

# POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY – NEW CHALLENGES IN ANALYZING FOREIGN POLICY

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## Abstract

*The art of governance, the relationship between the governed and the governing, the impact of a social and political system on coherent foreign policy-building is significantly influenced by the distribution of power and the type of decisional unit existent within the state. New subjects of study, such as political psychology, have proved their utility both in theoretical and practical study of international relations. Being a frontier subject, political psychology tries to offer answers to a number of questions regarding different issues among which the way character features influence the decision maker's behavior, the role of the operational code in foreign policy and the utility of psychological profiles in the international relationships and in intelligence. Leading from the types of power distribution and decisional units existent in the professional literature, the present paper narrows the narrative and focuses on examining the importance of the individual level of analysis in explaining foreign policy decisions, analyzing the decision of the Russian Federation to veto the intervention of the international community in the Syrian civil conflict.*

**Keywords:** *individual level of analysis, operational code, political psychology, decision-making, foreign policy, Russian Federation.*

## 1. Introduction

In the study of international relations, foreign policy encompasses not only the projection of power outside the borders of a state, but also it enables the consolidation of internal security and determines internal adjustments to the changes occurred in the international arena. In foreign policy analysis, understanding the decisional mechanisms that trigger certain political decisions play a crucial factor and can enhance one's ability for prediction and prognosis. By knowing and understanding the particular form of manifestation of a decisional unit, the factors that influence it and the variables which are influenced by relevant changes in the decisional process, foreign policy analysts can develop decisional patterns regarding the expected behavior of an actor in the international arena.

The present paper seeks to analyze the conditions under which the leader can influence foreign policy analysis and in which degree he can exert his influence, focusing on the Russian decision to veto the Syrian intervention.

In the professional literature, there are three main approaches to foreign policy analysis:

- Focus on the decision – inspired by the work of Snyder, Bruck and Sapin in the 50s, this approach orients the analytical process towards the bureaucracy existent within an organization and how decisional mechanisms are built on it.
- Focus on psychological and sociological elements – it leads from the premises laid out by cognitive psychology, organizational psychology,

politics and sociology and tends to focus on the organizational culture that influences the decision-making process.

- Comparative analysis.

The individual level of analysis, which inventories the psychological and sociological elements, based on which the organizational culture is formed and which influences the decision-making process, leads from the premise that international politics is a mere expression of the human instincts. Cognitive psychology and the use of information processing framework can provide insights into political behavior. The individual level of analysis seeks to understand the motivations of the empowered individual and the context within which they were formed. It places the individual in relation with its organization, in terms of social interactions, hierarchy, and personality, cultural and social background. Thus, the security dilemma, as put into words by Arnold Wolfers, facilitates the process of understanding and decoding the opponent's behavior whether they have a different decisional pattern or not. Security, as it was defined by Wolfers in 1952, is bi-dimensional, encompassing an objective dimension – if the threat really exists and a subjective dimension – if the threat is perceived. The decisions are taken not based on reality, but on perception, and history has proven many times that the image one creates about the intentions, capabilities and will of the enemy are not always in sync with the reality of the international arena. Psychologists studying the analytical errors in intelligence and security defined this cognitive error

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to be mirror-risk imaging and referred to it as being the assignation of an incorrect intention to the enemy, projecting one's own framing of a situation on to another, and/or assuming one's own risk-profile (i.e. risk tolerance) to be shared by others. (Heuer, 1999, 70).

The foreign policy decisions are ultimately influenced by individual options and perceptions, as it is individuals who make decisions, not states, which Jensen (1982, 13) describes as a "legal abstraction". In assessing the strategic impact the decisional unit has upon foreign policy analysis, the professionals in the field of strategic intelligence have created a taxonomy which includes biographic intelligence (Baud, 1997, 23). Thus, among military, economic and political component of strategic intelligence lies biographic intelligence. The data collection pertained to biographic intelligence refers to the leader's opinions, behavior, competencies, professional experience relations established so far, allowing the analysts to tessellate the data into a complete image of one's preferences in matters of political options.

The main limitations of this analytical method are due to the empirical difficulty of collecting complete and correct data, in a timely fashion manner. In most of the cases, this method has a rather historical utility than a predictive one, because the majority of the relevant data becomes available once the event has been consumed. However, the emergence of Internet and the fast-paced technological advancement, occurred in a context of exponential globalization, have allowed free access to vast amount of data in real time. If in the past it would have been close to impossible to gather information about opponents, now the process of collecting data has been simplified by the use of dedicated software and instruments.

## 2. The foreign policy of matryoshka

### 2.1. Russian Operational Pattern

Among the first analysts who focused on decision-making patterns is Nathan Leites, which approached in the Operational Code (1951) the issue of Russian foreign policy, from the perspective of leader's cognitive patterns and the way they are influenced by the desire to obtain power. Although the paper of Leites does not focus on Vladimir Putin, one of the most controversial leaders at the moment, the observations he made on the Russian operational code remain relevant in the current context, as Vladimir Putin is a result of the environment within which he developed.

His political options and perspective on security were greatly shaped by the transformations of the Russian society at large, Kremlin's status of power and its evolution within the international system, the failures and successes of Putin's

predecessors, as well as own cognitive biases. His place in history is rather unusual, as he missed perestroika while conducting his activity in KGB (as being involved in intelligence operations in Dresden) (Taylor, 2015).

Hill and Gaddy identified the main elements of biographic intelligence that could tessellate into a comprehensive image of the Putin's leadership and structured them into six different identities: the statist, the history man, the survivalist, the outsider, the free marketer and the case officer (Hill, Gaddy, 2013 apud Taylor, 2015).

The Russian Federation is a federative democracy, with a republican form of governing, within which the executive is represented by the president, prime minister and Government. The Fourth Chapter of the Russian Federation Constitution establishes through article 80 the prerogatives of the president. Standing surety for the human rights and civil liberties, the president is invested with the power to implement policies through which the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the state are ensured. The president of the Russian Federation establishes the guidelines for development both internally, and externally, being the representative of the state in matters of foreign affairs.

Pursuant to Boris Eltin's resignation in 1999, Vladimir Putin became interim president of the Russian Federation. In the following year, he wins the elections, and in 2004 is re-elected for a second mandate. As the Russian Federation Constitution envisages as a maximum number of consecutive mandates two, Vladimir Putin was not eligible for the 2008 elections, Dmitri Medvedev becoming president. During Medvedev's mandate, Putin occupied the function of prime-minister, thus maintaining a key position within the executive power. In 2012 won the presidential elections for the extended period of 6 years.

The current prime minister of the Russian Federation is the former president, Dmitri Medvedev. During his mandate, and especially, after the 2012 elections, there have been several debates on the power distribution within the state and on who really takes the most important decisions. A poll conducted by Levada Center in 2009, among 1600 Russian citizens, revealed the fact that only 13% believed the power belongs to Medvedev, compared to 32% who still perceived Putin as the key decisional figure. 49% of the respondents considered that the two politicians represent a sole power entity, within which decisions are taken by consensus. (Levada Center, 2009)

In *Who Makes Foreign Policy Decisions and How*, Margaret and Charles Hermann (1989) identify three types of decisional units, within which the decision making process, the decisional

mechanisms and influencing factors manifest differently.

According to Hermann's taxonomy, the decisional unit of the Russian Federation can be defined as a singular group. In this situation, the decisional power belongs to a small group, among which the political vision on a specific situation is shared. The most important element to be taken into consideration in this situation is the rapidity of reaching consensus.

The probability of reaching consensus is determined by a series of factors, like common ideology and the size of the group. In other words, if the members of the group share the same vision, values and have the same interests, it is easier to take a decision.

The ideology in the case of the Russian Federation has historical and doctrinaire sources, the Russians being animated by a strong nationalistic feeling and by the desire to recreate the image of a great Empire. The entire Russian policy revolves around the idea of consolidating the central government, determining economic development and reconstructing Russia – the imperial nostalgia. (Lo, 2003, 2).

The current Russian political elite was brought up under a Marxist-Leninist worldview where there was a strong tradition of regarding capitalist instruments as bourgeois oppression. The leitmotif of the recent Russian history is the enemy of the West, placed in opposition with a united Russia. Putin noted in his biography, it was his "sacred duty to unify the people of Russia, to rally citizens around clear aims and tasks, and to remember every day and every minute that we have one Motherland, one people and one future". Having that in mind, and combining it with a realist-anchored perception of international relations, the expansion of NATO and EU towards East after the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the Cold War ended transformed the West into the main enemy.

The colored Revolutions and the involvement of the Western democracies, which determined structural changes in the countries that once were in the Russian sphere of influence and their orientation towards pro-occidental views have been perceived as coordinated subversive strategies of the West to weaken Russia.

Thus, the message conveyed in the public sphere in Russia associated enemy and threat with the West, thus inducing the population the idea of a constant Western threat. This phenomena became obvious in the context of the recent events in Ukraine. The arguments sustaining Russian intervention in Ukraine rely mainly on ethos, appealing to identity, non-negotiable values like Christianity and invoking historical facts. Leading from NATO and its continuity as a military alliance, although the threat which determined its formation

was eliminated, and ending with examples of political activity developed by Western forces in former Soviet states, so as to encourage the administration to oppress Russian-natives, Putin has divided the world into heroes and villains and identified himself with the hero of the story. The efficiency of his narrative derives from the fact that it exploits the history and the historical desire of the Russian society, which has been perpetuated along generations within a security-centric system. At the moment, a survey conducted by Levada Center revealed that almost 88% of the Russian population consider the Western democracies are conducting informational warfare against Russia and are perceiving it as a threat (Levada Center, 2009).

## 2.2. Decision-making process – Foreign policy

When discussing about matters of foreign policy, the members of the group are also sharing the perception of the threat and of its generating factors, choosing the most effective response strategy based on that: intervention, non-intervention, support. The smaller the group, the higher the probability of a common vision. In what regards the Russian Federation, the debates and discussions existent within the political ruling elite are altered by the influence the president exerts within the group (Taylor, 2015). "Putin orders with an unprecedented authority, since the death of Stalin in 1953" (Lo, 2003, 5). Although we may consider the decisional unit as being the singular group in Russia, Putin exerts its dominant power among the members of the group.

His political personality is greatly influenced by his professional evolution. Starting as a graduate of Leningrad State University, department of Law, Putin became a KGB officer, which greatly shaped his future personality as a leader. Military structures are widely recognized for their inflexibility in hierarchy, being defined by two elements: centralization and formalization.

Centralization reflects the authoritative nuclei and limits the communication channels existent within the organization. Activities in a military structures are conducted in accordance with very strict hierarchical orders. Putin consolidated his privileged position gradually during his mandates. He became the sole exponent of Russian foreign policy, assuming the role of observation, orientation, decision and action, thus reducing almost completely the decisional mechanisms.

Although Vladimir Putin has approached foreign policy matters from an ideological perspective and appealed to the history of the nation and to elements which define national identity, his decisions were always based on an equation of interests and advantages. Putin's ruling system is authoritative rather than autocratic, being based not on legislative consolidation of autocracy but on the

authority of the person who created the system and makes it work effectively. (\*\*\*, What does Putin.)

The strategic direction of development is dictated by his voice, and elements of nature to prejudice its position are eliminated. Putin remains the key component of the system, as the people invested their trust in him personally (\*\*\*, what does Putin).

However, Putin is not a dominant leader by excellence, his political orientation and the environment in which he acts creating the probability of outward input. From this perspective, we can argue Putin is rather a pragmatic leader than a dominant one. He considered the collapse of the Soviet Union the biggest geopolitical failure of the XXth century (Galeotti, Bowen, 2014) and aware that Soviet reunification was an impossible goal, he sought to consolidate Russian position in the international arena. It has been observed that Russia appeals to international cooperation, if common interest are at stake.

Perhaps the most relevant example in that matter is the case of the 9/11 attacks. Facing a common enemy- terrorism – Russia has enhanced its cooperation with the US in preventing and mitigating terrorist threats. This approach of foreign policy has been observed in relation with Japan, with whom Russia has a historical conflict over the Northern territories (*rapprochement*) (Ferguson, 2008, 79).

The political objectives are emphasized in the New National Security Concept, implemented in 2000 (\*\*\*, the Foreign Policy Concept) by Vladimir Putin. Concept 2000 offers transparency and predictability in what regards foreign policy, in terms of political realism (Ivanov, 2003, 161), structuring courses of action in accordance with national interests and benefits. Adapting in accordance with the changes observed within the international arena and with the new forms of conflictual manifestation, Russia aims at attaining financial prosperity. By gaining (competitive) economic advantages, it seeks to become a pole of influence in a multipolar world, thus regaining its status of power. In matters of foreign policy, Kremlin continues the directions of action set in 2000 in the programmatic documents implemented in 2008.

### 2.3. Russian- Syrian relations

Narrowing the narrative and focusing on the relationship developed between the Russian Federation and Syria, one must analyze the historical evolution of Russia in the Middle East. The 2008 doctrine approaches, in articles 14 and 15, the problem of cultural differences, thus individualizing Middle East North Africa as being a region in which the process of globalization seems to have been inverted. The population fights for re-gaining cultural identity, underlining the desire for returning to the core cultural roots and Islamic values. The recurrence of this type of process in proximity has determined Kremlin to consider MENA a priority in

international affairs. As the Russian Federation has approximately 10-15% of its population of Islamic belief (CIA World Factbook), it has sought to demonstrate its capacity for inclusion and integration, without altering their belief and value system. Under this conditions, it blames the process of imposing a hierarchy and a governance institution by an outward force, perceiving this as an intrusive intervention in the internal affairs of a state, premise for increased xenophobia, intolerance and tensions.

The Doctrine identifies as core element of global instability the desire of international powers to manage conflicts through sanctions, coercive measures and unilateral military interventions carried out beyond the auspices of United Nations Security Council. In this context, the problem of the Syrian state becomes, from the perspective of the decisional process, a relative simple one. The members of the political elite share a common vision, therefore consensus is rapidly achieved and Russia's political objectives in the region are set in accordance with its historical ties with the Middle East.

Although MENA has not represented an area of interest for pre-Soviet Russia or for the Russian Empire, this approach has changed once the Second World War ended. The Russian geopolitical ambitions focused on the Arab world, especially on the Middle East. The Soviet Union sought to connect with Arab states, whose political regimes and orientations were sharing common grounds with the communist ideology. Models explaining the socialist orientation and non-capitalist development were elaborated, so as to explain the attractiveness of the Soviet model in Arab countries. In 1980, Hafez al-Assad signed a Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship with Russia, through which the two states established strategic ties. The implementation of perestroika in 1985 has destabilized the position of the Arab states in the Russian policy, switching from a central element into a periphery one (Malashenko, 2013, 12). Post-Soviet Russia no longer has the resources necessary to maintain productive relations with all the countries of the Middle East. However, Syria remained an important pier in the vision of Moscow. Since the beginning of his mandate, in 2000, Putin sought to regain its influence in the Middle East. Without any sounding success in establishing and consolidating strategic relations with Syria, Russia exploited the opportunities inferred by the revolutionary wave.

Systematically and in accordance with a neo-imperialist doctrine, Putin aimed at transforming Russia in a distinct pole of influence. Russian motivations did not revolve around the massive energetic resources available in the region, but focused on the need to consolidate strategic points. The support Russia offered Assad is a good representation of the pragmatic vision adopted by Kremlin, who perceived the revolution as an

opportunity, whose proper exploitation would allow an increase in regional influence. For attaining this objective, the Russian Federation estimated it is required for the ruling regime to remain in function. Its take down and the replacement of the Baath party with another form of ruling would have determined a break in the geostrategic relations established between Damascus and Moscow.

Russia's discourse revolved around the idea of inefficiency. Kremlin invoked the precedents of Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo, where interventionism has generated further conflictual manifestations and determined regional instability. Russia's main objective was maintaining stability in the area, and the US-led interventions have proved their efficiency in taking down a regime, but not in implementing a stable one. Although the Russian reactions used the concept of responsibility to protect to argue their veto position within the Security Council, Russian leader's pragmatism could have been translated into more tangible objectives.

First of all, Russia controlled the Tartus port, the only military base outside the former USSR territory and the only naval point for fueling Russian ships in the Mediterranean. In 2008, Assad agreed to convert the port into a permanent military base for war ships with nuclear cargo. In 2009, RIA Novosti announced that the port will become operational in matters of anti-piracy activities, as it served as a base for multi-directional projectiles. (\*\*\*, Russia set to build up) In this context, controlling the Tartus port was conditioned by maintaining the Assad regime in power.

Secondly, the Middle East has been a conflictual epicenter for a long time, thus becoming an area of interest for Russian arms export industry. Starting with the 50s, Kremlin has made deals with the states in the region, which implied the presence of Russian consultants on national territories and their direct involvement in the conflict. Through these agreements, Russia has pursued its strategic objectives in the region, gaining both major economic advantages and access to foreign military infrastructure. After the fall of the USSR, the relations with the Middle-Eastern countries deteriorated, the main demand being consisted of

Syria and Iran. The estimations regarding the value of the contracts signed between Rosoboronexport (Russian arms export industry) and Assad regime indicate a profit of 4 billion USD. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimated that the amount of money obtained by selling Russian arms on Syrian territory rises up to 162 million USD in 2009 (Katz, 2012), 700 million in 2010 and 960 million in 2011. (Yan, 2013)

Lastly, Putin feared the most the diffusion of Islamist radicalization towards North Caucasus and Volga region. The triumph of the Arab Spring and of the pertained social movements has reached to the Russian Muslim population, generating and encouraging the development of an opposition movement.

### 3. Conclusions

*In approaching the Syrian conflict, the Russian Federation formulated its foreign policy leading from two main questions: who will dominate Syria and who will become the new regional power core. The Assad regime was a strategic ally for Kremlin. The motivation that lied behind the use of the veto right for three time within the United Nations Security Council, thus blocking interventionist resolutions, were based on the strategic objective of maintaining relative stability in the region. The emergence of the Islamic State, both geographically and demographically, prove the fact that the Russian strategy was efficient, if it can be evaluated in the given situation.*

*The military intervention against the Assad regime would have determined increased instability in the country and would have created the political framework favourable for allegedly democratic elections. In countries like Syria, with poor democratic history, where the concept of democracy is diluted and understood only in terms of social welfare and health services, history has proven that democratic elections end up replacing a dictator with another.*

*In the context of the increasing street violence and popularity of groups/militant groups with extremist views, organizing such electoral events would have, most likely, created a political arena for legitimizing extremist movements.*

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