics based on analysis of his past behaviors to assign the Russian President with a low score, mid score, or high score for each characteristic and trait. In the case of the Russian President, the results of the assessment via Keller and Yang's framework are clear enough that a more precise score for each characteristic is unnecessary in order to conclude that the geopolitical dimension is the most important for Vladimir Putin and that the Russian President is a leader with a high likelihood of disregarding pacifying constraints in favor of aggressive foreign policy, thus offering an explanation for his decision to annex Crimea. Analysis of Putin's statements and behaviors in every category designate him a score that would suggest that the Russian president has a low sensitivity to political opposition and an increased likelihood to pursue an aggressive foreign policy, except in regard to the self-monitoring characteristic, for which my assessment placed Putin in the middle. My analysis of Putin's

decision-making process therefore concludes that based on past behavioral patterns and statements, it is likely that Putin will use force again to resolve future crises rather than resolving conflicts via peaceful means.

Belief in ability to control events

Belief in ability to control events is a worldview in which leaders believe that they can exercise a degree of control over situations in which they find themselves. Individuals with this trait are more likely to choose active policy agendas, opting to control policy making and implementation to the greatest degree possible as opposed to delegating policy making and implementation to others. As leaders with this characteristic are secure in their conviction that they are able to change the world, they are less likely to compromise or negotiate a deal with others. Once this type of leader makes a decision, they exude confidence in their decision and are sure that they know what needs to be done. In regard to PH theory, decision makers who believe in their ability to control events are unlikely to use the political dimension as the primary screening dimension and will not reject options because of their political unpopularity as frequently as those who do not exhibit this characteristic (Keller & Yang, 2008, p. 692).

Vladimir Putin is a leader who believes that he can control events and finds it unacceptable when others attempt to control him. In *First Person*, Putin's autobiography, Putin described the extent to which he found the rules of the KGB as a military-style organization unacceptable. Putin reflected that when he entered the KGB building daily, he felt as though he was being "plugged into an electrical outlet." Putin explained that working for the KGB put a person in a constant state of tension as it seemed as though nothing was allowed. Putin lamented that KGB officers weren't even permitted to go to restaurants and were constantly being checked in on as they conducted their daily tasks. Every move a KGB officer made was monitored: Every Friday Putin was required to submit a work plan for the next week, day-by-day, hour-by-hour, and while working he had to sign off on completed tasks every hour. Putin resented that he reported to a division head and a department head and constantly had to report to officers who outranked him what he had been working on and explain why large-scale projects weren't completed immediately. In the Kremlin, explained Putin, "I have a different position. Nobody controls me here. I control everybody else" (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 131). Putin's autobiography makes it quite clear why he sought the presidency: Only by becoming president could Putin escape control and become the man in charge.

Putin's need for control is also made clear by the measures the Presidential Administration have taken to ensure any potential political opposition is kept on a tight leash via limitations on civil liberties, especially via Kremlin media control. The leaked document "Reform of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation" revealed the new Presidential Administration's intentions to greatly increase political control of the Russian Federation, which are quoted below from Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy*:

- 1) The formation of a controlled mass public platform for all politicians and public-political organizations of the Russian Federation, supporting the President of the Russian Federation.
- 2) The continuing removal from the Russian political arena of the State Duma of the Russian Federation as a "political platform" for the forces in opposition to the President of the Russian Federation and affixing with it an exclusively lawmaking activity.
- 3) The establishment of an informational-political barrier between the President of the Russian Federation and the entire spectrum of opposition forces in the Russian Federation.
- 4) Introducing active agitation and propaganda throughout the entire territory of the Russian Federation in support of the President of the Russian Federation, the Government of the Russian Federation, and her policies.
- 5) Introducing constant information-analytical and political work in all means of mass media.
- 6) Introducing direct political counter-propaganda aimed at discrediting the opposition to the President, the Russian Federation's political leaders, and political public organizations.
- 7) Holding public gatherings (pickets, rallies, conferences, marches, etc.) in support of the President of the Russian Federation.
- 8) The organization and management of active political activity in all the regions of the Russian Federation in order to prevent attempts of governors, heads of *krais*, republics, and oblasts to conduct any activities aimed at dismembering Russia or weakening the powers of center.
- 9) The creation and maintenance of our own sources of mass media.

The authority Putin exercises over politics in Russia is undeniable as the document makes it clear that the Presidential Administration announced its intention to remove the capacity of the State Duma, the legislative branch of the Russian Federation, to act as a “political platform for the forces in opposition to the President.” Equally indicative of the strict oversight Putin exercises over politics in the Russian Federation is the measure to influence the Russian public through the introduction of propaganda in favor of Putin and counterpropaganda discrediting his political opposition. The document also stated that the Presidential Administration should also be “taking control of different mass media outlets” and determined opposition outlets should be driven into financial ruin. Putin has achieved that objective, as will be explained further in the *self-monitoring* subchapter. The “Reform of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation” was created in 2000 as the blueprint for the creation of Putin’s authoritarian state and in his twenty years in power Putin has created a political system in which the president is in complete control (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 420-3).

In a matter of weeks after Putin’s inauguration in 2000, the Kremlin began to rescind the basic individual freedoms guaranteed under the 1993 Russian Constitution, including the rights of free press, assembly, and speech. Putin has created a vertical power structure in the two decades of his regime to the extent that today in the Russian Federation the president is the true locus of power. The offices of the Presidential Administration oversee the activities of every layer of government from the top government ministries, to the two houses of legislature, the courts, the regional governments, the media, all the way down to trade unions and even youth groups. By these means Putin himself makes every domestic and foreign policy decision, which is dutifully implemented by the levels of government beneath the president and passed into law by the Duma and the Federation Council (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 9-10).

Analysis of reflections Putin has made in his autobiography as well as measures that he has taken as President of the Russian Federation show that Putin believes in his ability to control events, which according to Keller and Yang would make him more likely to choose an active policy agenda and be less likely to negotiate with others. Annexing Crimea outright rather than negotiate with Ukrainians can certainly be considered an active policy. However, assigning Putin with a high score in the *belief in ability to control events trait* implies that the threshold for which the Russian President would reject an option as politically unattractive is high. However, this is an oversimplification regarding Putin’s annexation of Crimea. Although the international

political costs were high, Putin's decision to annex Crimea was politically popular domestically. Polls conducted via the Levada Center reveal that after Putin's annexation of Crimea, his domestic popularity jumped from 60 percent to 80 percent (Taylor, 2018). Pursuing aggressive foreign policy instead increased Putin's domestic popularity, despite the negative effects that it has for his international popularity.

The domestic popularity of Putin's decision to annex Crimea aside, Keller and Yang predict that leaders who believe in their ability to control events are unlikely to use the political dimension as the main screening dimension in phase one. If the political dimension is not as important to the Russian President as the geopolitical dimension, this supports the conclusion of the operational code assessment chapter: The geopolitical dimension is the most important to Putin, which is why Putin rejected Ukraine's westward drift away from the Soviet Union on a geopolitical dimension and from the remaining set of alternatives elected to annex Crimea outright, despite the high political costs on the international sphere.

Task vs. interpersonal emphasis

The task vs. interpersonal emphasis trait can be summarized as whether an individual is more concerned with completing a task or accommodating the feelings and needs of others. Task-oriented people are less conscious of the opinions of others and tend to ignore or suppress opposition, while people who exhibit interpersonal emphasis are more likely to negotiate and consider the views of opposition. Leaders who put a great emphasis on task accomplishment are less likely to use political feasibility as the main screening dimension in stage one and are more likely to accept political pushback before deeming options politically unacceptable and rejecting them (Keller & Yang, 2008, p. 691).

Putin is a leader who suppresses opposition. There is evidence which suggests that Putin ordered the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian-defector and naturalized British citizen, who as a former FSB officer specialized in combatting organized crime. Litvinenko was a whistle-blower: In 1998 he and four other FSB colleagues stated in a televised press conference that they had been ordered by the FSB to kill Boris Berezovsky, a Russian oligarch. Litvinenko also claimed that the FSB had given him myriad other illegal orders, including the assignment to kidnap and beat up a prominent businessman. Litvinenko incriminated Putin himself when he wrote an obituary for the Russian journalist and notable critic of Putin, Anna Politkovskaya, who was shot dead in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building in 2006. The obituary was titled

“Anna Politkovskaya Was Killed by Putin.” Putin never tried to hide his disdain for Litvinenko: In response to the 1998 allegation that the secret police gave its operatives illegal orders, Putin as the then-head of the FSB made a televised statement assailing Litvinenko’s character, alleging that he was behind on alimony payments to his ex-wife. After the damning obituary written by Litvinenko for Politkovskaya, Putin initially avoided making any public statements until he was pressed to do so by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on a trip to Dresden. Putin was visibly angry when he responded, “That journalist was indeed a harsh critic of the current Russian government. But I think that journalists know ... that her political influence in the country was extremely insignificant. She was known in journalistic circles and among human-rights activists and in the West, but her influence on politics in Russia was minimal” (Gessen, 2012, p. 430). Putin’s critical statements about Litvinenko and Politkovskaya exemplify his contempt towards those who would publicly criticize him and illustrate that it is incredibly unlikely for Putin to make accommodations for opposition viewpoints.

In the weeks following Politkovskaya’s death, Litvinenko fell violently ill and ultimately died of polonium poisoning. Litvinenko was admitted to a Moscow hospital for excruciating symptoms including incessant vomiting and the sensation that his throat, esophagus, and stomach were burning. Litvinenko always feared that he would be killed for his opposition to Putin’s government and was hypervigilant following the murder of another outspoken critic of Putin, so the former FSB agents told doctors that he suspected that he had been poisoned by agents of the Russian government. In response, he received psychiatric treatment, although an oncologist who observed Litvinenko’s hair falling out in clumps noted that it appeared as though Litvinenko was experiencing radiation poisoning. Hours before Litvinenko died, doctors were able to confirm that he had been poisoned by polonium-210, an incredibly radioactive element that occurs rarely in nature but can be manufactured. The fact that Litvinenko died of polonium-210 poisoning suggests that the order to kill Litvinenko had to have come from Putin himself: Polonium-210 is only produced in Russia and its production and export are strictly regulated by Russian nuclear authorities. Removal of the necessary lethal dose from the manufacturer would have required top-level authorization from the president’s office at the earliest stages of the production process (Gessen, 2012, p. 439). The murder of Litvenkno illustrates the degree to which Putin’s government is intolerant of criticism and unaccommodating of the views of others.

As is clear from the provisions of the “Reform of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation” document stipulating that political opposition will be silenced in the Duma and counter-propaganda campaigns run against political adversaries, Putin’s government does not permit political opposition. However, there is further evidence which suggests that Putin uses more extreme measures to silence political foes. In 2015 Boris Nemtsov, a prominent Putin critic, was shot dead on a Red Square bridge in close proximity to the Kremlin only two days before he was scheduled to take part in a peace rally against Russian involvement in the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine (Kramer, 2015). Nemtsov had been an outspoken critic of Putin since 2000 and famously compared Putin’s Russia to “Germany of the 1930s when Adolf Hitler called anyone who disagreed with him a traitor.” Nemtsov criticized Putin’s Russia as authoritarian and undemocratic and published a series of reports in 2008 providing details of the widespread corruption of the Russian government. Shortly before his death, Nemtsov had alleged that Putin and his inner circle of elites had massively profited from government development efforts prior to the 2014 Sochi Olympics (Calamur, 2015). Most notably, Nemtsov spoke out against the Kremlin’s political interference and military intervention in Ukraine. After Nemtsov’s murder, the Russian journalist Ksenya Sobchak stated that Nemtsov had been preparing a report proving the presence of Russian military fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, despite adamant denials of such Russian military involvement from the Kremlin (Росбалт, 2020).

Although a Moscow jury convicted five Chechens of Nemtsov’s murder as part of a murder-for-hire plot in June 2017, the case never determined who hired the murders, and the circumstances surrounding the death of the Putin critic imply that the murder had nothing to do with the convicted Chechens and was instead ordered by the Russian president and executed by the Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO) (Satter, Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?, 2017). Like Litvinenko, Nemtsov had always feared that he would be killed for speaking out against Putin and discussed these fears only with his mother for years. On February 10, 2017, only 17 days before his murder, Nemtsov shared his mother’s conviction that if he continued to publicly criticize the Russian President, Putin would “commission” – order someone to kill - her son in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Sobesdnik*. When the interviewer continued the conversation by asking Nemtsov if he believed that Putin would have him killed, Nemtsov replied, “You know, yes ... a little. Not as much as mom, but still.” Nemtsov insisted that he

wasn't afraid of Putin and cited that he never would have headed the opposition party if he feared for his life. The interviewer concluded the conversation by saying, "I hope that Putin will not kill you," to which Nemstov replied, "God grant. I hope so too" (Мильчановска, 2015).

Signs were present three years before Nemtsov's murder that Putin was planning to have the opposition leader killed. While in Oslo on February 28, 2012, Nemtsov received a warning from Ahmed Zakaev, the Chechen separatist leader in exile, that the Russian authorities were plotting to kill Nemtsov. While discussing the warning in the safety of a hotel room only 30 minutes later with Andrei Piontkovsky, a Russian political journalist, Putin appeared on the news and stated that members of the Russian opposition party were planning to kill one of their leaders and blame it on Putin's government (Satter, *Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?*, 2017, pp. 1-2).

In addition to the indicators that plans for the murder of Nemtsov were being made three years in advance of his assassination, Putin and the FSO are implicated by the circumstances of the murder itself. Nemtsov was shot on a bridge in the shadow of the Kremlin that is under 24/7 surveillance by the FSO and there are posts at each end of the bridge where FSO officers survey video information that allows a strike group to apprehend any suspicious person within 20 seconds. Although between 16 and 18 video cameras caught the murder on tape, the footage was never released by the FSO. There were two additional tapes that leaked on the internet, however, one taken from the camera of the Moscow television station TvTs and another from a dashboard cam. Analysis of these tapes by Igor Muzin, a Russian lawyer who specializes in interpretation of video footage, indicates that Nemtsov's murder was a deliberately planned military operation that could only have been successfully executed by a high-skilled, well-trained intelligence organization that coordinated their operatives via radio and telephone. The tapes revealed that there were two people on the bridge ahead of Nemtsov who jumped onto a platform above the river as the assassination began to avoid bullet fire, six people surveilling the scene from across the street, three couples who split up and took separate surveillance posts as the shooting began, three trucks that blocked access to the bridge, another truck driver which purposefully blocked the TvTs camera, and various cars and trucks which provided cover for the assassins. The combined footage from the TvTs tape and the dash cam reveal that between 30 and 40 people were directly involved in Nemtsov's assassination and such a tightly coordinated operation in the most heavily surveilled and guarded area of Moscow could have only been carried out by the FSO. By slowing down the footage, the listener is also able to distinguish the words "shooting

was not visible” and “Kornienko” coming from one of the trucks. Gennady Kornienko was a general in the FSB and one of Putin’s closest colleagues at the time (Satter, *Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?*, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Even more damning, the case against the Chechens falls apart because the convicted triggerman has a strong alibi. Zaur Dadaev, the alleged shooter, confessed to killing Nemtsov but later withdrew his confession and claimed that it was given under torture. Video footage from the street camera outside Dadaev’s apartment reveals that he entered the building at 4:03 p.m. on February 27 and did not leave again until 12:46 a.m. on February 28, whereas Nemtsov was assassinated on February 27 at 11:31 p.m. (Satter, *Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?*, 2017, pp. 4-5).

While there is no smoking gun undeniably incriminating Putin in the murders of Alexander Litvinenko or Boris Nemtsov, the evidence in both cases suggests that Putin ordered the killings. Putin’s Russia is a place where opposition cannot safely exist. The evidence regarding the murders of Litvinenko and Nemtsov indicate that Putin scores highly as a task-oriented leader. Understanding this about Putin makes it clear why Putin did not utilize political feasibility as the main screening dimension in stage one. Indeed, Putin has dealt with much political pushback from the international community and yet he did not consider the political fallout of the annexation of Ukraine as politically unacceptable enough to reject it as an option.

Consideration of Putin’s negative statements about those who have criticized him as well as the circumstances of the deaths of some of his most outspoken critics support the Keller and Yang’s conclusion that task-oriented people suppress opposition. Keller and Yang assert that task-oriented leaders are more likely to accept negative political reactions before deeming an option politically infeasible, but if the evidence supporting the theory that Putin ordered the assassination of Boris Nemtsov and others who oppose his rule is true, this implies that Putin does not accept domestic political pushback period. Because political opposition cannot exist safely in Putin’s Russia, it is difficult to determine the domestic political feasibility of his actions. For the Russian President who exerts complete control over the domestic affairs of his country via a top-down command structure, all options are politically feasible domestically, but it is Putin’s refusal to tolerate domestic political opposition that suggests that the political dimension does matter to him, which is inconsistent with Keller and Yang’s predictions about task oriented leaders. Although an estimated 27,000 Russians rallied in support of the annexation of Crimea in the first week of March 2014 and 90 percent of Russians polled supported the

reunification with Crimea, Putin's refusal to tolerate those who would disapprove of his decision to annex Crimea imply that the political dimension is not unimportant to him.

Difficulties applying political feasibility to the actions of the autocratic Russian President aside, the political dimension is not as important to Putin as geopolitical strategy. The political pushback Putin received from the international community for annexing Crimea support Keller and Yang's finding that task-oriented leaders are less likely to use the political dimension as the main screening dimension in stage one of order-sensitive PH choice theory. Additionally, Putin's efforts to silence his domestic political opposition support Keller and Yang's finding that task-oriented leaders are less likely to negotiate and consider the views of opposition, which explains why Putin would take Crimea by force rather than negotiate with Ukrainian political leaders. Understanding of Putin's operational code and his primary goal of reintegrating the former Soviet space into Russia support the conclusion that the primary screening dimension considered by Putin during the Crimean crisis was the geopolitical dimension.

Need for power

Need for power is the inclination to influence, control, or dominate other people and groups. Research shows that people who score highly in terms of need for power tend to take a zero-sum approach to bargaining situations, choosing to focus on self-interested payoffs rather than accommodation or mutual gains. Like those who score higher in terms of task orientation, the need for power characteristic in political leaders is often associated with a preference for autocratic decision-making methods and the suppression of dissent. Therefore, those who score higher in the need for power leadership characteristic are expected to be less motivated by a desire to please others and more likely to tolerate political opposition in the pursuit of options deemed attractive on the dimension that advances their personal policy objectives (Keller & Yang, 2008, pp. 691-2).

Need for power is undoubtedly the leadership characteristic that applies most directly to Putin. In one of the very first studies of Putin's operational code, Stephen Benedict Dyson argues that Putin believes in authoritarian leadership, citing that the content and tone of Putin's public statements persistently emphasize order and stability through law (Dyson, Drawing Policy Implications from the "Operational Code" of a "New" Political Actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin, 2001). From the very beginning of Putin's quest for power, he was forthcoming about his intention to be an enforcer of authority. In a February 2000 "Open Letter to Voters"

written after Putin was registered as a presidential candidate and published in the newspapers *Izvestia*, *Kommersant*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Putin stressed his belief in rule of law, specifically “the dictatorship of the law which treats everyone equally” (Putin, Open Letter to Voters, 2000), an oxymoronic statement. After two decades of removing the political freedoms of society and consolidating power to the state, it is apparent that Putin is an autocratic leader.

The political scientist Karen Dawisha argues that Putin has created a corrupt system of governance in which Putin and his inner circle of friendly elites – the oligarchs – have accumulated massive amounts of wealth via criminal means at the expense of the wider Russian population (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 7-9). One accusation about Putin’s abuse of his power in order to enrich himself and his inner circle is the subsidized imports scheme of 1991. In winter of 1991 due to concern that there would be famine in Russia, the government sold dollars to import food at one percent of its actual value and subsidized the difference with Western commodity credits. Corrupt Russian government officials sold the imported food to Russians at market price, so instead of relieving the country’s food crisis, a small circle of connected elites profited massively (Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, 2003, p. 48). Putin was directly involved in this abuse of power as the St. Petersburg official in charge of investment and trade. As a middleman, Putin shipped raw materials abroad under the guise of “saving Petersburg from famine,” signing off on deals with 19 foreign companies worth \$122 million in exchange for food which never arrived in Russia (Judah, 2013, pp. 86-7). These allegations against Putin were never properly investigated (Skillen, 2005, p. 270).

With Putin at the helm, Russia never diversified its economy and the oligarchs and Putin’s inner circle have grown rich from an unreformed and uncompetitive state capitalist economy dependent on oil, gas and minerals. The political leaders close to Putin have become multimillionaires and the oligarchs loyal to him have become billionaires to the degree that 110 billionaires now control 35 percent of Russia’s wealth. Dawisha also points out that Putin himself is likely one of the world’s wealthiest people. He has accumulated over 20 official residences, 58 planes, 4 yachts and over \$700,000 worth of designer watches that he is regularly photographed wearing. The watches alone account for over six times the Russian president’s yearly salary, as such he would not be able to keep the houses, boats, and planes if it wasn’t for the power he has as President (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 8, 20-1). Putin’s high score in the need for

power trait explain Putin's move to annex Crimea outright despite condemnation by the international community.

The vertical power structure of Putin's Russia illustrates both his belief in his ability to control events and need for power. While the framework of the current vertical power structure was created by Boris Yeltsin in the 90s, Putin established the vertical power structure as the presidential leadership approach of the Russian Federation. Putin established a strong government from the top of the hierarchy with an emphasis on discipline and the obligation to complete tasks. The abysmal Russian response to the *Kursk* submarine disaster in August 2000 highlighted the need for this specific type of vertical power structure from the earliest months of Putin's presidency. Putin completely adjusted his management style after the tragedy because he claimed that he had been "systematically misled" by the military authorities who Putin alleges lied to him and told him that the *Kursk* had sunk after crashing with a foreign vessel and was in the process of being recovered. The poor response from Russian authorities convinced the Russian President that in order to obtain subordination down the chain of officials, he would need to establish a vertical power structure. The process was completed after the 2004 Beslan terrorist attacks in which gubernatorial elections were eliminated and replaced by a governor appointment process with the justification that effective and reliable administrators rather than elected governed were necessary to fight terrorist threats (Monaghan, 2011, p. 8).

With Putin's high score in the need for power characteristic and consistent with Keller and Yang's prediction that those who score high in the need for power category will take a zero-sum approach to bargaining situations and choose to focus on self-interested payoffs over accommodation or mutual gains, it is unsurprising that Putin pressured the former Ukrainian President Yanukovich to stop Ukraine's drift away from Russian influence and towards a European Union trade deal ahead of the Euromaidan Revolution by forging a trade war with Ukraine and closing the Russian market to Ukrainian goods rather than negotiate a mutually beneficial deal (Plokhyy, 2017, p. 340). Keller and Yang also claim that leaders who score high on the need for power trait will show a preference for autocratic decision-making methods and the suppression of dissent, which we have seen in the Russian President. For these reasons it is unsurprising that the Russian President eventually annexed Crimea when he believed that it was inevitable that Ukraine would sign a trade deal with the EU and thus be less reliant on the former most powerful Soviet republic unless he responded with aggression, supporting my conclusion

that reintegration of the former Soviet space is the most important geopolitical policy goal for Putin.

Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring is classified as the extent to which an individual controls their own behavior in an effort to appear more approvingly to others. High self-monitors are more likely to be interested in the social acceptability of their behavior and will adjust their behavior situationally. Low self-monitors display more consistent patterns of behavior across situations and are less concerned with whether their actions will be accepted by society. There is evidence indicating that self-monitoring may be linked to conceptual complexity, as high self-monitors see the world in comparatively vague terms while low self-monitors view the world in unambiguous, black-and-white terms. Politically, low self-monitors are more likely to push the boundaries of political constraints, whereas high self-monitors are more likely to stay within such constraints (Keller & Yang, 2008, pp. 692-3).

Providing Putin with a score in the self-monitoring category via analysis of past statements and behaviors is the most difficult of all the traits outlined by Keller and Yang that determine a leader's noncompensatory threshold at which the decision maker would reject an option as political unacceptable and to what extent the opinions of constituents affect the final policy decision of the leader. Although Putin limits the civil rights of Russian citizens, he remains concerned with international perception of his leadership and making it seem as though Russia exists as a democracy, the most notorious example being the referendum on Crimea's annexation, the (albeit) fabricated results of which Putin utilized to justify his decision to annex Crimea to both a domestic and international audience. After the pro-Russian Aksyonov government was installed in Crimea, a referendum on Crimea's status was held on March 16. The referendum was illegal under Ukrainian law and the ballot provided voters with only two options: to join the Russian Federation, or to restore Crimea's 1992 constitution, a choice that constituted a significant increase in independence from Kyiv. There was no option on the ballot for Crimea to remain under its constitutional framework of the time. The results of the referendum were questionable. Although 60 percent of residents of Crimea are ethnic Russians and may have wished to join Russia, former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer points out that the results of the referendum were "suspiciously Soviet": 97 percent reportedly voted to be incorporated into the Russian Federation with an 83 percent voter turnout rate. Two months post-

referendum, a representative of Putin's Human Rights Council inadvertently revealed that turnout was around 30 percent and that about 50 percent voted to be incorporated into the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, on March 18 Russian and Crimea officials signed a "treaty of accession" and Russia formally incorporated Crimea as a federal subject (Pifer, 2019). The results of the referendum were unconvincing to the international community: the European Union, the G7 member states and NATO had all condemned the annexation as illegal and in violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Hunt & Klimkin, 2019). The United Nations Security Council proposed a resolution in March of 2014 that would have declared the Crimea referendum as illegitimate, but it was vetoed by Russia (Bellinger III, 2014).

Although the referendum was not enough to convince the international audience of the legitimacy of Putin's annexation of Crimea, it is indicative that Putin cares about how he is perceived. As such, the Russian President utilizes covert means including financial pressure and legal threats to censor the press. The Russian President's clear concern for how he is perceived would imply that he is a high self-monitor, but his refusal to allow the free press in Russia to monitor or criticize his policies suggests otherwise. While freedom of the press is a critical component of most democracies, beginning from when Putin became president in 2000 it has been systematically restricted. While campaigning for the presidency, those working to elect Putin declared that president has the authorization to "control the media to achieve national accord" and even more alarmingly, "punish critics" (Solomon, 2006, pp. 4-5).

As introduced in the *task vs. interpersonal emphasis* subchapter, Putin's critics and journalists in general are in danger under his political regime. While there are many who speculate that Putin was responsible for the controversial journalist Anna Politkovskaya's death, there is other evidence which suggests that the Putin administration also threatens detainment and violence against journalists who disapprove of his decisions. For example, the journalist Vladimir Babitsky often found fault with Russian military actions in Chechnya while employed by Radio Liberty to cover the Second Chechen War. While in Chechnya he was arrested by the Russian military and subjected to interrogation, although he was charged with no crime. In addition to Babitsky, the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a non-profit with the stated mission of the defense of journalists, journalism, and freedom of expression in Russia has reported that in the first three months of Putin's presidency alone, 88 journalists experienced similar arrests and interrogations (Solomon, 2006, pp. 5-6). This pattern has continued throughout Putin's 20 years

in power. In October of 2009, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported “the alarming incidence of threats, violent assaults, and murders of journalists and human rights defenders [in Russia]... has created a climate of fear and a chilling effect on the media” (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2009). Journalists in Putin’s Russia are consistently harassed, detained, attacked, or murdered for their work (BBC, 2019).

As previously mentioned, rather than directly censor the media Putin uses financial pressure to silence critics, especially television networks which do not portray him in a flattering light (Solomon, 2006, p. 5). For Putin, control of television networks is paramount because of the way television coverage had swayed the Russian populace for or against Putin’s political predecessors. For example, every evening the Soviet nightly news had portrayed Brezhnev as a senile old man, whereas television had presented Gorbachev as the savior of the Union before criticizing him as a failure when he couldn’t compete with Yeltsin (Judah, 2013, p. 135).

After NTV, a subsidiary of Media-Most, aired a television program two days before the 2000 presidential elections that suggested that the FSB had orchestrated the 1999 Ryazan apartment bombings, Putin managed to seize the entire Media-Most empire (Gessen, 2012, pp. 305-6). It was well known that Putin strongly disliked the oligarch who owned the majority share in Media-Most, Vladimir Gusinsky, not only because of the Ryazan program but also because Gusinsky had refused to support Putin in the presidential elections (Judah, 2013, p. 136). Gusinsky owned 60 percent of Media-Most and the state gas monopoly, Gazprom, held a 30 percent share, and the final 10 belonged primarily to top managers within Media-Most. Gusinsky was able to own such a large share largely because of state-sponsored loans, which Gusinsky assumed would be forgiven because of the media campaign NTV ran to reelect Yeltsin in 1996. To seize NTV, one of the last independent television channels in Russia, Putin called in the state-sponsored loan early, which Gusinsky was unable to repay. Thus Gazprom, the government owned natural gas giant, gained control of Media-Most and its satellites, including NTV (Gessen, 2012, pp. 304-6).

The television network ORT was seized by Putin in a similar manner after it aired negative coverage of Putin’s response to the *Kursk* submarine disaster. The station showed images of the Russian President continuing his vacation in Sochi while 23 sailors remained alive and trapped in the submarine and ran footage of him providing poor excuses to the grieving

families of the young sailors when it became clear that all 118 on board had died before a rescue mission could be organized. ORT coverage accused Putin of preferring that Russian men die rather than accept an offer of rescue assistance from a foreign power to save them (Judah, 2013, p. 143). Putin's callous handling of the catastrophe resulted in a 10 percent drop in support for him in the polls. The *Kursk* tragedy and the media fallout were a disaster for Putin and further proof that the media could make or break his political career (Dawisha, 2015, p. 594).

In the wake of the overwhelmingly negative media coverage of his response to the *Kursk* disaster, in September Putin announced that as a result of "false information on the activities of the federal" authorities, he would implement the Information Security Doctrine to increase state control over the media. Putin claimed that "information pollution" was undermining national security, therefore moving forward the state would have the authority to restrict circulation of not only military and security information but also any political, economic, or environmental information considered critical to national security. Under the Information Security Doctrine journalists who published such information would be charged with espionage (Dawisha, 2015, p. 597). In October, Putin accused Boris Berezovsky, the oligarch who held the majority share of ORT of airing coverage of prostitutes pretending to be the grieving wives and sisters of victims of the *Kursk* disaster and opened criminal investigations against him before issuing a warrant for his arrest. Under intense pressure, Berezovsky sold his shares of ORT to Roman Abramovich, an oligarch loyal to Putin, who immediately handed the shares over to the state. In this way Putin was able to bring one of the last two independent television stations in Russia under Kremlin control (Judah, 2013, pp. 145-8).

By the end of Putin's second presidential term, 90 percent of the Russian media was directly or indirectly in the Russian President's control (Judah, 2013, p. 148), which makes it nearly impossible for independent sources to criticize his policies. As it stands today, as of 2019 Russia was ranked by the NGO Freedom House as 83rd out of 100 countries for press freedom (BBC, 2019). Although Putin is clearly concerned enough about public opinion of his leadership to refrain from directly censoring the press, it is inappropriate to designate him as a high self-monitor because of his demonstrated intolerance to opposition and the absence of a free press in Russia. Conversely, perhaps Putin's need to be portrayed favorably in the media would imply that he is a high-self monitor. Notably, Keller and Yang conclude that low self-monitors display more consistent patterns of behavior, which applies to the Russian president's persistent

suppression of dissent and attempts to control the media over his two decades in power. While it is difficult to label Putin as a low or high self-monitor, like low self-monitors Putin's past behaviors point to an increased likelihood of pushing the boundaries of what the nonbiased international community would consider politically acceptable.

Distrust

Within PH theory, distrust is defined as the belief that the actions of others are often dishonest and one should consider with doubt the reasoning behind the behavior of others. Individuals with higher levels of mistrust tend to consider the world as more hostile and their competitors as more contentious than individuals who exhibit a lower level of mistrust. Distrust of the outside world and subsequent magnified threat perceptions create a leader with a greater desire to use forceful policy instruments to eliminate these threats. Furthermore, individuals who exhibit distrust are more inclined to tolerate domestic opposition to the use of force, because these individuals believe that their decision to use force is justified in order to handle threats to national interests (Keller & Yang, 2008, p. 693).

Putin distrusts the common West, largely because of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion up to Russian borders. Keller and Yang argue that leaders who exhibit distrust are more likely to utilize force in response to threats, and this distrust is not only a critical component of Putin's personality that affects his decision-making process but is a direct cause of Putin's annexation of Crimea. Putin's aggression in Ukraine is a response to his conviction that the West broke a promise not to expand NATO up to Russia's borders. The U.S.S.R. had stepped away from former Warsaw Pact member states after ratification of the 1990 Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany and assumed that NATO would not extend membership to these states so close to Russian territory. This understanding was never made officially in writing, but the NATO Secretary-General at the time, Manfred Wörner gave a verbal assurance when he said "The very fact that we are not ready to deploy NATO troops beyond the territory of the Federal Republic gives the Soviet Union firm security guarantees." When NATO expanded in 1999 to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic and again in 2004 with the addition of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – with the Baltic States at Russia's border - the security status quo was shattered and Putin realized that Russia could not trust any NATO assurance (Kühn, 2010, p. 2). As the primary purpose of NATO at its founding in 1949 was to provide collective security

against the U.S.S.R., it is easy to see why NATO's expansion would foster deep distrust in Putin's mind about the intentions of the Western nations (Westervelt, *The Case Against NATO Expansion*, 2019).

Especially horrifying to Putin was NATO's 1999 intervention in the Kosovo crisis, which it did despite Russian protests and without United Nations Security Council approval. Reflecting on NATO intervention in Yugoslavia while addressing the Duma following the annexation of Crimea and subsequent referendum, Putin said, "It was hard to believe, even seeing it with my own eyes, that at the end of the 20th century, one of Europe's capitals, Belgrade, was under missile attack for several weeks, and then came the real [military] intervention" (Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 2014). Putin took such great offense to NATO intervention in Kosovo because of Russia's longstanding ties with Serbia (Marten, 2017, p. 11) and the sense of religious brotherhood with fellow Orthodox Christian Serbs but was powerless to stop the intervention as by bypassing the U.N., NATO prevented Russia from wielding its Security Council veto (O'Hanlan, 2017, pp. 13-14).

Putin directly expressed his frustration about NATO expansion and the way it had eroded his trust in the West during the February 2007 Munich Security Conference. The Russian President asserted, "I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" Putin shared his feeling that Russia is in a state of insecurity when he said, "We are seeing greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law... It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasize this – no one feels safe!" Putin, consistent with Keller and Yang's assertion that individuals with higher levels of mistrust tend to consider the world as more hostile and their competitors as more contentious, accused the United States of provoking an arms race and overstepping its national borders "in every way" in his speech (Putin, *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, 2007).

Putin also resents the Western government-funded organizations which during the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine provided advice and financing to local civil society groups at the helm of revolutionary political efforts that ousted leaders who had been friendlier to Russia. In 2008, NATO declared that both Georgia and

Ukraine would “become members.” As is explained further in the next section discussing Putin’s degree of military assertiveness, in 2008 – the same year that it was declared that Georgia would become a NATO member – a five-day war between Georgia and the Russian Federation ended with Russian forces occupying the contested Georgian territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia. During the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, leaked recordings circulated by Russia revealed U.S. officials debating which Ukrainian politicians to support as replacements for Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russia Ukrainian president that Putin had supported. The 2014 Ukraine crisis thus confirmed Putin’s distrust in the West and represented Putin’s greatest fears, including the encroachment of the Western economic and political model into Russia’s near abroad, Western interference in favor of anti-Putin political change, and the risk of losing Russian military assets in the Crimean port of Sevastopol (Marten, 2017, p. 12). This fear, which stems from Putin’s deep distrust of the West, was a direct factor in Putin’s decision to annex Crimea. With the Revolution of Dignity, Putin witnessed the pro-Russian Ukrainian president toppled with Western backing and subsequently distrusts the West who he fears will do the same to him (Westervelt, *The Case Against NATO Expansion*, 2019).

In fact, Putin directly ties his frustration with continued NATO expansion towards Russia’s borders again in his infamous speech to the Russian Duma following the illegal referendum. In the speech, Putin said, “Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this city of Russia’s military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia” (Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 2014). If Ukraine had joined NATO or the European Union, Putin’s revisionist strategy with its basis in the geopolitical influence of the former Soviet Union would have been shattered. The high level of distrust exhibited by Putin before the Euromaidan protests illuminate his decision to annex Crimea as Keller and Yang show that distrust of the outside world creates magnified threat perceptions and manifests leaders with a greater inclination to use force to neutralize these threats.

Military assertiveness

Military assertiveness is classified as a leader’s mindset about the use of force as a foreign policy instrument. Those who are less likely to be assertive militarily are often referred to

as “doves” in the international relations community, whereas those who consider military action as an effective and necessary policy tool are referred to as “hawks.” Hawks have a negative perception of the effectiveness of accommodative strategies and will often see aggression as necessary to protect vital national interests. Similar to leaders who exhibit distrust, hawks are more willing to tolerate domestic disapproval of the use of force than doves (Keller & Yang, 2008, pp. 693-4).

Putin has proven himself to be a hawk. At the turn of the century, before Putin officially ascended to power, the Russian Federation was on the brink of war and the Yeltsin administration was preparing to reinvade Chechnya, a federal subject of the Russian Federation. Military clashes in the Caucasus were escalating and the Kremlin was losing control over the regions that lashed out in what Russian leaders considered insubordination. The Siberian coal-mining oblast of Kemerovo, for example, was building up its own hard currency and gold reserves. Yeltsin made the decision to appoint Putin as his Prime Minister and successor one day after Arab-led Islamist militants left rebel Chechnya and entered Russian-controlled Dagestan. At the time of Putin’s appointment in August of 1999, he had an approval rating of one percent, but the hard stance he took against the rebel Chechens skyrocketed his popularity. Before the turmoil of the Dagestani invasion had settled, a series of apartment bombings killed over 305 and injured more than 1,000 in Russia, which deeply ingrained a fear of terrorism into the populace. Putin blamed Chechen terrorists for the carnage and promised Russia “we will waste them in their outhouses.” After Russia reinvaded Chechnya, Putin’s approval rating went through the roof. By December 1999 Putin’s military aggression against had seen his approval rating reach 79 percent and as such, he handily won the 2000 presidential elections (Judah, 2013, pp. 110, 114-5). Based on his actions leading up to the Second Chechen War, it is apparent that Putin views military assertiveness as a necessary foreign policy tool, and the way it boosted his popularity explains why he continues to use it.

It would be a mistake, however, to not mention the affect that the Second Chechen War had on Putin’s worldview. In the summer of 1999, when he was still the prime minister, Putin believed that Russia was on the brink of a falling apart on religious lines, like the way Yugoslavia had unraveled. In *First Person*, Putin reflected “I was convinced that if we didn’t stop the extremists right away, we’d be facing a second Yugoslavia on the entire territory of the Russian Federation: the Yugoslavization of Russia.” This quote shows that for Putin, who has

difficulty accepting the dissolution of the Soviet Union, further fragmentation of Russia is unacceptable. Putin cites in *First Person* that he became genuinely frightened of the consequences for Russia if Chechnya were given independence when defending Russian military aggression in the region: “I was frightened when I imagined the real consequences. I started wondering how many refugees Europe and America could absorb because the disintegration of such an enormous country would have been a global catastrophe” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, pp. 141-2). Putin’s fear for the safety of Russian citizens as explained in the context of the Second Chechen War also offers insight into why Putin views military aggression as a necessary policy tool.

Putin offered an explanation in *First Person* that illuminated why he is confident that he made the correct decision when he gave the orders to militarily invade Chechnya: “I’ll tell you what guided me and why I was so convinced of the threat that hung over our country. Everyone says I’m harsh, even brutal ... But I have never for a second believed ... that Chechnya would limit itself to its own independence. It would become a beach-head for further attacks on Russia... When I compare the scale of the possible tragedy to what we have there now, I do not have a second of doubt that we are doing the right thing” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, pp. 141-2). For Putin, the stakes in Chechnya were high and as such, the new president had no choice but to prioritize the war effort above all else. The first six months of his presidency were consumed with military planning, the subsequent invasion of the rebel region, and all-out war in Chechnya. After the Russian Army laid siege on Grozny, the U.N. described it as “the most destroyed city on earth” (Judah, 2013, pp. 125-6). Putin took such a hard line against Chechnya because he viewed the war’s success as a barometer of his success as a president and boldly declared in *First Person* “My mission, my historic mission – it may sound lofty, but it’s true – is to resolve the situation in the Northern Caucasus” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 139). This stress of the war on Putin’s mind and government molded him into a wartime president from his very first months in power.

Foreshadowing the aggressive foreign policy he would pursue in the former Soviet sphere of influence, Putin complained in his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, “They [American military actions] bring us to the abyss of one conflict after another... political solutions are becoming impossible” (Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 2007). Indeed, Ukraine is not the only country neighboring

Russia that has become a victim of Putin's military assertiveness. In the two decades that Putin has been in power, Russia has purposefully provoked a series of wars and crises in its near abroad, most notably the 2008 invasion of Georgia. When Georgia became independent in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, two civil wars broke out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite being officially independent, Georgia was reliant on Russia as the Kremlin helped negotiate ceasefires in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and sent Russian military forces to the two breakaway, de-facto autonomous states within Georgia. The presence of these Russian "peacekeeping forces" perpetuated a series of violent outbreaks between Georgia and the two de-facto states. The most contentious erupted in 2008 and created a five-day war in South Ossetia in which the Russian Federation bombed Georgian territories. The war ended in Russia's favor with a ceasefire and Russian military forces erected a barbed wire fence separating Georgia from South Ossetia, leading to use of the term "creeping occupation" as Russian forces have slowly moved the fence deeper into recognized Georgian territory (Otarashvili, 2017).

It must be noted that it was Dmitri Medvedev, not Vladimir Putin, who was the President of the Russian Federation at the time of its war with Georgia, but it was Putin who laid the groundwork for Russian intervention in the former Soviet republic. There is evidence that as early as 2003, Putin already had a military response to the crisis in mind: Tony Blair wrote in his memoirs that during his visit to Russia at the end of that year, Putin said "Suppose we act against Georgia, which is a base for terrorism against Russia-what would you say if we took Georgia out?" As introduced in the previous *distrust* subchapter, Putin was clear at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest in early April that NATO enlargement towards Russian territory was unacceptable. In response then-U.S. President George W. Bush's proposal to offer a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine as well as then-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's determination to see his country ascend to NATO membership, Putin stated at the conclusion of the conference that NATO expansion to Russia's borders "would be taken in Russia as a direct threat to the security of our country" (Evans, 2008). While reflecting on the war's 5th anniversary in 2013, Saakasvili stated in an interview that he had met Putin in February 2008 and said that he told the Russian President that he was prepared to refuse NATO membership for Georgia in exchange for Russia's assistance reincorporating the break-away territories. Saakasvili reported that Putin replied, "We do not exchange your territories for your geopolitical orientation." When Saakashvili told Putin that the situation in South Ossetia could

not get any worse, Putin apparently replied “Here you are very wrong. You will see that very soon it will be much, much, much worse” (Van Herpen, 2014, p. 234). On April 16, 2008, in the final days of Putin’s second presidential term, the outgoing president signed a decree sanctioning official ties between the Russian Federation and the secessionists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The decree also recognized legislative documents written by the successionist authorities (Socor, 2008).

The Treaty of Alliance and Protection, which was signed by Putin himself and ended the brief war, almost completely integrated South Ossetia into Russia. The Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili stated that Georgia considers the treaty as “a move aimed at annexation” and although Russia now recognizes South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, the European Union refused to recognize the agreement and indicated that it was a threat to stability and security in the region (Heritage & Soldatkin, 2015). One of the treaty’s clauses stipulates South Ossetia pass control of all defense matters to Russia, including the defense of South Ossetia’s borders. Critically, South Ossetia borders Georgia, so the treaty gives Russia grounds to potentially incite another military conflict with the former Soviet republic. The treaty also contains an all-encompassing military dimension that stipulates that any aggression by foreign actors – such as Georgia – against South Ossetia will be considered an act of aggression against Russia, which would permit Russia to potentially instigate future wars with Georgia (Otarashvili, 2017).

Putin scores high on the military assertiveness category as he has never hesitated to use aggression as a foreign policy tool. Putin’s decision to invade of Chechnya in 2000 and the evidence which implies that he orchestrated Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in 2008 show that Putin is unlikely to utilize accommodative strategies and that the Russian President views aggression as a necessary policy tool to protect the interests of his country. Based on Keller and Yang’s prediction, Putin’s high scores in the distrust and military assertiveness categories, as well as the evidence which shows that he believes military action is an effective and necessary policy tool mean that Putin has a high predilection to use force to resolve conflict. With Putin’s predilection to use force so clear, the Russian annexation of Crimea in Ukraine in 2014 is not surprising.

Sense Making

Analysis of Putin's biography show that Putin experienced several crisis situations throughout his life and before he became the President of the Russian Federation. Like an individual in crisis would, Putin engaged in sense making in an attempt to understand the chaos around him. Putin is a leader whose childhood was defined by the suffering of his parents during WWII, whose career was characterized by his time working for the KGB in East Germany for a declining authoritarian bloc, and whose political origins are defined by his early political career as a senior official in St. Petersburg in a failing democracy (Judah, 2013, pp. 62-3). Analysis of the crisis points in Putin's life as well as the sense making opportunities that came with them show why Putin perceived the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine as a threat that had to be handled with force.

Putin's parents suffered indescribably during World War II, an experience that was not unique among Soviet citizens at the time. Putin has claimed that his parents told him very little about their early lives, although Putin shared that his father was born in St. Petersburg in 1911 when World War I made the risk of starvation a real threat for everyone in the city. Putin's parents wed at age 17, his mother Maria worked in a factory and his father Vladimir worked for the Soviet Navy. During WWII Putin's father began working for the NKVD, the notorious Soviet agency that oversaw the U.S.S.R.'s prisons and labor camps. Putin's parents lost two children under horrific circumstances before the Russian president was born: Albert, who died in infancy, and Viktor, who died at the age of two during the Siege of Leningrad. During the 872-day blockade of the city, Viktor was taken from Putin's mother and placed in a children's home for protection, where he contracted diphtheria and passed away. Putin's elder brother was buried in a mass grave at a location that was unknown to Putin's parents as Viktor was one of over 500,000 people who died during the siege (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 5).

In a 2015 article titled, "Life is so simple and cruel," Putin shared the unimaginable horrors his parents endured throughout the siege of Leningrad, and described that at one point his mother was so weak and frail from starvation that she was presumed dead and picked up to be laid out with the corpses. Putin's father saw her breathing and screamed to the orderlies, "she is still alive!" to which they replied, "she won't survive." Putin's father attacked them with his crutches – his leg had been shot and shrapnel that was never removed would continue to cause

him immense pain for the rest of his life – and insisted that she be brought back inside. The orderlies obeyed but ominously relied, “Well, as you say, we will do, but know that we will not come here again for another two, three, or four weeks. You yourself will understand then,” implying that it was inevitable that she would pass away and Putin’s father would regret being left with her corpse (Путин, Жизнь такая простая штука и жестокая, 2015). Putin concluded the story of his mother’s near-death experience by saying, “By some miracle, she lived. She made it through the entire blockade of Leningrad.” Putin’s father, too, was one of a lucky four who survived out of the 28 men in his unit. Putin explained that while serving on an NKVD demolitions battalion behind enemy lines, local residents turned the Russian unit in to the Nazis. Surrounded by Nazis on all sides, Putin’s father jumped into a swamp and remained beneath the surface breathing through a hollow reed until the German dogs had passed by and it was safe to resurface (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 6). For these reasons Putin’s post-war birth in October 1952 to 41-year-old parents who had both barely survived the carnage and already lost two other sons can be considered an anomaly.

It is difficult to imagine that the experiences of Putin’s parents did not have an impact on his own upbringing and psychological development. Putin seldom discusses his older brothers but has visited Piskaryovskoye Cemetery, where it was later confirmed that Viktor Putin was laid to rest along with thousands of others who perished during the siege of Leningrad. Avidan Milevsky, a psychotherapist, explains that early family and sibling dynamics have a deep and persistent effect on adult life to the extent that future relationships, psychological health, and career decisions have all been proven to be affected by early family and sibling relationships. As Putin only rarely brings up the deaths of his brothers and suffering of his parents during WWII, Milevsky suspects that the repression of such a critical aspect of his family history had created a complex internal struggle with these memories. Put differently, many of Putin’s choices are sense making in response to being raised by overprotective parents whose eldest children died before the Russian President was born. For example, Putin may have chosen to pursue judo to prove to his parents that they had no reason to worry about him, although his overprotective mother still perceived the sport as dangerous and initially disapproved of her son’s choice (Milevsky, 2014).

Putin, as those who are raised as only children often are, is most comfortable working alone. His grammar school teacher remembers that he didn’t like socializing but was quite

disciplined when it came to sports. Putin himself admitted that as a child on the schoolyard, “I didn’t try to command people. It was more important to preserve my independence” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 16). Consistent with what psychotherapists would expect from an only child, Putin pursued a solitary career path that required little teamwork and was determined from childhood to work someday for the KGB. Putin explained in *First Person*, “Even before I graduated from school, I wanted to work in intelligence. It was a dream of mine, although it seemed about as likely as a flight to Mars” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 22). As Putin was fascinated by books and spy movies such as *the Sword and the Shield* and marveled at how the work of one man could achieve what entire armies couldn’t: “One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people.” Despite the objections of his parents and athletic coaches, Putin was determined to become a KGB spy, and even went so far as to visit the office of the KGB Directorate as a 9th grader to inquire as to what he needed to do to work for them. His parents and coaches were concerned that he would be rejected from law school and be forced to join the army, but Putin admitted that “no body could stop me” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 23). As we have seen in the *task vs. interpersonal emphasis* subchapter, Putin tends to be task-orientated, which is consistent with his desire to become a spy stemming from the value Putin places on the impact that one man can have. Like other task-oriented leaders, Putin is unlikely to accommodate the feelings of others, which is consistent with Putin’s refusal to bend to the will of his parents and coaches and instead forge his own career path as a spy.

Putin achieved his dream of becoming a KGB officer and was working for the foreign intelligence division in Dresden when the Berlin Wall fell, which was one of the most significant crisis moments of his life. In December of 1989, an angry mob of East Germans stormed the Stasi headquarters before surrounding the KGB offices with weapons it had stolen from the Stasi armory. Putin’s boss was out of the office and as such, the future Russian president was acting head of mission at that time, so he contacted the Soviet military command and requested the immediate dispatch of troops to protect the employees and confidential files in the office. The answer Putin received from the general on the other side of the phone line shook him to his core: “We cannot do anything without orders from Moscow, and Moscow is silent” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 65). In that moment, Putin realized that he was on his own. Putin reflected in *First Person*, “I got the feeling that the country no longer existed. That it had

disappeared. It was clear that the Union was ailing. And it had a terminal disease without a cure - a paralysis of power” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 79). Putin’s entire political career and search for power and control can be considered a sense making attempt of this feeling of being left in a power vacuum as a result of a failed state. The President of the Russian Federation has dedicated his career to solving the “paralysis of power” problem that crippled the Soviet Union as well as post-Soviet Russia throughout the 1990s. Allen Lynch explains, “In virtually every instance where Putin has had to choose between the liberties of individuals, social groups, and society as a whole on the one hand and the power of state on the other, Putin has bet on the state.” The effect this event has had on Putin’s mission of consolidating power back to the state is clear (Lynch, 2011, p. 25). When Putin called for backup in 1989 he received the answer “Moscow is silent,” but Putin has created a system where he himself is Moscow.

The collapse of the Soviet Union itself was also a crisis moment for Putin. In *First Person*, when reflecting on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Putin admitted, “I really regretted that the Soviet Union had lost its position in Europe...I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That’s what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 80). As was established by the *Operational Code* chapter, Putin considers the dissolution of the Soviet Union to be the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century and accomplishing his mission of recreating a Russian zone of influence in the former Soviet space is one of his strategic goals. Putin’s policies that force closer ties between Ukraine and Russia, such as interference in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election in favor of a pro-Russian executive, imply that Putin has difficulty both accepting and making sense of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In response to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine that resulted from this Russian interference, Putin said “If you have permanent revolutions you risk plunging the post-Soviet space into endless conflict,” (BBC, 2004) which proves Putin still considers countries in Russia’s near abroad, such as Ukraine, within the context of the former Soviet Union.

As a result of this trauma and difficulty making sense of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin’s policies as president have been formulated with one mission in mind: to restore Russia to a position of global importance. The decision to annex Crimea can also be seen as such an attempt to restore Russia to its former position of global strength. After the end of WWII, the

U.S.S.R. had stood for decades as one of two global superpowers, but its collapse in 1991 left Russia irrelevant. Shaun Walker, a Moscow-based journalist, explains that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Putin did not seem bothered by the human costs or “material tribulations,” but instead mourned the national humiliation of a global superpower failing. One such example of Russia’s weakness after the unraveling of the Soviet Union is in 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia: Bill Clinton had called Yeltsin in 1998 to inform him that the U.S. was discussing air strikes against Serbia, to which Yeltsin responded with a firm no. Despite Russia’s adamant protests, the bombing raids went ahead anyway. Thus, as a way of coping with the humiliating unraveling of one of the world’s most powerful empires, Putin intends to recover Russia’s lost importance and restore a sense of pride in Russia amongst Russian people (Walker, *The Humiliation that Pushed Putin to Try and Recapture Russian Glory*, 2019).

Putin is not the only Russian who was deeply affected by the collapse of the U.S.S.R.: It would be difficult to understate the suffering the vast majority of Russians experienced in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Union. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the political system collapsed, the imperial periphery – such as Ukraine – formed new nations, and the birth country of nearly 300,000,000 people ceased to exist. Many ethnic Russians, including Putin, acutely felt the loss of not only their home country and communist ideology, but also their Soviet identity. Presented here is another sense making moment for Vladimir Putin: As summarized by Walker, “If they were no longer Soviet citizens, then who were they?” (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 7).

In addition to grappling with a state-wide existential crisis, the majority of Russians were plunged into hopeless poverty in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the corruption that came with the new “democratic” government. Many of the problems boil down to the failed transition from communism to capitalism (Westervelt, *Corruption, Organized Crime, and the Absence of Democracy in Modern Russia*, 2015). During the privatization process, those who acted shrewdly during the transition became the multi-millionaire oligarch class, while the rest suffered through economic depression and mass poverty (Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, 2003, p. 46). Although Putin himself rose quickly through the political ranks during the “wild nineties,” starting as a mid-ranking bureaucrat to eventually becoming the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg under Anatoly Sobchak, most of the Russian population suffered in brutal conditions. Statistics of the time illustrate the pervasive influence of

the lawlessness on society and the deep psychological effect on the Russian populace: Between the fall of the U.S.S.R. and Putin's ascension to the presidency at least 150,000 Russians were murdered, which was the 4th highest rate in the world and approximately 150,000 cars were stolen annually (Judah, 2013, p. 103). New freedoms, including the ability to travel and trade across borders, created an uptick in both drug use and trafficking that subsequently resulted in a nine-fold increase in the number of addicts between 1992 and 2010. The increase in drug use amongst Russia's already unhealthy population compounded the demographic crisis, leading to an increase in associated problems including the spread of hepatitis, drug-resistant tuberculosis, HIV and AIDS: The rate of new HIV infections doubled every six to 12 months between 1995 and 2001 (Galeotti, 2016, p. 2). By the new millennium the life expectancy of men dropped to 57 years, meaning that a teenage boy born in 2000 was less likely to grow up to the age of 60 than his great-grandfather born in 1900 (Judah, 2013, p. 103).

As Russia was plagued by corruption, disorder, and economic depression in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the idea of democracy was delegitimized in the minds of the public (Judah, 2013, p. 103). Opinion polls at the time are thus unsurprising: In March of 1993, 63 percent of Russians polled indicated that they regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union and by 2000 – the year Putin's ascension to the presidency – the number had risen to 75 percent (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 14) with many reporting that they were ready “to put order over democracy” (Judah, 2013, p. 103).

It is partially because of this sentiment among Russians – that the need for order after the “wild nineties” was more important than the individual freedoms of citizens – that Putin so easily consolidated power to the Russian state and specifically to the Presidential Administration. As was described in the *Decision Making* chapter, the ways in which Putin has restructured the Russian Federation as an autocracy are numerous: Putin created a top-down power structure, he seized control of the media, he suppressed and continues to suppress opposition, he has exhibited a pattern of using military aggression to keep Russia's near abroad weak and divided, and his Presidential Administration has developed a cult of personality portraying Putin as Russia's savior based on a campaign of state sponsored propaganda. All these actions that Putin has taken to consolidate power are sense making attempts: Like many of his fellow Russians, after the

pathetic way in which the Soviet Union unraveled and the chaos of the 1990s, Putin craves order and control.

The Euromaidan Revolution was at its core about the Ukrainian determination to write its own future, and the prevailing political sentiment at the time for closer integration with the European Union and more distance from Russia, which was why Putin perceived it as a threat. The scar left by the loss of the Soviet Union was certainly in the forefront of Putin's mind when he took advantage of the widespread disorder caused by the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and annexed Crimea. Sources indicate that even before Yanukovych was ousted, a proposal to extort the instability in Ukraine in order to annex Crimea and eventually destabilize and annex other parts of eastern and southern Ukraine to Russia was being discussed by the Putin administration in early February of 2014. We can deduce by the events that follow that Putin is serious about not losing Ukraine from its post-Soviet sphere of influence. Putin himself admitted himself that he personally decided to "return" Crimea to Russia after consultation with his political advisors and military commanders on February 22, 2014. Therefore, it can be concluded from Putin's decision to annex Crimea that Putin considered losing Ukraine from Russia's post-Soviet sphere of influence as a line in the sand. In this way, the trade war Russia forged with Ukraine to put economic pressure on the country that was drifting away from the influence of its former empire as well as the \$15 billion Russian loan to save the corrupted Ukrainian government can be considered sense making by Putin. As is made clear by works such as *Putin's Kleptocracy*, Putin is Moscow, and he made these decisions while grappling with the realization that the most important former Soviet Republic to Russia was teetering on the brink of making a permanent break from its former imperialist overlord. Putin called the annexation an act of historical justice that partially corrected the damage done to Russia by the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Plokhy, 2017, p. 347). The annexation of Crimea was thusly the culmination of Putin's process to make sense of the loss of the Soviet Union.

Meaning making

Although Putin's leadership characteristics and personality traits suggest that he would be unbothered by domestic public opinion of his actions, the meaning making he has endeavored upon both before and after the Crimean annexation would suggest otherwise. As was introduced in the *Sense Making* chapter, Putin is not alone among Russians who regret the dissolution of the

Soviet Union and put great emphasis on the geopolitical significance of the former Soviet space. Over the past two decades, Putin has endeavored to make meaning for those who identify as Russian at home and abroad by drumming up Russian nationalism, rewriting Russian history, and championing the *Russkiy mir* movement. These meaning making efforts have culminated with the decision to annex Crimea.

“If they were no longer Soviet citizens, who were they?” is a sense making question. At the root of Putin’s meaning making efforts lies the question, “How can the Russian identity be positively redefined in the wake of the loss of the Soviet system?” In late 1999, several days before he officially became president of the Russian Federation, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published an article written by Putin who reflected on his duties as president: “For the first time in the past 200-300 years, Russia faces the real danger that it could be relegated to the second, or even the third echelon of global powers.” The article mentioned poverty and social upheaval, but it was primarily a call to restore the health of the Russian state rather than to improve the quality of life of its people. The spirit of the article called for Russians to unite with the goal of ensuring that Russia secure “upper-echelon” nation status. Putin concluded, “We are running out of time to avoid this. We must strain all intellectual, physical, and moral forces of the nation. We need coordinated, creative work. Nobody will do it for us. Everything depends on us and us alone: Our ability to see the size of the threat, to consolidate forces, and to set our minds to prolonged and difficult work” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 219). This patriotic call to action to secure “upper-echelon” status for Russia is indicative of the shame and confusion Putin has felt in the wake of the loss of the Soviet Union.

In *The Long Hangover*, Shaun Walker begins with Putin’s 1999 article as he explains the meaning making of the Putin regime to prompt ordinary Russians to take pride in their country again. Walker argues that Putin is trying to portray to the people that the widespread suffering of the 1990s— including “organized crime, growing cruelty and violence, alcoholism and drug addiction, and the weakening of the family and its education role” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 210) – were a “symptom of broader malaise” (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 16). Throughout the article Putin continually emphasized that the health of the state is the most important problem that needed to be addressed (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 16), posing such questions as “How can we make the new, market mechanisms

work to full capacity? How can we overcome the still deep ideological and political split in society? What strategic goals can consolidate Russian society? What place can Russia occupy in the international community in the 21st century?” (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 211). None of these questions directly address the individual suffering of Russian people throughout the Soviet period or the 1990s, it is instead implied that once these questions are answered and these problems addressed, the quality of life for Russian people will automatically improve. Putin’s article also touched on the many iterations of Russia’s past political systems, including communism, an approach which was intended to bolster the strength of the state in the eyes of Russians (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 16).

To accomplish his mission of strengthening the state in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin had to first develop a sense of nation and national pride amongst Russians (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 16). Putin’s first inaugural address thus concluded with, “I believe it my sacred duty to cement the people of Russia together, to rally citizens around clear goals and tasks – and to remember every day and every minute of my service to the Fatherland that we have on homeland and one people, that all of us have on common future” (Putin, *Inauguration Speech of President of the Russian Federation*, 2000). As his first presidential term progressed and he was elected for a second term in 2004, it became increasingly clear that he intended to unify Russians based on a sense of pride in their historical achievements. In his 2004 inaugural address, Putin strengthened his efforts to create the feeling of nation by stating, “We are all the inheritors of Russia and its thousand years of history, the inheritors of this land that has given birth to exceptional sons and daughters, workers, warriors, and creators. They have passed down to us this huge, great state.” The speech referred to the history of Russia many more times, and he continued, “There is no doubt that we can draw strength from our past. But even the most glorious history is not enough to ensure us a better life. Today’s generations of Russians must reinforce this grandeur through their own acts. Only then will our descendants be able to feel pride in these pages that we are writing in the history of our great nation” (Putin, *Transcript of the Inauguration of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia*, 2004). With these words, Putin intends to drum up Russian nationalism by glorifying Russian history.

One such shared historic experience that Putin seeks to make meaning for Russians about is the Soviet victory in WWII, although with modifications made to the narrative. Those that are familiar with history understand the dark side of Russia's involvement in WWII: It was a victory that came at an astronomical human cost as the Soviet Union experienced the majority of casualties. Over 15 percent of the Soviet population is estimated to have died during WWII – almost 17 million people – largely because of the policies of Stalin (Bender, 2014). For example, Stalin received hundreds of warnings of the imminent Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, but instead ignored them and failed to make basic preparations to protect his people. As the war progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Stalin's strategy was achieving victory by sheer manpower. In one Crimean operation, Soviet soldiers were forbidden from digging trenches for protection because it would hamper "the spirit of aggression," resulting in the deaths of 175,000 soldiers in a two-week period. Instead of being welcomed home, Soviet soldiers who had been Nazi prisoners of war were sent to the gulag upon their return to the Fatherland (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 23). Stalin forcibly resettled over 1.5 million people, primarily Muslims, during and immediately after WWII. The deportation of 230,000 Crimean Tartars was especially grim as almost half died of hunger within the first 18 months of being dispelled from their homeland (Library of Congress, 2016). In Putin's narrative of the Great Patriotic War, as WWII is known in Russia, none of these horrors are acknowledged.

The present narrative of the Great Patriot War as well as the Day of Victory celebrations are meaning making attempts by Putin to build on the Soviet legacy as part of a broader nation-building effort. In the immediate aftermath of WWII, the devastation was still too fresh for any sort of celebration. It wasn't until the Brezhnev era that the victory legend began to take shape as the economy faltered and communist leadership sought validation through history, much in the same way that Putin is doing now. The celebrations were modest as many families had personal memories of the loss and suffering of the war and thus the focus was placed on honoring and spending time with veterans on the holiday. The Soviet tradition of victory parades was restarted with Yeltsin in 1995, but there was no feeling of victory because of the crippled economy and the brutal war in Chechnya. Putin created Victory Day as the celebration it is today, and his first Victory Day was the biggest and most festive since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. On Putin's first Victory Day as President, the day after his inauguration, thousands of soldiers dressed in

their Soviet uniforms marched on Red Square in columns based on their WWII battlefronts. While speaking outside Lenin's mausoleum, one of many solemn relics of Soviet rule that was never dismantled after the fall of the U.S.S.R., Putin told Russian WWII veterans, "through you, we got used to being winners. This entered our blood. It was not just responsible for military victories, but will also help our generation in peaceful times, help us to build a strong and flourishing country." With these words Putin is building a new Russian nation on the legacy of Soviet victories. Putin also referred to the Great Patriotic War as a "severe test of our statehood and people's spirit," implying that Putin perceived the destruction of WWII primarily as a setback for statehood, emphasizing once more that he considers a robust state as inviolable and more important than the individual well-being of Russians (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, pp. 30-1).

Despite playing up this legend of victory, the general feeling among Russians at the turn of the millennium was not one of glory. In August of 2000, only a few months after Putin's first pompous Victory Day, the *Kursk* submarine sunk in the Barents Sea. While generals on land were slow to respond, 118 young sailors died after the sub went down. Media coverage made military higher-ups seem indifferent and Putin received an avalanche of criticism for continuing his vacation in Sochi for five days while there was evidence that some sailors were still alive in the back of the sub and urgently needed rescuing. As previously mentioned, Putin learned a number of lessons from the disaster, including that he needed to implement a top-down power structure and limit the media's ability to criticize him, but he also realized the critical need to modernize the extensive but outdated military Russia inherited from the U.S.S.R. as a means of achieving "upper-ecelon" nation status (Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018, p. 31).

Over the past two decades of Putin's regime, the victory narrative has been ratcheted up and the extent of Stalin's terror has been played down. Putin is determined that Russians should not be ashamed of their past and thus ignores the darkest aspects of Russian history, such as Stalinist purges (Walker, *The Humiliation that Pushed Putin to Try and Recapture Russian Glory*, 2019, p. 20). In 2007, the Kremlin under Putin developed a series of new history books to legitimize the concentration of political and economic power to the Russian state as a means of countering Western animosity. Putin himself met with officials and teachers to highlight the goal of overhauling the prominent narratives of Russia's past. The most controversial history book

that emerged from these efforts presents the years of Stalinist terror as necessary for the U.S.S.R.'s accelerated modernization to counter the growing German and Japanese military threat. In regard to the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, in which millions were executed, disappeared, and sent to the gulags, the textbook skirts around giving any moral judgement of Stalin and instead presents the idea that his terror was necessary to prepare for war with Nazi Germany (Sherlock, 2011, pp. 96-7). Putin made wrote these revisions of Russian history into national law in July 2020 with the passing of a new constitutional amendments that make it illegal to "diminish the significance of the people's deed in the defense of the Fatherland" and extend the right and obligation to "protect the historical truth [of the Great Patriotic War]" to the state (Kirillova, 2020).

Putin's goal from the beginning has been to make meaning for Russians by sowing the seeds of nationalism as part of a broader *Russkiy mir*, "Russian World," movement. *Russkiy mir* initially referred to "Russia" beyond state borders but has grown to imply the creation of a Russian-Orthodox-Slavic civilization (Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 3). The concept began in the 1990s to define the Russian diaspora in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union: The collapse of the U.S.S.R. was a jarring experience not only for the Russian President, but also for 25 million Russians who suddenly found themselves living outside national borders (Pieper, 2020, p. 756). *Russkiy mir* thus represents a supranational community of Russian "compatriots abroad" who are united by shared Russian culture, language, historical memory, traditional values and most importantly loyalty to the Russian state, inclusive of the Russian Empire and the U.S.S.R. The idea of *Russkiy mir* has disparate implications that vary widely with its usage, ranging from the harmless ethno-cultural to imperial and outright revanchist (Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 9). Best estimates of the Russian diaspora put the number of Russian "compatriots abroad" at 35 million. As we will see via Putin's meaning making attempts and already understand from the *Decision Making* and *Sense Making* chapters in the context of Putin's feeling of loss after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the awareness of so many Russian "compatriots" living abroad is emotionally charged for the Russian President (Suslov, 2018, p. 339).

Putin adopted *Russkiy mir* as the ideology of the Russian government from the very beginning of his presidency and has used it in his endeavors to make meaning for those who identify as Russian in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The *Russkiy mir* concept is important to the Russian President's meaning making for both its emphasis on unifying Russians

at home and abroad in national pride and its implication that identity is determined by culture, values, and language, not territory. While speaking at the First World Congress of Russian Compatriots in 2001, Putin addressed the Russian diaspora and launched the *Russkiy mir* movement when he referred to the pain of the loss of the Soviet Union as well as shared cultural, historical, and linguistic ties. The Russian President referred to “Tens of millions of people speaking, thinking, and, perhaps even more importantly, feeling in Russian, [who] live outside the Russian Federation” while emphasizing to the audience that *Russkiy mir* has always extended beyond Russia’s recognized borders (Путин, Выступление Президента России Владимира Путина на Первом Всемирном конгрессе российских соотечественников, 2001). In 2006 Putin encouraged the Russian intelligentsia to use the term *Russkiy mir* more often when he said, “*Russkiy mir* can and should unite everyone who cherishes the Russian word and Russian culture, wherever they live, in Russia or abroad” (Русский мир - идеологический мир или политическая реальность?, 2015). In 2007, Putin founded the *Russkiy mir* Foundation as a government-sponsored organization with a mission to “reconnect the Russian community abroad with their homeland, forging new and stronger linkers through cultural and social programs, exchanges, and assistance in relocation” (Русский мир, 2014). By the time of the Russian military invasion of Georgia in 2008, the term *Russkiy mir* had firmly entered the vocabulary of Russian politicians (Русский мир - идеологический мир или политическая реальность?, 2015). In March 2014, the Russian Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov referred to Putin as “the guarantor of security for the *Russkiy mir*” (Русский мир - идеологический мир или политическая реальность?, 2015).

Mikhail Suslov of the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at University of Denmark explained that Putin’s perpetuation of the *Russkiy mir* idea can explain what this thesis has concluded from analysis of Putin’s decision-making process, which is that the geopolitical dimension is more important for Putin than the pure political dimension. Suslov argued that because at its core *Russkiy mir* is about unifying Russian “compatriots abroad” with Russians within national borders, the idea itself implies that Russia is geopolitically bigger than its recognized borders and that there should be a political relationship between the government of the Russian Federation and the millions of people who identify as Russians but live abroad. Put simply, *Russkiy mir* implies that “Russia is or should be political and geographically bigger than the Russian Federation.” Putin thus uses the concept of *Russkiy mir* to justify the annexation of

Crimea, other instances of Russian attempts at territorial revisionism, and more broadly the right of the Russian Federation to have a privileged sphere of influence in its neighborhood (Suslov, 2018).

During the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, for example, Russia claimed that it was acting to defend Russian citizens in South Ossetia. Russian rhetoric of “protecting” Russians abroad featured prominently in its justification of the decision to intervene militarily in South Ossetia and Abkhazia: Then-President Medvedev pledged to “continue to protect and defend the lives and dignity of [Russian] citizens, wherever they are located” and stated explicitly that Russia “seeks to maintain privileged interest in its sphere of influence” (BBC, 2008). Beginning in 2002, the Russian Federation had issued passports on a large scale to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of a policy known as “passportization,” thus undermining Georgian sovereignty prior to the military intervention. Moscow was then able to cite residency of Russian citizens in its justification for militarily intervening to defend ethnic Russians from “Georgian aggression” (Pieper, 2020, p. 764). As we will see, Putin wielded the same argument about the need to defend Russian “compatriots” abroad while making meaning about the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and justifying Russia’s redrawing of the territorial map.

The best avenue to analyze Putin’s meaning making after the annexation of Crimea is via his speech to the Russian Federal Assembly announcing the incorporation of Crimea into Russia after an illegal referendum, which perpetuated many of the ideas of the *Russkiy mir* movement. In the speech, Putin justified Russian aggression in Ukraine by asserting that Russians and Ukrainians are one people because of their shared roots in Kievan Rus and the Orthodox religion. Put simply, Putin argued that Ukraine is part of *Russkiy mir*. This idea has significant geopolitical implications because by stating that Russians and Ukrainians are one in the same, Putin denied the existence of a separate Ukrainian ethnicity, nation, and by extension, state (Westervelt, Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective Take Home Exam, 2020). By refuting the existence of a Ukrainian state, Putin is intending to make the annexation of Crimea – a blatant breach of Ukrainian sovereignty – permissible.

Putin did not directly use the term *Russkiy mir* in his speech, but he alluded to it with phrases such as “the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity” (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014). His speech referenced the main ideas of *Russkiy mir*, specifically shared heritage, history, and culture between Crimeans and Russians

when he said, “Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea...Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolizing Russian military glory and outstanding valor” (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014). By referring to the location of Prince Vladimir’s baptism as “ancient Khersones” and not Kiev, he implied that Prince Vladimir was baptized on Russian territory or shared territory and avoided connecting Prince Vladimir to Ukraine or Ukrainian territory. Putin spoke only of Russian glory, valor, and deaths, an intentional omission of Ukrainian sacrifices by the Russian President which erased Ukrainian history and subordinated Ukraine to Russia (Westervelt, *Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective* Take Home Exam, 2020). By arguing historical points of significance only from the Russian perspective, Putin rejected Ukrainian historical or cultural claims to Crimea (Plokhy, 2017) and perpetuated the *Russkiy mir* meaning making of the Russian government denying the existence of a Ukrainian national identity and history separate from Russia (Snyder, *Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World*, 2015, p. 705)

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the *Russkiy mir* movement, the notion that Ukrainians are constituents of the Russian nation was prominent. Ukrainians and Russians have a common ancestry and shared East Slavic origins in Kievan Rus (Plokhy, 2017, p. 350) and *Russkiy mir* promotes a “diasporal geopolitical imagination [that] echoes ancient statehoods based on kinship rather than territory” (Suslov, 2018). Ukrainians have been subjects of Russia since the 17th century when Ukrainian Cossacks overthrew Polish dominion in their territory and requested the protection of Muskovy. With the Pereiaslav Treaty of 1654, Ukraine was incorporated into Russia, with its autonomy significantly decreasing over the next century (Yekelchuk, 2001, p. 10). Throughout the period of Imperial Russia, Ukrainians were referred to as “Little Russians.” Foreshadowing the *Russkiy mir* movement with its emphasis on the superiority of Russian language and literature, during this period Ukrainian folk culture and spoken language were permitted, but Ukrainian high culture and official Ukrainian language were suppressed. It was not until the Revolution of 1917 that the idea of Ukraine as a nation was presented (Plokhy, 2017, p. 350), although it ended with the addition of Ukraine into

the U.S.S.R. by force (Yekelchyk, 2001, p. 10). Many ethnic Ukrainians suffered immensely during the Stalinist period, most notably during the Holodomor, a man-made famine that killed millions of Ukrainians. A major point of contention between Russia and Ukraine has been whether Stalin's terror was targeted specifically at Ukrainians and by extension whether the Holodomor can be considered genocide (Applebaum, 2017). With this considerably oppressive history in mind, Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and his promotion of *Russkiy mir* denies the existence of a separate Ukrainian ethnicity and nation. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the goal of Putin's nation-building project is to manifest a Russian nation that expands beyond its recognized borders via unifying Eastern Slavs on the basis of shared Russian language and culture (Westervelt, *Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective Take Home Exam*, 2020). Serhii Plokhy, historian of Ukrainian history, points out that by annexing Crimea, Ukraine is serving as a test for Putin's nation building model outside Russia (Plokhy, 2017, p. 350).

Putin rejected the existence of a Ukrainian identity separate from Russia by stating "we are not simply close neighbors but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other" (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014). For Putin's assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are one people and cannot live without each other to be correct, Ukrainians need to agree with it, and survey results indicate that this is not the case. Despite the shared ancestral roots and linguistic and cultural similarities, poll results have shown that the percentage of Ukrainians with positive feelings about Russia dipped from 80 percent in January 2014 to 50 percent in September 2014 (Plokhy, 2017, p. 353). The claim that Russians and Ukrainians are one is especially bogus when one considers that the Russo-Ukrainian War is ongoing (Westervelt, *Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective Take Home Exam*, 2020). The Russian President's claim that Russians and Ukrainians are one people and they cannot live without each other is a meaning making attempt with its basis in *Russkiy mir*: Putin intended to present the annexation of Crimea by force in a positive way by referring to it as "reunification," when in reality it was an act of aggression.

Putin proposed the notion that Russians and Ukrainians must reunify in his speech by implying that former Soviet citizens are living in a divided nation. Referring to the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Putin said "Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different

ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders,” drawing attention to the large Russian diaspora that Putin believes must be reunified via *Russkiy mir*. He touched upon the idea of reunification again when he said, “In people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia” (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014). In political reality, Crimea has officially been Ukrainian territory since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 and separate from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic within U.S.S.R. since 1954 when it was gifted by the Russian Soviet Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty (Yekelchuk, 2001, p. 156). Putin highlighted what has been observed in the *Decision Making* chapter, which is that it is the geopolitical dimension is the most important to him when he said “It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed but plundered” (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014), which implies that Crimea is Russian territory. By using the term “robbed” Putin disregarded Ukraine’s cultural and historical claim to Crimea, which has been of great cultural and economic significance to Ukraine for centuries (Yekelchuk, 2001). By saying outright that Russia was “plundered,” Putin rewrote history in an attempt to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine (Westervelt, Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective Take Home Exam, 2020).

Like the pretext for Russia to militarily intervene in Georgia, the need to protect Russian “compatriots” abroad featured prominently in Putin’s speech, with an added focus on Crimean emotive-cultural ties with the “homeland.” In the speech, Putin referred to the attempt of Ukrainian Parliament to repeal Russian as an official language in February of 2014 (Editor's office at the Russkiy Mir portal, 2019), claiming it was a “direct infringement on the rights of ethnic minorities.” Alluding to the responsibility of Russia, based in *Russkiy mir*, to protect “compatriots” abroad, Putin claimed that “nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites” were oppressing ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014) (Pieper, 2020). The speech was successful in the meaning making sense as it appealed to Russian nationalism, stoked national resentments, and rallied ethnic Russians to Putin’s cause: Putin delivered the speech to resounding applause and even a few emotional tears from the audience (Lee Myers & Barry, 2014).

The use of the term “compatriot” in Putin’s speech is significant. By saying “The Russian people showed this maturity and strength through their united support for their compatriots” (Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, 2014), Putin is including those who live in Crimea amongst the “compatriots abroad” who “speak, think, and feel in Russian” and make up *Russkiy mir*. Through use of the term “compatriot,” Putin is promoting Russian nationalism and ignoring the existence of a distinct Ukrainian identity. Timothy Snyder, historian of Eastern Europe, explains that because the term “compatriot” has no legal bearing, Putin is muddying the legal definition of citizenship. When the Russian President referred to compatriots, he meant people that Moscow claims are Russian or people who the Kremlin claims identify themselves as Russians (Snyder, *Crimea: Putin vs. Reality*, 2014) (Westervelt, *Ukraine and its Neighbours in Historical Perspective* Take Home Exam, 2020). As it was with the Russian military intervention in Georgia, by this logic these “compatriots” would then need the support and protection of the Kremlin.

As part of the proposed 2020 Russian constitutional amendments, Alexander Malkevich, head of the Foundation for the Protection of National Values, proposed a clause that would have extended the Kremlin “the right to use any force to protect the lives and property of its citizens abroad” (Kirillova, 2020). Although the clause did not advance with the use of the terminology “the right to use any force to protect the lives and property of its citizens abroad,” Putin’s use of the term “compatriot” in his speech following the annexation of Crimea is notable because the Russian constitutional amendments that were approved in July 2020 by a Russian referendum included a clause which states the obligation of the Russian Federation to “provide support to compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russian cultural identity” (Russian Constitution, amend. 69, sec. 3). The updated Constitution, which stipulates that Russia “is united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who transmitted to us the ideals and faith in God, as well as the continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historically established state unity” (Russian Constitution, amend. 67, sec. 2) coupled with the amendment which pledges to support compatriots abroad is essentially *Russkiy mir*, with its geopolitical implication of Russia’s right to exercise a privileged sphere of influence because of “compatriots” abroad, codified in law.

Putin's meaning making begins with his demonstrated intolerance of slander of Russian or Soviet history with an intention to drum up nationalism as part of a larger nation-building project. The Russian President's meaning making has culminated with the annexation of Crimea and other demonstrations to the international sphere that Russia has a right to exercise a privileged sphere of influence in order to "protect compatriots abroad," including in Georgia in 2008. Putin is dedicated to the message of the *Russkiy mir* movement, which implies that Ukraine is part of the Russian world. This explains why Ukraine's determination to align itself closer with the common west was unacceptable to Putin, resulting in the annexation of Crimea.

Conclusion

There are those who would ascribe Putin's annexation of Crimea entirely to Russian aggression (Mearsheimer, 2014), but analysis of Putin's decision making, sense making, and meaning making reveal that the annexation of Crimea was due in large part to Putin's post-Soviet geopolitical ideology that makes up the core of his operational code. Putin's decision-making processes illuminate that he made the decision to annex Crimea with force through the lens of geopolitics, the most important dimension by which the Russian President makes decisions. Putin's sense making endeavors illustrate the profound effect that the collapse of the Soviet Union had on the Russian President and millions of other Russians, which explains why he perceived the Euromaidan Revolution as a threat as well the presence of widespread domestic support for Putin's act of aggression in Ukraine. Putin's meaning making shows his commitment to his Russian nation-building project and explains his branding of acts of aggression as "protecting Russian compatriots abroad." His belief in the *Russkiy mir* movement affirms the high degree to which the Russian President is preoccupied with the geopolitical dimension of policy decisions as well as inciting Russian nationalism at home and abroad.

Analysis of Putin's political psychology and behavioral patterns reveal that Putin has many qualities of an autocratic leader: he has created a vertical power structure where the President is the primary decision maker, he is preoccupied with obtaining and maintaining political control, he suppresses opposition, and he does not trust others. Putin's high scores in the *distrust* and *military assertiveness* categories explain why he has used force to resolve conflict in the past and imply that he is likely to use aggressive foreign policy to resolve future crises. Conclusions that this paper has drawn about Putin's autocratic leadership characteristics and

personality traits with a focus on the impact of an individual to determine the fates of others emphasize that in the case of the annexation of Crimea, Putin was the sole decision maker, and it was unlikely that he would have responded to Ukraine's westward drift with peaceful attempts to negotiate. Instead, Putin perceived the Euromaidan Revolution as a threat and responded with force.

As Putin's annexation of Crimea relates to the frozen conflict in Donbass, there is no indication that the Russian President desires peace. Consistent with Putin's leadership characteristics that indicate a low likelihood to negotiate, the Russian President has not matched any of Ukraine's concessions and has strengthened Russia's hold on the separatist regions in East Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. Like the "passportization" policy observed in Georgia in 2008, Putin has also issued Russian passports to millions of Ukrainians living in the separatist, Russian-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine. Putin's past behaviors indicate that just as the situation played out in Georgia, the Kremlin will use this as justification for endless Russian military interference in the region. Under these conditions, peacefully reincorporating the separatist regions back into Ukraine will be nearly impossible. As was shown in the *Operational Code* and *Decision Making* chapters, Putin resents Ukraine's independence. The *Sense Making* chapter explains why Putin has rejected Ukraine's sovereignty and as was observed in the *Meaning Making* chapter, Putin refuses to acknowledge Ukraine's right to statehood. Putin's intentions regarding Ukraine are the same as observed in Georgia in 2008: The Russian President will make Ukraine Russian, or Ukraine will be so unstable that it will be ungovernable and unfit for European ascension (Dickinson, 2020).

Putin's position as an autocratic leader as well as the recent constitutional amendments which allow him to stay in power until 2036 (Associated Press, 2020) make it pertinent to further research the *Russkiy mir* movement as the basis for Russia's revisionist foreign policy. As the need to protect Russian "compatriots abroad" has been used twice already as justification for the Russian Federation to militarily intervene in the former Soviet space, there is reason to suspect that it will again be used as a pretext to violate the sovereignty of states in Russia's neighborhood. While achieving peace in the conditions created by Putin will be difficult, by understanding his political psychology and grand geopolitical plan his next strategic maneuvers can be predicted and countered. In this way, potential crisis situations can be identified in their earliest stages and deescalated before Putin decides that the only solution is the use of force.

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