

Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision Making in the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas

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Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the country's prominent role in instigating and supporting an anti-Kiev rebellion in Donbas, surprised the world. This study seeks to explain Russian behavior in these two cases. Because of the recent nature of events, there is so far not an abundance of reliable sources. Thus, some of the findings in this study should be seen as suggestive rather than conclusive. It is argued that dominating Russian axioms about Russians and Ukrainian being one people; the West using popular uprisings as a means of war against unwanted regimes; and Western exploitation of Russian weakness for 20 years; all constitute necessary preconditions for the Russian behavior. However, the explanation is not complete without considerations on the dominant position of people with background from the FSB in the inner decision making circle, and on Putin's risk taking, improvisation and emotions.

This study aims to explain why Russia decided to use military force against Ukraine in 2014. Military force was used first to annex Crimea in February and March. After that, military force was used with varying degrees of intensity to initiate, build up and maintain an armed uprising against Kiev in the two Eastern *oblasts* (counties) of Luhansk and Donetsk (hereafter called Donbas). The study is premature in the sense that more reliable information on motives and processes of decision making may be available at a later stage when archives may be open. However, the chances are also great that by then the study will have only historical and academic interest.

Academically, the study falls within the field of foreign policy decision making. It is, furthermore, a theoretically informed case study, where the purpose is to explain actual decisions, not to make general statements about foreign policy decision making. Thus, the approach to theory is eclectic.¹ The two decisions to use force described above are the dependent variables. To explain them, the potential effects of three independent variables are explored: (1) dominant axioms of Russia, Ukraine and the West in the Russian political elite and society; (2) the procedure of foreign policy decision making in Russia; and (3) Putin's personality. These three variables, or different varieties of them, have played a prominent role in the international debate on the Russian use of force. The aim is, to the extent currently

possible; to reconstruct what may have been the processes and thinking taking place in the Russian leadership that led to the use of military force.

Dominating axioms are here understood as discourse rather than belief system. Joseph Schull suggest that discourse should be understood as something that its adherents “will have varied beliefs about”, but that they at the same time are “constrained by in order to be recognized as competent speakers of their discourse” (Schull, 1992, p. 729). This is the approach adopted in this study. It means that not all members of the Russian political elite have to genuinely believe in the dominating “truth” about Russia, Ukraine and the West, but that certain axioms exist that it is personally risky to challenge. The identification of the most important of these axioms is a task for this study.

The procedure of foreign policy making concerns among other things questions of bureaucratic politics and group-think. Bureaucratic politics refers to the idea that political outcomes are the results of bargains among institutions at the sub-state level. These institutions may have both their own and the national interest at hart.² Group-think refers to mechanisms that tend to reduce alternative views and information among decision makers.³ Finally, Putin’s personality concerns all aspects relating to the Russian president himself that may contribute to the explanation for the use of force. In addition to personality, a discussion is also included on to what extent Putin has a wish to continue to stay in power and whether this may be part of the explanation for the use of force against Ukraine.

Dominating axioms

There are in particular three dominating axioms that may contribute to an explanation of why Russia used force in Ukraine. First, the idea that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people.⁴ Second, that the West, with a mixture of economic, political and military means, is using popular uprisings against regimes it dislikes to wage war on them.⁵ Third, that Russia has been wronged by the West for the last 20 years, and that after Euromaidan the time had finally come to put the foot down. Putin (2014) himself said in his Crimea annexation speech that the West “cheated us again and again, made decisions behind our back and presented us with completed facts”.

The Russian acceptance of Ukrainian independence was in the post-Soviet period always qualified. Russia did not necessarily have an argument with the independent status of Ukraine as such. The formality of independence was largely accepted as long as the country was “with Russia”. The Russians for a long time thought that there was little to worry about when the Ukrainians talked about a future in Europe. The Ukrainians would soon realize their error and

voluntarily return to the Russian fold (Bukkvoll, 2001, p. 1142). After the Orange revolution in 2004-2005, though, that illusion was broken. The new Russian narrative became that Ukraine still wanted to be “with Russia”, but that an evil alliance of Western imperialists and minority Ukrainian nationalists were trying to prevent this. According to the head of the Russian Security Council and close Putin advisor, Nikolai Patrushev, the USA has on purpose installed a regime in Kiev that has its base among “declared nazi symphatizers”, and the current rise in Nazism in the Baltics and Ukraine is taking place at the initiative of Washington (Egorov, 2014, 2015). The idea among many in the Kremlin was probably that Western integration initiatives took place against the wishes of most Ukrainians. True, opinion polls in Ukraine had long shown that a majority of Ukrainians combined positive attitudes towards Russia with a pro-European prospect for their own country, but this fact may have been little recognized in Russia.

The concern over developments in Ukraine increased substantially after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. By then, it was clear that even the return of Victor Yanukovich as president was no guarantee for Ukraine remaining with Russia rather than with the West. Putin had put serious efforts into helping Yanukovich win the presidential election in 2004. When the Orange revolution instead led Victor Yushchenko to the presidency, this was explained solely as a result of Western interference. Yanukovich’s return to the presidency after relatively free and fair elections in 2010, on the other hand, was seen in the Kremlin as a restoration of the natural order of things. Nevertheless, Yanukovich, after some initial pro-Russian steps, also began to pursue a more pro-Western and especially pro-European course. Thus, many in the Kremlin probably concluded that the power of Western meddling had not been negated by Yanukovich’s presidency. After Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, it became a mantra of his that “we need to be active on the Ukrainian front, otherwise we may lose the country” (Zygar, 2015a).

Why there is such a strong desire in Russia to keep Ukraine close is a question of both ideology and interests. The difference between ideologically and interest based motivation may sometimes be hard to identify. This study uses the understanding of the two concepts suggested by Jennifer Hochschild. Ideology is in her account about the realms of morality, identity and causation/interpretation. This means that it concerns questions about what the actor considers right or wrong; who the actor sees himself to be and how he is related to others; and in which way he interprets phenomena and processes. Interest is about material or physical desires (Hochschild, 2006, p. 287).⁶

The first axiom, that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, is, by using Hochschild's definition, a purely ideological notion. It concerns morality, identity and causation. If Russians and Ukrainians are the same people (identity), then it is wrong to separate them by the help of political structures (morality), and attempts to do this can in the eyes of the Russian leadership never be the result of the genuine preferences of the Ukrainians themselves (causation/interpretation). Such endeavours can only be the result of the efforts of third parties and Ukrainian dissenters, and they can only succeed if these actors are able to force or trick the Ukrainians into anti-Russian positions. In his September 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly, Putin dismissed Euromaidan as an "armed coup organised from abroad followed by civil war" (Walker, 2015). There was no reference to any grievances against the Yanukovich regime that the Ukrainian people may have had.

According to Mikhail Zygar, what angered Putin more than anything about the Ukrainian leadership was its "*ukrainstvo*". By this he simply meant the tendency to always point out the differences between Russians and Ukrainians (Zygar, 2015b). To give but one example, former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma in 2003 published a book simply called *Ukraine is not Russia*. Kuchma, similar to Yanukovich, was a representative of the Eastern Ukrainian business elite. It would be especially disappointing to Moscow that such a title was produced by somebody from that part of the Ukrainian elite, long seen as a potential Kremlin ally. The axiom about Russians and Ukrainians being one and the same is seldom contradicted in the Russian elite. It has adherents, not only in the pro-regime camp, but also among the opposition. Opposition leader Aleksei Navalnii said in October 2014 that "I don't see any kind of difference at all between Russians and Ukrainians" (Dolgov, 2014).

In the wider population, however, fewer and fewer seem to think this is the case. The independent polling and sociological research institute *Levada centre*, has asked Russian public opinion about this topic since 2004. In 2005, 81% of respondents thought Russians and Ukrainians were the same people. By September 2015, that figure had declined to only 46% (Levada, 2015a). Furthermore, a study conducted by three US scholars in cooperation with *Levada* suggests that there may be a "small but not trivial degree of social desirability bias among respondents" when answering to political questions in Russia (Frye, Gehlbach, Marquardt, & Reuter, 2015). This means that a significant number of Russians are likely to say in opinion polls what they think the authorities would like them to say rather than what they actually think. Thus, in the current case some respondents may have answered that they thought Russians and Ukrainians are the same people because they know the political leadership thinks this, not because it is their own opinion. If that is the case, the rift between

elite discourse and public opinion may be even bigger than the September 2015 survey suggests. This point may be relevant also for the other survey results quoted in this study.

We do not have empirical data on how widespread the belief that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people is within the elite. It may be that the axiom, while seldom contradicted, also has only partial elite support. This, nevertheless, does not necessarily diminish its explanatory power. As discussed in the introduction, if the axioms are understood as discourse, then the degree of genuine individual belief is of limited relevance for the explanatory power of the axiom. The dominating discourse, that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, is established by those who have the power to do so, and to contradict this statement may leave an individual outside the group or even open up for sanctions against that individual. This is not to dismiss that expressed beliefs may be genuine, just that it is very hard to know.

The second axiom, that the West is using popular uprisings to gain geopolitical advantage at the cost of Russia, is both an ideologically and interest based notion. Ideologically, it is about why a popular uprising took place in Ukraine (causation/interpretation) and about the “slyness” of the methods (morality) used to bring it about. In terms of interests, it is about Russia losing advantage to the West in terms of economics and security.

The causation/interpretation element was vividly demonstrated to the author of this study when he was present at a conference on international security hosted by the Russian ministry of defence in 2014. The first conference panel included presentations by Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff, Vladimir Zarudnyskiy and others. The main message from all of them was that “colour revolutions” is the new Western way of waging war on Russia.⁷ Still, the morality element may gradually be getting less pronounced. First, some Russians will say that international politics has always been a fierce battle without rules. Moral arguments are of little relevance in the affairs between states. Second, many Russian politicians have probably reached the conclusion that if the West is waging war in this way, then Russia can do the same. This is one of the main messages in Gerasimov’s (2013) now famous article “Tsennost nauki v predvidenii” and its follow up “Po opitu Sirii” (2016). Russia will of course still officially claim that both the incorporation of Crimea into Russia and the rebellion in the Donbas were the results of genuine popular uprisings against Kiev. Privately, nonetheless, they of course know their own role in those events. Thus, to the extent that they continue to be morally outraged by what they see as the Western instrumental use of popular

uprisings, this should probably be seen more as part of the international battle for the narrative than as genuine moral indignation.

Compared to the “one people” axiom, the “Western use of popular uprisings” axiom has a slightly broader support in the population. In a November 2015 Levada opinion poll respondents were asked why they thought the current Ukrainian leadership is striving for closer relations with Europe and more independence from Russia. Almost half, 49% thought this was because “Ukraine had become a marionette in the hands of the West and the USA”. Another 29 % thought it was because “Ukrainians think that closer relations with Europe will make the country more democratic, prosperous and free”. 10 % thought the reason was that “Ukrainians have always hated Russians”, 7 % that “Ukrainians want to overcome their Soviet inheritance [...] and that union with Russia will drag Ukraine back into the past”, and 2% that “Russia has developed into a non-democratic non-developing country” (Levada, 2015b). If we combine the answer alternatives that do not see the West as the main force behind Ukraine’s pro-European drive, they amount to 48 %. Thus, despite what Putin and other Russian leaders say, and despite the massive Russian propaganda, there are almost as many Russians who think Ukraine’s pro-European policy is a result of indigenous views as those who think the Ukrainians have just been manipulated by the West.

The interest based part of the second axiom is that Russia will lose economically and geo-strategically by Ukraine going west. Russian leaders have mostly spoken of what Ukraine rather than Russia would lose economically by the former going west, but a leaked Kremlin policy paper from February 2014 suggests that the Russian motivation for holding on to Ukraine is not necessarily limited to ideology. This policy paper warns in particular that Russia could lose Ukraine as a customer for oil and gas and completely lose control over the Ukrainian pipeline system. Additionally, if Russia one way or another gets control over a number of Ukraine’s eastern provinces, Russia would get access to substantial and well qualified labour resources. Furthermore, it would control significant parts of the Ukrainian military-industrial complex. This in turn would make it easier for Russia to complete its current armaments program (Kremlin policy document, 2015). The authenticity of this document has not been recognized by anyone close to the Kremlin, but if genuine, it does at least indicate that interest based motives may have been part of the internal deliberations. Of course, the way the conflict developed it is now likely that the costs for Russia of the Donbas war have already far exceeded any economic gain. However, that does not mean things did not look more optimistic at the time when the decision to intervene was taken. It is entirely possible that many in the Kremlin expected to get control over more profitable parts of

Ukrainian industry than the largely derelict coalmines they currently control, for example much of the industry around Kharkiv. Also, they may have expected much weaker Ukrainian military responses and feebler and shorter lasting Western economic sanctions.

The other element of the interest based interpretation is security. This mainly relates to the fear of Ukrainian NATO membership if the country manages to distance itself from Russia. The possibility of future NATO bases in Ukraine would make the geographical distance between NATO military infrastructure and Moscow much shorter than today. Russia could risk losing its naval base in Sevastopol to NATO. Putin said already in connection with the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, that if Ukraine at some time in the future joins NATO, the country will have to do that “without Crimea and the East”. According to Mikhail Zygar, the former mentioned internal Kremlin Putin mantra of “we need to deal with Ukraine” gradually transformed into “if Ukraine goes to NATO, we take Crimea” (Zygar, 2015a, p. 557).

The third axiom, to repeat, is that Russia has been wronged by the West for the last 20 years, and that after Euromaidan the time had come for the country to put the foot down. One of the main messages in Putin’s now famous 2007 Munich speech was that the end of the cold war had been made possible by a “historic choice of the people of Russia”. Yet, the West instead of being grateful reacted by creating new walls around Russia. These new walls were much closer to Moscow than the previous ones (for a transcript of the speech, see Washington Post, 2007). That statement, although creating a lot of stir at the time, is nevertheless a polite version of how others in the Russian leadership interpret the post-cold war developments. One of Putin’s economic advisers, Sergei Glazev, claims that the West in the post-cold war period “forced Russia down several steps on the ladder of development”, and goes on to state that the West currently “sets two or three civilizations up against each other, creates war between tens of countries around the planet, and is trying to decrease the population in the non-Western part of the world by several billion people” (Deliagin, Glazev, & Fursov, 2013). To achieve the latter, the West consciously creates famines, violent conflict and epidemics (Ibid.). Glazev is a Kremlin radical, and many in the Kremlin will probably disagree with the most outrageous of these allegations, but his radicalism has so far not cost him his position. In fact, as will be shown later, he is at times given considerable political authority.

This interpretation of recent history is an important part of the explanation why Russia saw its intervention in Ukraine as a way of striking back. According to the comprehensive political Putin biography *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, by Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, if Russia had not intervened in Ukraine after the fall of Yanukovych, the

interpretation in Moscow was that Russia would not only have lost Kiev, also the Eurasian Union would have become meaningless and Russia's general position in Europe would have been greatly reduced (Hill & Clifford, 2015, p. 363). Dealing with Ukraine in a military way, on the other hand, demonstrated to the West that Russia "could no longer be ignored" (ibid., p. 378).

Furthermore, as pointed out by Andreii Frolov (2015), striking back over Ukraine should not only be seen as a reactive policy. There is also a pro-active element. Up until the Crimea intervention, although to a decreasing degree, maintaining the illusions of joint values with the West had at times been a straightjacket for the Russian leadership. After Crimea and Donbas, all such make-believe became meaningless. For the Russian leadership that was a liberating feeling. There would be no more pretence.

On this third axiom, the Russian popular support is stronger than at the previous two. In July 2015 *Levada* asked the respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement that "the USA is exploiting Russia's difficulties to turn the country into a secondary state and a simple provider of raw materials to the West". A total of 86 % agreed fully or partly. Only 7 % did not think so (Levada, 2015c). Furthermore, in November 2015, only 21 % were worried about negative Western reactions because of Russia's role in Crimea and Donbas, 71% said they were not worried at all or not really worried (Levada, 2015b). Thus, the Russian population largely seems to buy the leadership's interpretation of post-Soviet history, and they think Russia is strong enough to take the chance of standing up to the West.

A final point, one which has surfaced in much of the Western commentary on Crimea and Donbas, is how Russia could attack Ukraine when it had signed several international treaties that guaranteed Ukrainian territorial integrity. One possible explanation may be that Russians tend to give priority to what they see as *just* over what they see as *legal*. Harold Berman (1950) suggested as far back as 1950 that in the Russian legal and political tradition, *justice* outranks *the letter of the law*. In the case of Ukraine, Russian journalist Konstantin Ranks has noticed that when discussing with for example Balts and the Finns, these will always refer to the agreements Russia has signed. Russians, on the other hand, will tend to emphasise what they see as fair and just. Likewise, the editor of the Russian radio station *Echo Moskvy*, Aleksei Venediktov, who for some time enjoyed a certain access to Putin, claims that the word "justice" (*spravedlivost*) was one of those he had heard the most from Putin during their conversations (Timofeeva, 2014). Thus, this legal and cultural tradition may also be part of the explanation for the use of force.

The procedure of foreign policy making

The procedure of foreign policy making concerns both the questions of who and how. Who were parties to the decision making, and how were the decisions made? The “who” is a question of individuals and groups and their relative strength within the political leadership. The “how” concerns in which way decisions are made, such as the size of the decision making body, the role of the president and whether there are distinct rules or institutionalized procedures for how to make decisions. The “how” additionally includes such questions as how long the decision took and whether it was one major or several smaller decisions. Based on the empirical information detailed below, two conclusions seem justified regarding the “who” question. First, very few people were involved. This, however, did not necessarily, as expected by theories of group-think, prevent significant difference of opinion. Second, although information so far on this point is limited, FSB dominance within the political leadership may be one part of the explanation for the decision to use military force.

In the Russian regime’s 2015 celebratory film about their annexation of Crimea, Putin himself states that very few individuals were involved in the decision. According to him, the decision on Crimea was taken by a small group on the eve of the ending of the Sochi Olympics.⁸ This group, in addition to Putin himself, consisted of: Head of the Presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov; Head of the Security Council, Nikolay Patrushev, Head of the FSB, Alexandr Bortnikov and Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu (Zygar, 2015a, p. 557). The Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, based on its own sources, claims that within this group the strongest advocates for using military force were Ivanov and Patrushev (Shiriaiev, 2015). Shoigu, on the other hand, listed the arguments against (Zygar, 2015a, p. 557).

Thus, already on Crimea there probably were differences of opinion when it came to the use of force. According to former Kremlin insider, Gleb Pavloskii, this became even more the case in decision making on the Donbas. Pavlovskii (2015) writes that:

in the Ukrainian crisis there were clearly different groups [within the Russian leadership] with different interests and strategies. While in the case of Crimea, the old system of compact and military-like decision making was still dominant, from about May 2014 everything changed. A number of different lobbying groups popped up. Among them were Ukrainian and Russian business men attached to different parts of the Kremlin apparatus and to different individuals within Putin’s closest circle. Even the governors of certain southern Russian counties (*oblasti*) tried to weigh in.

Since the group that made the decision on Crimea was so small, one may question whether considerations of bureaucratic politics can have any explanatory. Still, it is possible to argue that since the decisive group consisted of four former KGB/FSB officers and only one individual not with a KGB/FSB past, the dominance of the FSB may be seen as one of the reasons for the use of force. Trigger-happy *chekisty* (Russian slang for representatives of the security series) dismissing the arguments of risk averse and reluctant military would be nothing new in Kremlin decision making on issues of war and peace. As pointed out by Roger Braithwait, it was head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, who in 1979 won the fight against Chief of the General Staff, Nikolay Ogarkov, on the decision on whether or not to send troops into Afghanistan. Andropov, supported by Minister of Defence Dmitrii Ustinov,⁹ was certain of a quick military victory. The military, under Ogarkov, thought this assessment wildly optimistic. Ogarkov was nevertheless told by Ustinov that “his job was not to teach the Politbureau its business, but to carry out its orders” (Braithwait, 2013, pp. 77-79).

According to a recent report, both the MOD and MFA are often not part of the “strategic level of decision making” on foreign policy in Russia (Minchenko Consulting, 2015, pp. 5-6). Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, judging by the sources of this study, does not seem to have been party to any of the major decisions on Ukraine. True, Minister of Defence Shoigu, was admitted to the inner circle. That, however, may have had more to do with the fact that he is personally close to Putin than with the fact that he is the Minister of Defence (ibid.).

Given the dominance of individuals with background from the security services at the strategic level of decision making, one would expect a significant danger of group-think. Group-think means that decision making suffers from among other things close-mindedness and stereotyped views of enemies, and that this is a result of the individuals involved being too similar in background (homogeneity) and not often enough in contact with alternative groups (insulation) (Sunstein, 2003, p. 143). A related concept is group polarization. Cass Sunstein suggests that often in group-think situations, “a deliberating group ends up taking a *more extreme position* than its median member took before the deliberation began” (ibid., p. 112). Russian observers, on the other hand, paint a more nuanced picture of Kremlin decision making.

Aleksei Venediktov, for example, insists that there are often radically differing views within Putin’s close circle. Thus, even if the small group that took the decision to use force against Ukraine may have been very homogenous, if Venediktov is right, they were not necessarily very isolated or all in agreement. Venediktov recalls:

You know, I was once allowed to be present at some of the closed meetings, and also to read the minutes afterwards. I can tell you that serious arguing took place. The final word was of course the president's, but on all issues from the National Welfare Fund to Ukraine different points of opinion were presented. This included also rather extreme statements" (Timofeeva, 2014; also see Reznik, Pismennaya, & Arkhipov, 2014).

Thus, if Venediktov's observations are representative, it may be more the *political weight* of the FSB (who) than the *absence of alternative views* (how) that led to the decision to use force in Ukraine – bureaucratic politics rather than group-think and group polarization.

The question of "how" also has other elements. One of them concerns the role of the president himself. Is he the first among equals, taking part in discussions on an almost even footing, or is he more elevated and maintains a certain distance to the discussions of others? Former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovskii (2015), claims that Putin during his presidency has become more and more the latter. According to him, Putin has created "a room for himself" above the decision making structures where no one else is allowed. This interpretation is also supported by Venediktov, who says that in reality only Putin himself made the decision to take Crimea by force (Venediktov, 2015). That decision making style may in particular have been the case when it came to policy towards Ukraine. Zygar asserts that Putin for a long time had had a tendency to "keep the Ukraine policy to himself" (Zygar, 2015a, p. 523). This does not suggest a president who actively engages in heavy discussion and collective decision making, but instead one who mostly listens to the arguments of others and then makes the decision in solitude. Yet, it is not clear whether this mechanism is more or less likely than the alternative to increase the chances of radical or risky decisions.

Another aspect of the decision to use force against Ukraine is time. Here there seems to be a significant difference between the decision making on Crimea and Donbas. Although the Ukrainian Maidan was not foreseen, and the Kremlin did not become finally convinced that Yanukovich would fall until 20 February 2014, Putin and his closest advisers still had a relatively long time to ponder what to do if Yanukovich fell. Zygar reports that "*krym nash*" (Crimea is ours) became a daily topic in the Kremlin already in the autumn of 2013. Head of the Russian railways, and close Putin friend, Vladimir Yakunin, and Director of *Rosneft* and Putin confidant Igor Sechin, were the most eager to get the peninsula back (ibid., p. 557). In terms of Crimea there appears to have been enough time to prepare both what political and what military actions to take.

Decision making on Donbas seems to have followed an altogether different trajectory. Although Putin, as earlier stated, had mentioned Crimea and the East together in Bucharest in 2008 as unacceptable to become NATO territory, current available sources paint a more blurred picture of Kremlin thinking when it came to what Russia should do in relation to the East. The full details of Russia's role in the eastern uprising are still not available. One interpretation, based on current evidence, is that both the uprisings in Donetsk and Luhansk were largely local initiatives whereas the one in Slaviansk was not. Furthermore, the ones in Luhansk and Donetsk would probably have been solved peacefully if the "little green men" had not arrived there from Slaviansk to persuade the local protesters to continue. According to Donbas oligarch Serhii Taruta, who took part in the negotiations between the Kiev government and the rebels in Donetsk, the little green men "quickly changed the philosophy" of the Donetsk rebels away from compromise (quoted in Koshkina, 2014, p. 400).

There is little doubt that the rebellion in Slaviansk was led by former GRU officer Igor Strelkov (Girkin), but there is less certainty on the question of to what extent he acted on his own or was directed from Moscow. An indication of the latter, is that the independent Ukrainian journalist Inna Zolotukhina claims to have seen in-service GRU operatives in Slaviansk at the time of the rebellion. Furthermore, she was told by people high in the local administration that there were about 150 *spetsnaz*-GRU troops in Slaviansk, and that they had been there for almost a month (Zolotukhina, 2015, p. 70). Zygar writes that Strelkov coordinated his activities in Slaviansk with Sergei Glazev, the former mentioned Putin economics adviser. If that is true, the Kremlin was directly party to the Slaviansk rebellion from the beginning. Moreover, after Strelkov had turned Donetsk into a city at war, the Kremlin became even more active. Now, another Kremlin heavy weight, Vladislav Surkov, joined Glazev in running the Donbas business (2015a, p. 574). Thus, one overall interpretation of this early stage of the rebellion in Donbas is that substantial initiative was local, but that operators from the Kremlin quickly got involved, and that they were given a degree of freedom of manoeuvre by Putin in order to see what they could achieve.

The Donbas policy should be seen against the background that the use of force in Crimea had been such a success. The Russian leadership may have been convinced that the Ukrainian state in general was crumbling, and that it would not be able to respond forcefully to rebellion in the Donbas either (ibid., 581). If that is the case, then developments until July 2014 may have been seen to vindicate this assumption. The rebels took over more and more territory, and the initial Ukrainian response was not very potent. In late July, on the other hand, the

Ukrainian counter-offensive became much more efficient. By mid-August the possibility of a Ukrainian military victory over the rebels had become a reality.

At this point, the Kremlin could have stopped and said to itself that “we tried, but it did not work the way it had done in Crimea”. However, by then considerable resources had already been invested, and Kremlin political appetites had probably also grown. These appetites were not for joining more territory to Russia, but for creating a lever on the new Ukrainian leadership (ibid.). Thus, backing out was not attractive. Furthermore, investigative journalists in the Russian newspaper *Novaia Gazeta* claim, based on anonymous interviews, that the time factor played a significant role in the Russian decision not to back down. There was just not enough time to deeply consider all the possible consequences (Shiriaiev, 2015).

Based on this, admittedly scant, evidence, we may speculate that Crimea was a relatively calculated decision based on enough time to evaluate potential consequences and conduct both military and political contingency planning. The decision to use force in Donbas, on the other hand, may have been more of the “mission creep” type. A mixture of trial and error led to a situation where one suddenly, under great time pressure, had to decide on whether to give it all up or escalate.

Putin’s personality

Given what is written above about decision making and about the president’s crucial role within it, an analysis of the reasons why Russia used force in Ukraine would be incomplete without an attempt to examine Putin as a decision maker. The inferences made, however, should be read as potential causes for action and not as firm research findings. However, some qualified interpretation is still possible, based on what Putin has said and done and what others with access to him have revealed. The discussion focuses on the three issues connected to Putin’s person that figure in the debate about why he decided to use force against Ukraine: Putin’s desire to stay in power; Putin as a risk taker; and Putin as an emotional and improvisatorial decision maker.

One caveat is that the section will not deal specifically with Putin’s general world view. That would have been to repeat much of part one of the analysis. Putin may of course hold his own personal varieties of the three axioms presented there, but most of what he has said and done since he became president suggests that his world view is not significantly different.

Most politicians would like to continue to stay in power. This is especially true in autocratic regimes, such as the one in Russia.¹⁰ An important reason is that the legal protection of leaders who leave positions of power is so weak. Politics trumps law in most of

these regimes. Thus, politicians who leave office risk the loss of both freedom and property when no longer in office. Putin himself was chosen as a successor by Boris Yeltsin because the latter saw him as a trustworthy guarantee against legal prosecution of himself and his family (Gelman, 2013, p. 107). Furthermore, Putin has himself expressed fear of what might happen to him when he at some point leaves power. The 1993 standoff between parliament and president in Russia had a strong impact on Putin. He came to believe that losers in political struggles in Russia would run a very real serious risk of being “put to the wall and executed” (Pavlovskii quoted in Hill & Gaddy, 2015, p. 26).

The question here is whether Putin’s decision to use force against Ukraine also can be explained by a desire to remain in office. This is the claim of among others the Russian opposition leader Aleksandr Navalnii (2016) and also some Western analysts (see, e.g., Blank, 2015). What can be established is that Putin’s popularity in the Russian population was falling steadily until Crimea. In 2010 he had an approval rating of 79% in the Russian population. By the end of 2013 this figure had fallen to 61% (Guriev, 2015). It is likely that Putin knew why this was the case. He could no longer hold up his side of the social contract. This is a contract that Sergei Guriev has described as “rising incomes and living standards in exchange for the unaccountability of corrupt elites” (ibid.). There clearly was a need for new sources of legitimacy. This fact, however, is not by itself evidence enough that fear of losing power was one of the reasons for the use of force. After all, 61% approval rating is still pretty good by international standards. We seem to be talking about a phenomenon that is more a correlation of variables than a casual explanation at the moment. The staying in power hypotheses makes sense logically, but so far it cannot be satisfactorily confirmed by empirical data.

The second issue concerns Putin as a risk taker. Apparently, Putin did not believe in Western economic sanctions if he decided to take Crimea. The strongest reaction he expected from Western countries was a boycott of the G8 summit in Sochi (Zygar, 2015a, p. 572). Still, according to Zygar, the riskiness of the Crimea action was recognized by everyone in the Kremlin (ibid., p. 557). There was a real chance that Ukraine would fight back, and nobody knew for sure how the West would react. The concern here is both with Putin’s personality in terms of taking risk, and with the risk taking in this particular situation.

In the 2000 biography *Ot pervogo litsa* (In the First Person), Putin mentions that when studying at the KGB-academy it was registered as a negative trait of his personality that he had a “lowered sense of danger” (Gevorkian, Timakov, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 34). This admission may be sincere, but it may also be a deliberate attempt by Putin himself to build an image as a “tough guy”. According to Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, Putin very consciously

portrays himself both as a risk-taker and someone who is in control and has fall-back options (Hill & Gaddy, 2015, p. 13). This probably has more to do with intimidating opponents than it has to do with introspection. Aleksei Venediktov, for example, to the contrary has an impression of Putin as a very careful man. He considers this one of Putin's strong sides (Timofeeva, 2014). The bottom line is that the fact of risk-taking as a particular trait of Putin's personality is too uncertain to be used as an explanation for the decision to use force against Ukraine. Even if this indeed was a trait of the young Putin's personality, it may be different in the now 63 years old Putin. In addition, the personality trait of risk acceptance is almost impossible to distinguish from the potential use of the image of risk acceptance for instrumental purposes.

Despite questions about Putin being a particularly risk-acceptant individual, it may have been the case that particular aspects of the incident at hand released a heightened willingness to take risk. A fact that has only recently become known is that the geopolitical loss Putin and Russia suffered from Euromaidan may have been bigger than at first assumed. When Yanukovich refused to sign the association agreement with the EU in Vilnius in November 2013, he officially stated that this was only a postponement. It should in no way be seen as a major change of Ukrainian foreign policy. Still, upon his return to Kiev, he confidentially told a gathering of the top Ukrainian oligarchs that the refusal in Vilnius actually was the beginning of a 180 degree turn around of Ukrainian foreign policy. European integration would no longer be the aim, even if he for some time continued to say this in public (Koshkina, 2014, pp. 51-52). The gathered oligarchs could not believe their own ears, and the oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskiy took Yanukovich aside to check whether he had actually meant what he said. The latter confirmed.

Thus, it is possible that Putin, after relentless pressure and daily conversations with Yanukovich over a long period of time (Zygar, 2015a, p. 530), thought he had secured one of the most important geopolitical victories of his career. He may have thought that he had been able to stop the westward drift of Ukraine – a concern of his since he came to power in 2000.

According prospect theory, first developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), people tend to be more risk acceptant when faced with the prospects loss than gain. In the case of Ukraine, Putin had gained something extremely valuable, only to be faced with the likely rapid loss of it all because of Maidan. This would, according to prospect theory, have increased Putin's risk acceptance and therefor become part of the reason why he decided to use force.

There are also other conceivable non-rationalistic explanations. One is that Putin first of all is an improviser. This is the impression of former US ambassador to Moscow, William Burns. Burns met Putin several times and thinks he “tends to be more of an improviser than anything else” (Burns, 2015). Especially the above analysed decision making regarding the Donbas seems to support such a conclusion. On the other hand, the decision making on Crimea seems more thought through and planned, but even here sources claim that Putin did not have his mind set on a fixed end-state even at the time when he gave the green light for the operation (Zygar, 2015a, p. 572; Berezovets, 2015, p. 64). A clear vision of the end state is a precondition for rational decision making.

Another non-rationalistic explanation for the use of force is emotions. For example, the New York Times described Putin’s talk to the nation after the annexation of Crimea as “an emotional address steeped in years of resentment and bitterness at perceived slights from the West” (Myers & Barry, 2014; see also Tsygankov, 2014, p. 288). According to Gleb Pavlovskii, Putin belongs to a group of people within the Russian leadership that is constantly looking for revenge for the fall on the Soviet Union (Hill & Gaddy, 2015, p. 42). A desire for revenge is an emotion, and when the West seems to drive even further the disintegration of the former Soviet world with attempts to “snitch” Ukraine, that may have triggered this emotion even stronger. In addition to revenge, plain anger is also a potential explanation. The Russian analyst Stanislav Belkovskii thinks that the absence of many Western leaders at the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics in Sochi, and the fall of Yanukovich that Putin thought was a result of Western meddling, together “tore him apart psychologically” (Galperovich, 2015). Thus, the annexation of Crimea may also partly be explained as an angry emotional reaction by Putin.

Conclusions

The three axioms of one nation, popular uprisings as a weapon used by the West, and 20 years of humiliation of Russia, form the ideological and interest base background for the decision to use force against Ukraine. Without the strength of these convictions, in the Russian leadership if not to the same extent in the Russian population, military force against Ukraine would not have been used. As argued in the first part of this analysis, as long as the axioms constitute the dominating discourse, they will have explanatory power whether they are genuinely believed or not. They are the established truth, and dissent may have serious consequences for those who express it.

The status of the axioms as causes, however, does not preclude them from also being used instrumentally. The Russian leadership probably sees that insisting on these axioms is useful both in order to intimidate the West (for a Western example, see Tayler, 2014), and in order to conceal additional utility-based motives. If Russia, as Jeffrey Taylor puts it, is “seething with anger”, that could scare the West to concessions it would not give if the country’s leadership was seen as calm and rational (ibid.). In terms of using ideology to conceal interests, the leaked Kremlin policy document presented earlier suggest that a utilitarian agenda was also present. Control over human and industrial resources in Eastern Ukraine and geostrategic military advantages, may have been additional motives for the use of force. However, such arguments would not necessarily serve the Russian case if voiced in public.

Still, even with strong ideological and interest based motives for not tolerating Euromaidan and its possible consequences, using military force against Ukraine would not have been an automatic decision. There were considerable risks, even if some of them, such as economic sanctions from the West, may have been underestimated. Based on the evidence discussed in this study, three to four factors in particular seem to have made the difference in the choice between military action or not.

First, the dominance in decision making circles of people from the FSB is important. As the sources consulted here describe, alternative opinions were most likely present in the deliberations. Thus, group-think may not explain very much. Bureaucratic politics, on the other hand, with its focus on the relative strength of different sub-national actors for policy output, may be more relevant. From the, still admittedly very little, that we know about the discussions in the Kremlin on the use of force against Ukraine, it seems that the FSB representatives were in favour versus Minister of Defence Shoigu was the sceptic. This is eerily reminiscent of the deliberations before the 1979 Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan.

Second, prospect theory may contribute as well. Putin could have thought that he had secured one of the biggest geopolitical triumphs of his career by finally halting Ukraine’s drift to the West. Then, just as he was starting to enjoy the victory, it all suddenly looked like it would be lost because of the Yanukovich overthrow. Prospect theory suggests that people get more risk acceptant when facing loss than when facing gain. There is also the issue of Putin himself being a particularly risk-acceptant person, but as discussed above, this assumption can be questioned.

Third, emotions are probably part of the explanation. The sources of these emotions are of course the axioms presented above, but an emotionally cooler president than Putin could

have been less swayed by them. It is conceivable that emotions played a larger role in the case of Crimea than in the case of Donbas.

Finally, Putin's desire to thwart the downward trend of his popular approval rating may also have played a role. This argument is consistent with the timing of events, and it involves the substantial issue of the content of the Russian social contract. Nevertheless, firm evidence in support of this argument demands an insight into Putin's thinking not yet available. The argument is logically convincing, but so far not sufficiently empirically supported.

This is a case study of the decisions to use military force to annex Crimea and to be involved in a popular rebellion against Kiev in Donbas. As such, there are limits to what other countries in Russia's neighbourhood can learn from the experience. Still, the specificities of Russian geopolitical ideology and interest based calculations, procedure of decision making and leadership characteristics presented in this study are relevant for more countries than Ukraine. Adapted to the individualities of other regional contexts, they may help interpreting Russian policy elsewhere

Notes

¹ For arguments in favor of eclectic theoretical approaches to problem-oriented policy analyses, see Sil & Katzenstein (2010).

² A standard reference for bureaucratic politics is Allison & Halperin (1972). See also Stern & Verbeek (1998).

³ The landmark study here is Janis (1982). See Sunstein (2003, pp. 140-144).

⁴ See for example Putin's statement on this at a Red Square concert to celebrate the annexation of Crimea, <http://www.vz.ru/news/2015/3/18/735143.html>.

⁵ Stated at the Moscow Conference on International Security 2014 by both Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valrei Gerasimov and Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff, Vladimir Zarudniskyi. The author was present in the audience, and an English version of the talks can be found at http://eng.mil.ru/files/MCIS_report_catalogue_final_ENG_21_10_preview.pdf.

⁶ For a recent comprehensive study of ideational factors in Russian foreign policy, see the special issues of *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2014).

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/03/150309_putin_crimea_annexion_film

⁹ Ustinov, although he also had a military background, was a representative of the defence industry rather than the Soviet military. This was an important distinction in terms of political outlook in the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Brandon Kinne, in his study of decision making in autocratic regimes, states that the desire to continue to stay in power is an assumption that is “fundamental in numerous theories of foreign policy”, and he does not “consider it overly controversial” (2005, p. 118).

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