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ARTICLE



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Stephen Benedict Dyson and Matthew J. Parent

ABSTRACT

Content analytics applied to open source material can assist in understanding, predicting, and influencing the behavior of foreign political leaders. We provide evidence to this effect by profiling Russian President Vladimir Putin, who remains a source of consternation to the academic, intelligence, and policy communities. We apply the operational code scheme to a corpus of over one million words spoken by Putin across his time in office, and use the results to adjudicate between the competing portraits of him in the extant literature. We find Putin to hold broadly mainstream beliefs about international politics, albeit qualified by hyper-aggressiveness toward terrorism and a startling preoccupation with political control. His approach is that of an opportunist rather than a strategist. These data represent a stream of information that must be combined with other sources and integrated, through policy judgment, into a comprehensive approach to a foreign political leader.

Intelligence and analysis that can assist in understanding the behavior of foreign political leaders is of high value to policy makers.¹ Insight into how friends and adversaries perceive the world can guide diplomacy and coercion. Deciphering the worldview of international leaders is no easy task, however.² Foreign political figures do not submit to questioning under oath about their beliefs and negotiating positions, nor do they make themselves available for psychoanalytical interviews that might uncover underlying personality dynamics. Content analytic techniques applied to open source political speech have been developed in response to this problem. They seek to meet the policy demand for real-time information about the decision tendencies of contemporary international leaders, and the academic demand for systematic and replicable analysis.³ The utility of these techniques is demonstrated through their application to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

'Who is Vladimir Putin?' This question, asked almost continuously since the Russian leader first came to prominence in 1999, has yet to be satisfactorily answered. For a decade and a half, Peter Baker writes, 'Vladimir V. Putin has confounded American presidents as they tried to figure him out, only to misjudge him time and again.'⁴ Close to mystical powers of cunning are sometimes attributed to him by senior U.S. politicians: 'Putin is playing chess, while we are playing marbles.'⁵ On other occasions, he is cast as a reckless figure who has 'consistently put his ego, his territorial ambitions, and the financial interests of his cronies ahead of the needs of his country.'⁶ Masha Gessen calls him 'the man without a face' whilst Joshua Yaffa despairs that studying Putin is 'drawing portraits of what is, ultimately, an unknowable subject.'⁷ As Walter Russell Mead notes, this lack of insight into Putin is crippling to the ability of policymakers to make sensible choices: 'Until the West understands how the world looks to Vladimir Putin, it won't understand the nature of the threat Russia poses or be able to think constructively about how to counter that.'⁸

We use speeches and interviews given by the Russian leader to generate evidence that can systematically address some of the competing hypotheses about Putin's worldview. Specifically, we use the operational code construct, which posits that a political actor's beliefs about the world are present in their public speech, to organize a profile of Putin centered upon three key questions: (1) Is he a rogue leader? (2) What motivates him? (3) Is he a strategist or an opportunist? In so doing, we generate a profile of Putin – what Alexander George referred to as an 'actor-specific behavioral model' – to help sort through the conflicting interpretations of his worldview.⁹

First, we explain the operational code construct that serves as our means for profiling Putin. Then, we address each of the key controversies on Putin in turn (Is he a rogue leader? What motivates him? Is he a strategist or an opportunist?) by identifying the key pieces of evidence on each side of the controversy and using our operational code approach to adjudicate, where possible, between the interpretations. We find him to hold a bifurcated belief system, placing him mostly in the world leader mainstream though with tendencies toward violent beliefs concerning terrorism and sources of disorder more generally. We find him to be driven by a desire to maintain power and control. And our evidence supports the view that Putin is more opportunist than strategist. Finally, we suggest some practical ways to deal with Putin given the profile of him we have developed. Beyond the single case of Putin, the goal is to demonstrate the academic and applied possibilities afforded by the application of content analytics to open source material.

The operational code

We profile Putin by using the operational code assessment scheme, a technique developed to harness academic rigor to policy ends by seeking to understand the modus operandi of foreign political leaders.¹⁰ The operational code construct provides policy relevant knowledge about how the subject of study sees the political universe and their place within it. Indeed, the operational code is a prime example of an attempt to bridge the gap between the academic and the applied international affairs communities. The first operational code studies were done by Nathan Leites in response to calls by the U.S. government for help in understanding post-World War II Bolshevik negotiating behavior.¹¹ Later, the construct was revised by Alexander George, a lifelong proponent of policy relevant political science.¹² George took Leites' complex, somewhat discursive study of Bolshevik strategy, and reorganized it into a tight framework of questions and answers, focusing upon the core beliefs that comprised the Bolshevik view of the nature of the political universe and the best way to advance Bolshevik interests within that universe.

George saw the operational code as a 'prism that influences the actor's perceptions and diagnoses of the flow of political events ... that [in turn] influence the actor's choice of strategy and tactics, his structuring and weighing of alternative courses of action.'¹³ The operational code contains two clusters of beliefs. First, philosophical beliefs are diagnostic of the nature of the political world in which the actor operates, most fundamentally the degree to which the political universe is friendly or hostile and the degree of control the actor perceives themselves to have over it. Second, instrumental beliefs concern the characteristic approach of the actor toward politics: the 'norms, standards, and guidelines that influence the actor's choice of strategy and tactics, his structuring and weighing of alternative courses of action.'¹⁴ The instrumental side of the operational code seeks to discern whether the actor will favor a cooperative or conflictual strategy. George's ten operational code questions are listed in Figure 1.

George cautions that although knowing an actor's operational code is invaluable, it is not a perfect guide to behavior. Real-time intelligence and the judgment of policymakers remain vital, as operational code beliefs are but 'one variable cluster within a rich, complex causal framework for explaining decision-making.'¹⁵

To profile an individual's operational code, George recommended an ecumenical approach toward evidence, collecting writings, speeches, biographies, and any other available source of insight. This qualitative approach to the operational code resulted in a fertile research program profiling political actors from around the world,¹⁶ including an early profile of Vladimir Putin prepared soon after he

Philosophical Beliefs

1. What is the “essential” nature of political life? Is the universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one’s political opponents?
2. What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one’s fundamental values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and / or the other?
3. Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
4. How much “control” or “mastery” can one have over historical development? What is one’s role in “moving” and “shaping” history in the desired direction?
5. What is the role of “chance” in human affairs and in historical development?

Instrumental Beliefs

1. What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
2. How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?
4. What is the best “timing” of action to advance one’s interests?
5. What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one’s interests?

Figure 1. Alexander George’s ten operational code questions.

came to power.¹⁷ The difficulty, though, is that these profiles were dependent upon often scant forms of evidence about the inner thoughts of their subjects, and were also dependent upon the interpretive capabilities and idiosyncrasies of their authors.

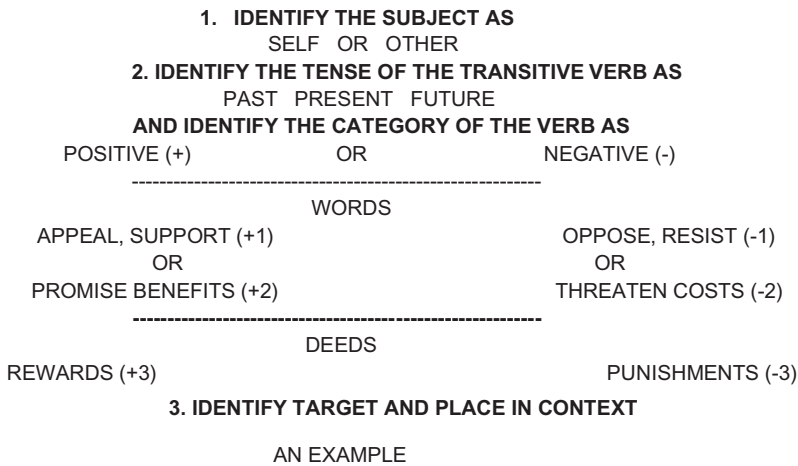
In response, a group of researchers lead by Stephen G. Walker began to use the public speech of political actors as a way to answer the questions posed by the operational code construct.¹⁸ Working from a systematic content analysis scheme ensures that the profile of one actor can be compared to another, and is free from the interpretations of the analyst. Using public speech in this way has significant advantages: politicians talk a great deal, and if their speech can be regarded as data, then we have an abundance of material with which to work. As three researchers who work in this area put it, in order to consider political speech as revelatory of political beliefs one has to accept the following assumption: The words people say are related to the thoughts they have, and the thoughts they have are related to the actions they take.¹⁹ In the case of Putin specifically, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy find that Putin’s statements are a good guide to his beliefs:

All the evidence from Putin’s words and actions since 1999–2000, when he first moved from the shadows into the position of prime minister and then acting president, indicates that there is nothing contrived or secret about his goals and his policies. Putin’s practice has been to state them directly.²⁰

In this new iteration, the operational code is conceived as an expression of the subjective nature and utility of power in a social setting. The code is constructed using a ‘Verbs-in-context-system’ (VICS) approach to speech. VICS analysis transforms the words of authoritative actors into information about their perceptions of the balance of power and intentions in political relationships.

The VICS scheme isolates sentences in a subject’s spoken or written output, focusing upon those containing a transitive verb referring to self, other, or both. Transitive verbs express words or deeds taken by self toward other or other toward self. Deeds are more consequential, and hence coded as more intense on a scale, than words. Deeds and words can be hostile or cooperative, and are scaled from most hostile to most cooperative. Words and deeds where ‘self’ is the agent are used to construct the *instrumental* indices of the code, representing those strategies and tactics deemed of highest utility by the actor. Words and deeds where ‘other’ is the agent are used to construct the *philosophical* indices of the code, representing self’s view of other’s behavior and nature.

The master beliefs in the operational code are the first and fourth belief in the *philosophical* suite of questions, and the first belief in the *instrumental* suite. These are regarded as master beliefs as they



A quote taken from Putin's interview in *First Person* (Gevorkyan, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 167): "We are using force against the bandits, not the people."

1. **Subject.** The subject is "we", i.e. the speaker is referring to his or her self or state.

2. **Tense and Category.** The verb phrase "are using force" is in the present tense and is a negative word denoting a deed and a punishment, coded, therefore as 'punishments' (-3).

3. **Target and Context.** The action is directed towards the "the bandits".

The **complete data line** for this statement is: self -3 bandits (in this case, the text is placed in the terrorism and Chechnya data files). This would create an operational code in the *instrumental* section (there is no other attribution here, and so no opportunity to code *philosophical* beliefs) of -1 (very hostile) on the first *instrumental* belief, 0 (very hostile) on the second *instrumental* belief, 1 (risk acceptant) on the third, and 1 (punish) / 0 (threaten, oppose, appeal, promise, reward) on the fifth *instrumental* belief concerning the utility of means.

Figure 2. Steps in coding text for operational code analysis. Source: Adapted from Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998).

capture the core conceptual questions of the code: what is the nature of the other (P-1); what is my best strategy (I-1); and who has control (P-4).

The first *philosophical* belief (P-1) concerns the fundamental nature of the political universe: dangerous and conflict-ridden or benign and cooperative? The greater the extent to which the political actor talks about others in their political universe using hostile language, the lower their score on this index. The second key belief (I-1) is the mirror of the first: what is the best strategy for self, a hostile (lower score) or cooperative (higher score) approach. The more the political actor talks about actions they have taken or will take using conflict-based language, the lower their score on this index. The third key belief (P-4) is the centrality of the question of control to the political actor. What do they see as their role in moving or shaping political events? The greater the extent to which the actor talks about themselves as being in control, the higher their score on this index.

Figure 2 shows in detail the steps involved in coding for operational code analysis, and includes a coding example taken from Vladimir Putin's speech. The operational code is constructed from many such coding operations, the total number depending upon the volume of speech that is collected. Figure 3 shows the principles of aggregation by which coding results are aggregated into operational code scores. All indices range from 0 to 1 except P-1 and I-1, which scale from -1 to +1, where higher scores indicate a more cooperative perception of the other or selection of strategy by self.

Our study of Putin is based upon tens of thousands of such coding operations, reflecting the more than one million words of Putin's speech in our text database. This 'big data' approach is made possible by the development of dedicated content analysis computer software, replacing the hand coding method that characterized operational code analysis in its early years. In addition to facilitating the coding of large volumes of text, use of automated content analysis eliminates concerns about human

<i>Element</i>	<i>Index</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
P-1. Nature of the political universe (image of others)	$\%Positive$ minus $\%Negative$ Transitive other Attributions	+1.0 friendly to -1.0 hostile
P-2. Realization of political values (Optimism/Pessimism)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Other Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 optimistic to -1.0 pessimistic
P-3. Political Future (Predictability of Others' Tactics)	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation* for Other Attributions	1.0 predictable to 0.0 uncertain
P-4. Historical Development (Locus of Control)	Self Attributions divided by (Self plus Other Attributions)	1.0 high to 0.0 low self-control
P-5. Role of Chance (Absence of Control)	1 minus (Political Future x Historical Development Index)	Ranges from 1.0 (high role of chance) to 0.0 (low role of chance)
I-1. Approach to Goals (Direction of Strategy)	$\%Positive$ minus $\%Negative$ Self Attributions	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-2. Pursuit of Goals (Intensity of Tactics)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Self Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-3. Risk Orientation (Predictability of Tactics)	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation for Self Attributions	1.0 risk acceptant to 1.0 risk averse
I-4. Timing of Action (Flexibility of Tactics)	1 minus Absolute Value [$\%X$ minus $\%Y$ Self Attributions]	1.0 high to 0.0 low shift propensity
a. Coop v. Conf Tactics	Where X = Coop and Y = Conf	
b. Word v. Deed Tactics	Where X = Word and Y = Deed	
I-5. Utility of Means (Exercise of Power)	Percentages for Exercise of Power categories a through f	+1.0 very frequent to 0.0 infrequent
a. Reward	a's frequency divided by total	
b. Promise	b's frequency divided by total	
c. Appeal / Support	c's frequency divided by total	
d. Oppose / Resist	d's frequency divided by total	
e. Threaten	e's frequency divided by total	
f. Punish	f's frequency divided by total	

Figure 3. Indices for calculating operational code beliefs. Source: Adapted from Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998, 178–182).

Note: All indices vary between 0 and 1 except for P-1, P-2, I-1, and I-2, which vary between -1.0 and +1.0. P-2 and I-2 are divided by 3 to standardize the range.

judgment (hence, idiosyncrasy) in coding decisions. The text analysis is replicated without deviation by the computer for every coding run performed on a given corpus of text.

We collected everything Putin said on 13 foreign policy topics from his first day as acting President of Russia until the final day of 2016, compiling a database of 1,057,709 words.²¹ To our knowledge, ours is the only study that has collected the universe of Putin's speech over sixteen years on the key foreign policy topics of his presidency; it is the most empirically extensive profile of Putin publicly available. The text was collected from the Kremlin's President of Russia website, a complete and verbatim record of Putin's public speaking engagements.²² We collected set-piece speeches and interviews. To preserve our ability to track changes in Putin's operational code over time, we separated the material into year-long text files.²³

To place Putin's scores in perspective, we used the operational code technique to construct two reference groups – of five rogue leaders and eleven mainstream leaders – who have held power at the same time as the Russian president, using text material collected ourselves or data published in operational code studies conducted by other researchers. We selected leaders for the reference group based upon several criteria: they held power during the same time period as Putin; there were either ample public speeches and interviews available or peer-reviewed studies of their operational codes

	Vladimir Putin	Contemporary major power leaders	Contemporary rogue state leaders
P-1. Nature of Political Universe (Conflict/Cooperation)	.48	.48	.15***
P-2. Realization of Political Values (Pessimism/Optimism)	.27	.27	.05**
P-3. Political Future (Predictable/Unpredictable)	.18	.14	.10
P-4. Historical Development (Low Control/High Control)	.34	.26***	.18***
P-5. Role of Chance (Small Role/Large Role)	.94	.96	.98
I-1. Strategic Approach to Goals (Conflict/Cooperation)	.66	.60	.35***
I-2. Intensity of Tactics (Conflict/Cooperation)	.32	.28	.16**
I-3. Risk Orientation (Averse/Acceptant)	.34	.19***	.21
I-4 Timing of Action a Conflict/Cooperation	.31	.40	.34
b Words/Deeds	.44	.49	.33
I-5. Utility of Means Punish	.06	.10	.15
Threaten	.02	.02	.07**
Oppose	.10	.10	.28***
Appeal	.57	.53	.31***
Promise	.09	.08	.05
Reward	.17	.16	.15
N	168	11	5

Figure 4. Putin's full operational code compared to mainstream and rogue leaders.

Notes: The significance test is a *t* comparison of means for the groups Putin/major world leaders or rogue leaders. A significant result means the comparison group is distinct from Putin on the specific measure. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .05$; * $p \leq .10$. *N* for the Putin data is the total number of word files coded, a combination of the number of topics \times the number of years in the text corpus (minus those years in which he did not speak on a particular topic). The *N* in the comparison group columns is the total number of leaders. The number of words upon which the analysis is based is reported earlier in the paper.

had been published; they could be classified relatively non-controversially as leaders of mainstream members of the international community or leaders of rogue states.²⁴

Results

Figure 4 shows the results, comparing Putin's operational code to the two reference groups of political leaders.

Operational code data must be examined for changes over time and topic area, similarities and differences to the relevant reference groups, and interpreted in light of hypotheses about the policy behaviors of the political actor under study and the state they represent. This is the task of the remainder of this article. Specifically, we use the insight generated through the operational code procedures to address three key policy questions about Putin: Is he a rogue leader? What motivates his actions? Is he a strategist or an opportunist?

Is Putin a rogue leader?

When dealing with a confusing or adversarial world leader, policy makers want intelligence on one primary question: is the other leader rational, operating within the scope of normal political calculation?²⁵ Hence the attention given to German chancellor Angela Merkel's comment that, in her judgment, Putin was 'in another world'.²⁶

One persistent school of analysis paints Putin as a rogue leader, outside of the bounds of mainstream thought and action. Robert Gates, the former U.S. Defense Secretary, argues that Putin

has a dramatically different worldview than the leaders of Europe and the U.S. He does not share Western leaders' reverence for international law, the sanctity of borders ... due process and rule of law. He has no concern for human and political rights. Above all, Mr. Putin clings to a zero-sum worldview. Contrary to the West's belief in the importance of win-win relationships among nations, for Mr. Putin every transaction is win-lose; when one party benefits, the other must lose. For him, attaining, keeping and amassing power is the name of the game.²⁷

This is not a universally held view, however. Other analysts have argued that Putin is a mostly pragmatic leader, assertive in pursuing Russia's interests and his own continuation in office, but essentially operating within the paradigm of normal, rational politics (in political science, this is an image of leadership that is most closely associated with Bueno de Mesquita et al's *Logic of Political Survival*.)²⁸ This was the dominant reading of Putin during the early years of his presidency. U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush saw him as an organized, vigorous, and mostly trustworthy leader.²⁹ Policy analysts consistently argued, at least until the eruption of conflict in Ukraine in 2014, that Putin's beliefs fell broadly within the range of standard major power politics.³⁰

Adjudicating on the sanity of a political leader is beyond the ability of the kind of analysis we practice, and those attempts we have seen do not inspire much confidence.³¹ We can, though, reformulate the question into one we can address with data: is Putin more like leaders in the mainstream of the international community, or more like leaders commonly termed rogues or even thugs?³²

Figure 5 shows Putin's image of the political universe (his p-1 score ranging from -1: hostile to 1: friendly) for each year he has been in power. The mean, represented by the circles, is constructed from

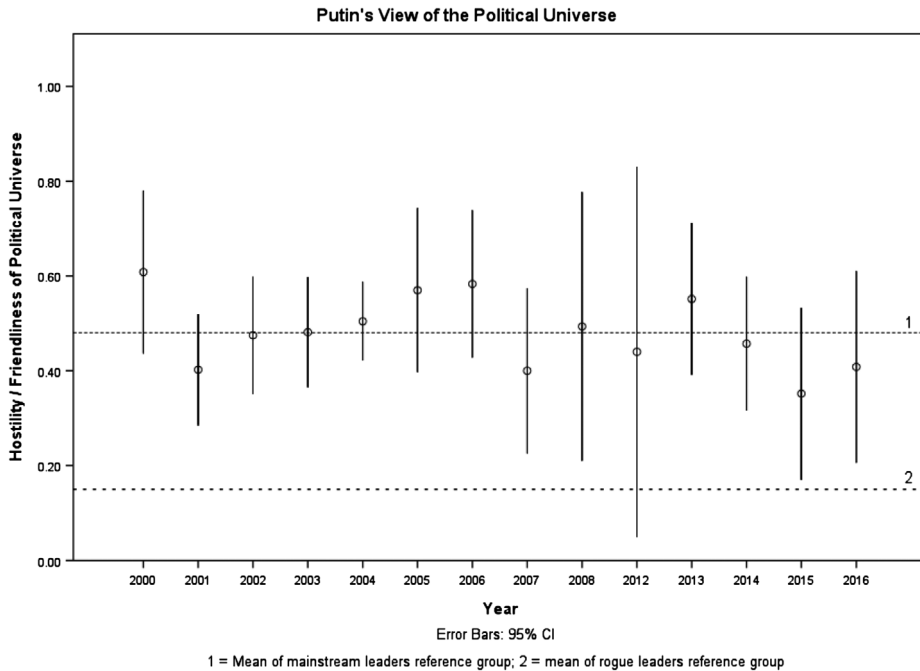


Figure 5. Putin's view of the political universe.

the thirteen separate measurements of Putin's operational code each year: one for each of the topic areas listed above (See note 21). The 95 per cent confidence intervals are larger when Putin's operational code varies more across different topics (we show data below indicating an essential bifurcation in his operational code between terrorism and other foreign policy topics. His beliefs about terrorism are consistently the most hostile; his beliefs toward China are consistently the most positive).³³ Strikingly, Putin's operational code aggregated across the topics is significantly more like a mainstream world leader than a rogue leader. The mean observations of his operational code cluster around the mean of the mainstream leader reference group (marked by the horizontal line denoted '1' in the chart). The clustering is loose, indicating that Putin's core operational code belief varies depending upon the topic at hand. On only a few occasions, though, does the 95 per cent confidence interval include the rogue leader reference line (marked '2') and on one of those – 2012 – the scores exhibit unusually high variance due to the smaller samples of Putin's speech in that year (he resumed the presidency only in May 2012). Taken overall, the picture is one of consistency in his worldview over time more than radical change, although his post-Ukraine intervention scores are moving in a more hostile direction – as we discuss later in this study.³⁴

Reference to the data in Figure 4 reinforces this conclusion. In addition to the representation of the P-1 data, Figure 4 shows significant similarities to the mainstream leader reference group on most operational code indices, and significant differences to the rogue leader group. Compared to Putin, leaders in the rogue group are more likely to perceive hostility, perceive their states to lack control over the evolution of situations (P-4), and favor conflictual strategies (I-1) and conflictual words and deeds (I-5).

Putin, then, consistently speaks more like a mainstream than a rogue leader when his comments on all foreign policy topics are aggregated. Variation is present when his speech is disaggregated by topic, though. When we isolate his speech on terrorism from his speech on other topics, a very different Putin emerges.³⁵ A theme of qualitative studies of Putin is his 'thuggishness'. Masha Gessen has written extensively about this facet of Putin's worldview, suggesting that Putin's life story might be titled 'Autobiography of a Thug', and detecting his fixation on the 'courtyard culture' of his youth and an 'outcast status'.³⁶ Indeed, our operational code profile shows that the issue of terrorism provokes exceptional hostility from Putin (Figure 6).

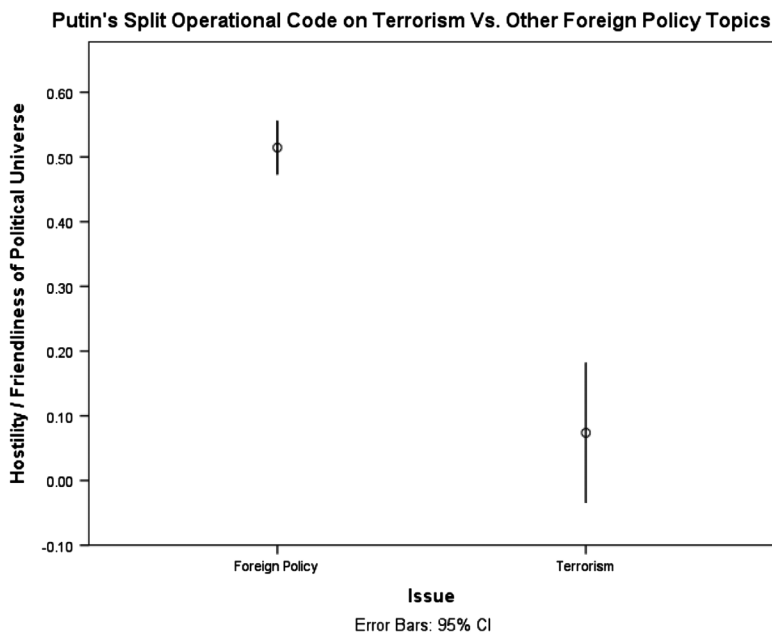


Figure 6. Putin's split operational code on terrorism vs. other foreign policy topics.

The brutality of his approach to the related issues of Chechnya and terrorism issues was a defining feature of his early presidency. Putin stated that he would pursue terrorists relentlessly: 'We will wipe out the terrorists wherever we find them. If we find them in the toilet, then that's where we'll do it.'³⁷ In *First Person*, the series of interviews that appeared as Putin came to national prominence, Putin came across as measured on most topics, but brutal on terrorism: 'The bandits will be destroyed. Whoever takes up arms will be destroyed'. When his interviewers asked him about assassination threats against him levelled by Chechen terrorists, Putin responded with the language of a streetfighter:

One should never fear such threats. It's like with a dog, you know. A dog senses when somebody is afraid of it, and bites. The same applies here. If you become jittery, they will think that they are stronger. Only one thing works in such circumstances – to go on the offensive. You must hit first, and hit so hard that your opponent will not rise to his feet.³⁸

Our findings, based upon content analysis of sixteen years of Putin's speech, are broadly consistent with a qualitative operational code done of Putin soon after he came to power. Writing in 2001, Stephen Dyson argued that Putin evidenced an operational code based upon order and control.

Putin's operational code reveals a man with a split or dual belief about the nature of political life, with concomitant prescriptions for how to deal with others depending upon how they themselves have dealt with him. Those who demonstrate adherence to normative behavior are best handled, in Putin's mind, by reciprocation. However, those who step outside such norms – the prime case so far in his time in office has been the rebels of Chechnya – are fair-game for unusual, even violent treatment.³⁹

Our data are consistent with this interpretation, suggesting both that Putin's basic operational code was evident early in his time as Russia's leader and that the operational code technique, whether deployed qualitatively or quantitatively, generates robust profiles of political actors.

What motivates Putin?

The second key question we address is what, at core, drives Putin. Our content analysis data supports an interpretation popular in the qualitative literature on the Russian president: that his fundamental drive is toward order, his most basic fear is of chaos. The key element of the operational code bearing upon this is the 'perception of control over historical development' index (the fourth philosophical belief): Putin scores significantly higher than both the major world leader and rogue leader reference groups.⁴⁰ This difference is shown to be statistically significant in the aggregate data presented in Figure 4, and the consistency of these differences over the course of the Putin presidency is graphed in Figure 7.

As both our operational code profile and the qualitative literature point to Putin's drive for control as a key motivator for his actions, we use this section to explore the roots of this drive rather than adjudicate between competing perspectives.

Mary Elise Sarotte believes that Putin's experiences as a KGB officer stationed in the East German city of Dresden were central to the formation of his worldview. In particular, she pinpoints the civilian clashes with Stasi and local police in October 1989 as having a profound effect on Putin. Trapped inside the Soviet Embassy, Putin experienced at first-hand the chaotic and violent consequences of the collapse of state power. 'For someone who believed deeply in the cold war order, it was most likely an excruciating experience. It is clear that he returned home soon afterwards in disgust, full of bitterness that lingers to this day.'⁴¹

In *First Person*, Putin spoke about these events: 'Alright, the Germans tore apart their own MGB (security ministry). That was their own internal affair. But we weren't their internal affair. Those crowds were a serious threat ... no one lifted a finger to protect us.'⁴² Putin sought help from Soviet forces stationed nearby, and was told that they could not get orders from the USSR: 'Moscow is silent'. This shook Putin deeply:

that business of 'Moscow is silent' – I got the feeling then that the country no longer existed. That it had disappeared. It was clear that the (Soviet) Union was ailing. And it had a terminal disease without a cure – a paralysis of power.⁴³

Ben Judah argues that 'Putin has spent a career trying to overcome that paralysis.'⁴⁴

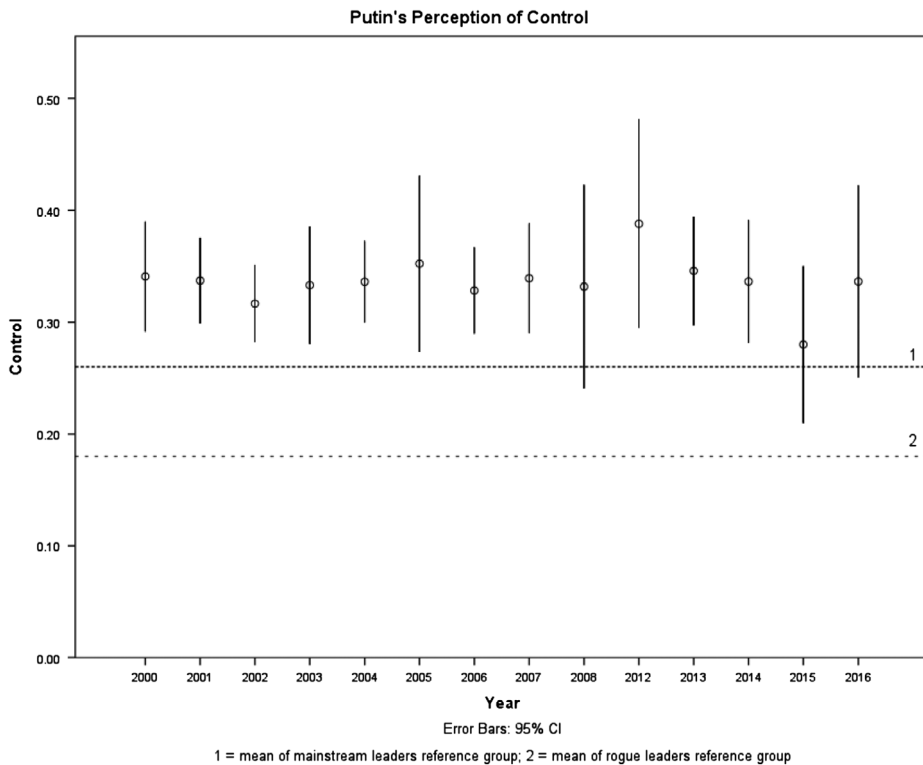


Figure 7. Putin's caption on control.

Putin's biographers, Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill, see the Dresden experience as at the core of Putin's mature belief system. The conclusion he drew, they argue, was that the collapse of a system of governance was never too far away and

his future activity, in the KGB or otherwise, could not be guided by blind loyalty to an ideology or to specific political leaders. His loyalty had to be to the state itself rather than to a specific system of governance.⁴⁵

Sarotte agrees that Putin 'saw the crowds seize control – and is not, to put it mildly, comfortable with that precedent ... he will do whatever he deems necessary to prevent the same scenario from repeating itself'.⁴⁶

Re-establishing the power of the state, and specifically the presidency, has been a priority of Putin.⁴⁷ Our profile of Putin's operational code supports the interpretation that Putin's military interventions, in particular toward Chechnya, Ukraine, and Syria, are fundamentally about his perception that chaos and state weakness are existential threats.⁴⁸

Is Putin a strategist or a tactician?

The final debate we address concerns whether Putin is a cunning and devious grand strategist or an opportunist tactician. Some see Putin as a grand strategist, constantly outmaneuvering the West: to reprise a quote from the introduction, someone who 'is playing chess while we play marbles'. The international relations theorist John Mearsheimer says: '[Putin] is a first-class strategist, who should be feared and respected by anybody challenging him on foreign policy'.⁴⁹ Others see Putin as an opportunist. Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin's longtime advisor, noted

his sense that there's no need to go against the grain, that in fact you need to go with it. Why fight a trend and use up your resources? You have to take the resources of the trend and achieve what you want with them.

Putin, Pavlovsky continues, wanted to build 'a state without ideas, based on common sense'.⁵⁰ As the Russian foreign policy analyst Fyodor Lukyanov puts it, 'Putin is good at tactics. He has a vision. But there is no strategy in between'.⁵¹

While there is no direct measure of 'strategist vs. opportunist' in the operational code construct, we can leverage some of our findings to address this debate. Putin's actions in Ukraine afford the opportunity to consider the two hypotheses. In the grand strategist interpretation, Putin is portrayed as a consistent opponent of the expansion of Western organizations and institutions into what he regards as Russia's sphere of influence.⁵² Those who favor the opportunist interpretation see his actions differently. Lilia Shevtsova argues that Putin deployed the Western expansionism argument after the fact to justify his actions in Ukraine, but that this was not the real driver of his decision-making.⁵³ Russia scholar Kimberly Marten agrees that Putin is much more of a tactician than a strategist. Her interpretation of the Ukraine intervention is that Putin was aghast at the chaos following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, seeing parallels to his formative political experiences as discussed above. Marten concludes that the Yanukovich ouster was seen by Putin as 'another example of what he portrayed as Western-orchestrated regime changes – and [he] feared he was potentially the next target'.⁵⁴

Our data show that Putin's operational code toward the three western states/organizations most commonly adduced as threats to him – the United States, the European Union, and NATO – has moved in a markedly hostile direction since the Ukraine crisis began. For the years 2014, 2015, and 2016, the mean of his operational code score on friendliness/hostility of the political universe is .22, significantly more hostile than the contemporary world leader reference group, and indistinguishable from a rogue leader posture toward the West. However, this is a recent development rather than a consistent grand strategic orientation. The mean of his score on the same three topics for the years prior to 2014 is .54, or a little less hostile than the contemporary major power reference group.⁵⁵

We can study this shift more precisely by dividing Putin's speech on Ukraine and NATO/U.S. by the date of the Ukraine intervention and constructing pre and post operational codes around that point. If the Mearsheimer view was correct, we would expect Putin to hold hostile operational code beliefs toward NATO and the U.S. in the pre-Ukraine intervention period, or at least to show a spike in hostility prior to his actions in Ukraine. But his key beliefs on NATO are unremarkable across the vast majority of his presidency, including in the period leading up to the Ukraine crisis. Whilst Putin did shift his views on NATO, Ukraine, and the U.S. in a hostile direction, this came after, rather than before, the crisis and intervention in Ukraine (Figure 8).⁵⁶

Further, Putin has not made NATO a major topic of his public speech. As a percentage of his overall speech on foreign policy, NATO occupies a lowly 2.8 per cent of his total verbal output. He has spoken less about NATO than about China (4.3 per cent), for example. Michael McFaul, the former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, confirms that this lack of public speech about NATO was replicated in private communications: 'In the five years that I served in the Obama administration,' McFaul writes,

I attended almost every meeting Obama held with Putin and Medvedev, and for three of those years, while working at the White House, I listened in on every phone conversation, and I cannot remember NATO expansion ever coming up. Even months before Putin's annexation of Crimea, I cannot recall a single major statement from a senior Russian official warning about the dangerous consequences of NATO expansion.⁵⁷

This suggests that Putin's hostility toward NATO expansion is an after-the-fact justification of his actions in Ukraine (as posited above by Lilia Shevtsova and Kimberly Marten), rather than part of a consistent grand strategic orientation (as implied by John Mearsheimer). To the extent that the evidence from Ukraine is regarded as dispositive, then, we support the perspective that Putin is more of an opportunist than a far-sighted master strategist. Whilst it is true that the Putin of recent years exhibits hostile attitudes toward Western powers, this is a recent, rather than consistent, feature of his speech. While, of course, public speech is not necessarily congruent with private conversations on the same topic (although see McFaul's comments above), the evidence we are able to bring to bear supports the opportunist view of Putin more than the grand strategist view.

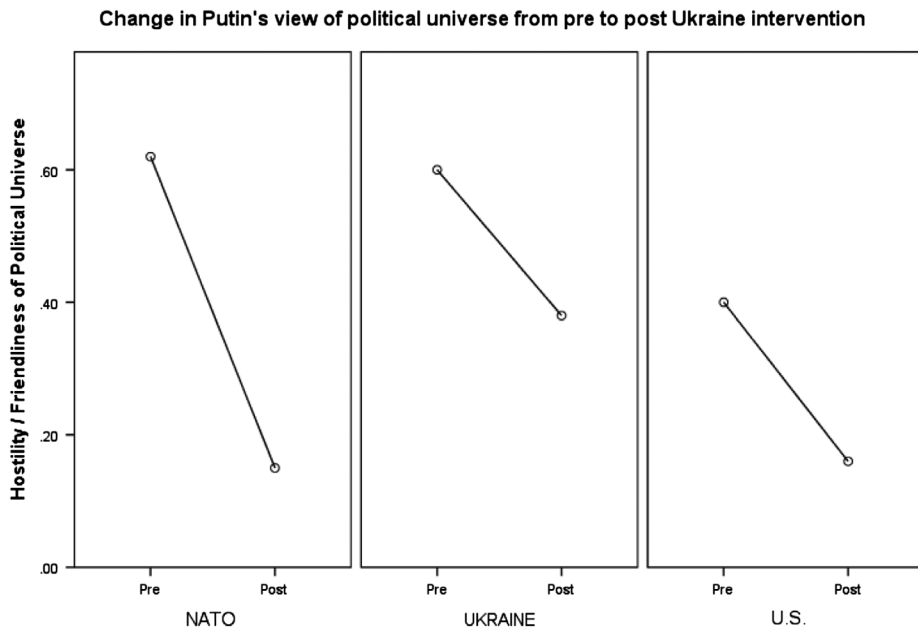


Figure 8. Change in Putin's view of political from pre to post Ukraine intervention.

Conclusion

The most useful intelligence portrait of a foreign leader not only answers some basic questions about their worldview and motivations, but also offers a guide for how to move them toward desirable policy destinations. It would be hubris for us to claim we can do this last here. First, the approach we have used comes with significant caveats: an operational code isolates only some relevant factors in an individual's belief system, and an individual's belief system is only one driver of their behavior. Second, like all human beings, Putin is a complex actor operating in ambiguous and unpredictable circumstances. Moreover, our data supports an interpretation of Putin as fundamentally an opportunist rather than a grand strategist. This means, by definition, that his behavior is difficult to predict without knowing the precise circumstances he faces (or more accurately, his perception of these circumstances.)

Nonetheless, having framed this study as having policy relevance, we feel obliged to offer some thoughts on how policymakers might deal with Putin. Our best advice is to recognize that Putin's greatest fear is the disintegration of order that could ultimately lead to his loss of power. When things are going his way – such as during the period of political popularity and oil-price fueled economic expansion of the early to mid-2000s – Putin is a businesslike world leader. When chaos looms, such as in Chechnya as he came to power or after the ouster of President Yanukovich in Ukraine, Putin is perfectly willing to play the thug, and use violence in an opportunistic way to bolster his own standing. Policymakers should design incentives and punishments that play upon this fear of chaos and desire to remain in power (and would benefit from consulting Bueno de Mesquita and Smith's *The Dictator's Handbook* for the logic behind such incentives).⁵⁸

We also wish to stress that Putin's beliefs vary significantly – from being an entirely mainstream world leader to being a thuggish rogue – depending upon the issue area involved. This would suggest that a policy strategy of decoupling is plausible. A mix of rivalry on some issues and partnership on others is consistent with his varied operational code.

The academic community can play a role in informing contemporary policy by using its techniques to provide evidence for and against policy positions and so clarify debate. We have attempted to advance this agenda in a small way here by providing a policy relevant profile of Russian President

Vladimir Putin, focused on the key contending hypothesis about the nature of his operational code. We have argued that he holds beliefs that in many respects are closer to a mainstream world leader than an ostracized rogue, although his reputation for thuggishness is not unearned. We have endorsed the interpretation that Putin is especially concerned with control and especially fearful of chaos. And we have indicated that a view of Putin as an opportunist rather than a master strategist is consistent with the available evidence.

We end with two further caveats. First, our study relies for its data on public speech. Ideally, we would have a corpus of private speech with which to compare the public rhetoric, and were such a corpus available, our results may need to be revised.⁵⁹ We have, for example, no way to assess the inherently private beliefs of Putin regarding so-called ‘special operations’ that are not publicly discussed.⁶⁰ Second, producing the kind of actor-specific evidence in this study is one way to bridge the gap between academia and policy-making, but bridging a gap is not the same as eliminating it. As George stresses, effective policy-making requires synthesizing multiple streams of information – including but not limited to actor-specific models of the adversary – and then applying judgment based upon the specifics of the situation and the political feasibility of a given course of action.⁶¹ Academic approaches, when applied to open source intelligence material, can develop evidence about a contemporary security question, but the tricky task of integrating the many competing factors and tradeoffs of high-stakes decision-making remains the special province of the policy-maker.

Notes

1. Carey, “Teasing Out Policy Insight”; Post, “Leader Personality Assessments”; and Omestad, “Psychology and the CIA.”
2. Duelfer and Dyson, “Chronic Misperception.”
3. Schafer and Walker, *Beliefs and Leadership*; and Suedfeld et al., “Assessing Integrative Complexity.”
4. Baker, “3 Presidents and a Riddle.”
5. Epstein, “Rogers: Russia Playing Chess.”
6. New York Times Editorial, “The Ruble’s Fall.”
7. Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*; and Yaffa, “Reading Putin.”
8. Mead, “In It to Win It.”
9. George, *Bridging the Gap*, 125–131.
10. For a history: Dyson, “Origins of the Psychological Profiling.”
11. Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism*.
12. George, “The Operational Code.”
13. *Ibid.*, 191.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Holsti, “The Operational Code”; McClellan, “The Operational Code”; and Walker, “The Interface Between Beliefs and Behavior.”
17. Dyson, “Drawing Policy Implications.”
18. Schafer and Walker, *Beliefs and Leadership*; and Walker et al., “Systematic Procedures.”
19. Suedfeld et al., “Assessing Integrative Complexity,” 346.
20. Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, loc. 3438. For discussion of the issues raised by using public speech to reveal private beliefs, and empirical support for so doing, see: Schafer, “Issues in Assessing Psychological Characteristics”; Renshon, “When Public Statements Reveal Private Beliefs”; and Dyson and Raleigh, “Public and Private Beliefs.”
21. The topics are the United States, NATO, the European Union, China, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, Georgia, Ukraine, Chechnya, Terrorism, the Soviet Union, Iran, Iraq, and a residual category of general foreign affairs. Detailed operational codes for Putin in each of these topic areas are available on request from the authors. We collected and combined both prepared speeches and answers given in response to questions. Arguments have been advanced for focusing on either prepared or spontaneous speech in the study of elite belief systems. Some suggest that prepared speech gives a more precise readout of beliefs as it offers a considered view and is free from the need to respond to the wording or slant of a question, others have countered that prepared speech involves input from speechwriters and offers the opportunity to craft a position that is more for public consumption than a guide to policy. There is no consensus as to which type of speech is more revelatory, and so we kept prepared and spontaneous speech separate in the first round of analysis in order to test for differences between the two modes. Putin did evidence a marginally more cooperative orientation when giving prepared remarks than when responding to questions. However, the differences do not substantially alter the category in which Putin is placed: by shifting slightly in a more cooperative direction in prepared remarks he becomes more similar to the mainstream world leader reference

group. In light of the lack of strong theory and the marginal empirical differences between the types of remarks, we combine the two types of material in our measures: doing so gives us sufficient word counts to disaggregate his operational code by topic. Finally, we note that the slightly higher cooperative scores in prepared remarks is likely caused by the pro forma nature of speeches of welcome Putin gives to foreign leaders who visit Moscow. These are ceremonial rather than indicative of policy choices.

22. <http://en.kremlin.ru/>.
23. We began with quarterly text files, and later made the decision to aggregate into year-long files. Decisions on how to slice up the text files always involve trade-offs between increasing the number of observations (shorter time periods are better) versus ensuring each text file has a sufficient number of words to provide a meaningful read on the subject's operational code (longer time periods are better). As we were already dividing the text thirteen ways to gain coverage of the range of topics, the annual time period proved most feasible.
24. The contemporary major power leaders (with word counts or published source of operational codes in parentheses) are: Jiang Zemin (Feng 2009); Hu Jintao (He and Feng 2013); Xi Jinping (He and Feng 2013); Tony Blair (230,333 words); Gordon Brown (67,160); George W. Bush (281,955); Bill Clinton (666,956); Barack Obama (148,547); Angela Merkel (293,799); Nicholas Sarkozy (509,788); Françoise Hollande (333,088). The rogue state leaders are: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Malici and Buckner 2008); Bashar al-Assad (Malici and Buckner 2008); Fidel Castro (Malici and Malici 2005); Kim Jong-Il (Malici and Malici 2005); Saddam Hussein (330,062).
25. A view communicated to one of the authors by a senior US intelligence figure. Policy makers are confident, this figure said, that they can handle negotiations with any international figure, even those with whom they profoundly disagree, so long as they know ahead of time that their interlocutor is a mostly rational person.
26. Baker, "Pressure Rising."
27. Gates, "Putin's Challenge," for other studies that paint Putin as a rogue leader, see Weigel, "Lenin Meets Corleone"; Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*; and Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*.
28. Bueno de Mesquita et al., *Logic of Political Survival*.
29. Baker, "3 Presidents and a Riddle."
30. Fish, "Putin's Path"; Charap, "The Petersburg Experience"; Tsygankov, "New Challenges"; and Sakwa, "Putin's Leadership."
31. Burgo, "Vladimir Putin: Narcissist?"; and Araujo et al. "Gunslinger's Gait."
32. In line with the goals of the study, we bracket here the academic debate about the constructed nature of social roles such as 'mainstream' and 'rogue'. Instead, we follow Alexander George (1993, 48, 49) in suggesting that Henry Kissinger's scheme, in his book *A World Restored*, has utility. Kissinger, George writes, delineated between mainstream states that subscribed to 'international agreement about the nature of workable arrangements and about the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy' and 'revolutionary' states (George uses the terms 'revolutionary', 'outlaw', and 'rogue' interchangeably) that reject the norms and practices of the international system.
33. Full operational codes on each topic area available from the authors on request.
34. Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals for hostility/friendliness of political universe in the reference groups: Mainstream leaders .41/.55; Rogue leaders .06/.24. Conflictual/cooperative strategy: Mainstream leaders .56/.64; Rogue leaders .24/.46. Figure 4 reports significance tests of differences between Putin and comparison groups on all operational code indices.
35. We combined his speech on terrorism and on Chechnya for this analysis: he used the terms interchangeably in his speech and his operational codes on the two topics were essentially indistinguishable from one another.
36. Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*.
37. Rutland, "Putin's Path to Power," 32.
38. Gevorkyan et al., *First Person*, 166, 168.
39. Dyson, "Drawing Policy Implications," 343.
40. Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals: Mainstream leaders: .21/.31; Rogue leaders: .16/.20.
41. Sarotte, "Putin's View of Power."
42. Gevorkyan et al., *First Person*, 78.
43. *Ibid.*, 79.
44. Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 13.
45. Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, loc. 2065.
46. Sarotte, "Putin's View of Power."
47. Parfitt, "Interview with Gleb Pavlovsky"; and Gevorkyan et al., *First Person*, 139.
48. Hill, "Putin and Bush"; Dannreuther and March, "Chechnya"; O'Laughlin et al., "A Risky Westward Turn"; Rutland, "Putin's Path to Power"; Hill, "The Real Reason"; and Marten, "Putin's Choices."
49. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis."
50. Parfitt, "Interview with Gleb Pavlovsky," 55.
51. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, loc. 3989.
52. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis."
53. Shevtsova, "Humiliation."
54. Marten, "Putin's Choices," 189.

55. Grouping together Putin's annual P-1 scores on U.S., EU, and NATO for 2000–2013 yields 31 observations, the mean of which were compared to the 9 observations for the same topics from 2014–2016. A *t*-test reveals the difference between the groups is significant at $p < .000$.
56. To ascertain this, we split Putin's speech on the three topics at the point of 28 February 2014 (see Salem, Walker, and Harding 2014). We then placed the speech after that date into a 'post-intervention' file, giving us 21 months of speech (up to 31 December 2015), and worked back 21 months to create 'pre-intervention' files. The results of text analysis of these files are represented in chart 5.
57. McFaul, "Faulty Powers."
58. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*.
59. Renshon, "When Public Statements"; and Dyson and Raleigh, "Public and Private Beliefs"
60. Kramer, "Putin Declares."
61. George, *Bridging the Gap*, 132–134.

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