

A New Russian Realpolitik: Putin's Operationalization of Psychology and Propaganda

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ABSTRACT

For two decades, Vladimir Putin has held the highest levels of position and power in Russia. The leader and his collaborating elites harness an enduring Russian identity and methodically design a path for a manipulated society to eagerly regain legitimacy, respect, and relevance. This qualitative and exploratory study examines Putin and his apparatus's efforts to unify Russian society and expand its influence through the cultivation and operationalization of specific psychological theories. Through theory triangulation, thematic coding, and analysis of relevant and current open-source material, convergence demonstrates Putin's disciplined understanding and deliberate management of Russian identity and perception. Evidence indicates Putin's comprehensive and synchronized approach to achieve a spectrum of policy objectives. This study challenges the traditional notion of leadership's rational pursuit of self-interest by showcasing Putin's operationalization of power politics, propaganda efforts, and malleable internal workings of an exclusive society for both manipulation and exploitation.

Keywords: Putin, Russia, image theory, humiliation theory, identity theory, psychological domain, sixth domain

Una nueva Realpolitik rusa: la operacionalización de la psicología y la propaganda de Putin

RESUMEN

Durante dos décadas, Vladimir Putin ha mantenido los más altos niveles de posición y poder en Rusia. El líder y sus élites colaboradoras aprovechan una identidad rusa duradera y diseñan metódicamente un camino para que una sociedad manipulada recupere su legitimidad, respeto y relevancia con entusiasmo y ganas. Este estudio cualitativo y exploratorio examina los esfuerzos de Putin y

su aparato para unificar la sociedad rusa y expandir su influencia a través del cultivo y la operacionalización de teorías psicológicas específicas. Mediante la triangulación teórica, la codificación temática y el análisis de material de código abierto relevante y actual, la convergencia demuestra la comprensión disciplinada de Putin y el manejo deliberado de la identidad y la percepción rusas. La evidencia indica el enfoque integral y sincronizado de Putin para lograr un espectro de objetivos de política. Este estudio desafía la noción tradicional de la búsqueda racional del liderazgo del interés personal al mostrar la operacionalización de Putin de la política de poder, los esfuerzos de propaganda y el funcionamiento interno maleable de una sociedad exclusiva tanto para la manipulación como para la explotación.

Palabras clave: Putin, Rusia, Teoría de la imagen, Teoría de la humillación, Teoría de la identidad, dominio psicológico, sexto dominio

一个新式的俄罗斯现实政治：普京对心理学和（政治）宣传进行操作化

摘要

二十年来，弗拉基米尔·普京一直掌握着俄罗斯的最高地位和权力。这位领导人及其幕僚控制着一个长久的俄罗斯身份，并有条不紊地为一个被操控的社会设计一条道路，以迫切且急需的方式重新获得其合法性、尊重和相关性。本篇定性探究式研究检验了普京及其政府通过对特定心理理论进行发展和操作化，以期统一俄罗斯社会和扩大其影响力所作的努力。通过理论三角测定、主题编码、对相关及当前开源材料进行分析，得出的结果证明普京系统地理解了俄罗斯身份和感知，并有意对其进行管控。证据表明了普京对实现一系列政策目标采取的全面同步方式。本研究通过展示普京为实现操纵和剥削而对一个排外社会的权力政治、政治宣传工作、可调整的内部工作进行操作化，（进而）挑战了关于领导者理性追求自身利益的传统理解。

关键词：普京，俄罗斯，形象理论，羞辱理论，认同理论，心理领域，第六领域

Introduction and Background

Despite efforts of select analysts, policymakers, and academics to force a deliberate iconoclasm and properly jettison the rudimentary assumptions and oversimplified conclusions drawn from conventional thinking and residual Cold War framing, two former superpowers, the United States and Russia, do their part to live up to old expectations. Instead of attempting to go beyond “the orthodoxy of assumed animosity that keeps Russia and the United States from finding negotiated common ground,” the two countries remain locked in a dynamic geopolitical chess match involving nuclear weapons, military forces, geographic proxies, and varying ideologies (Crosston 2018). Just like during the Cold War, heightened discourse, diplomatic action, and military posturing from both sides reinforce and amplify power politics and different forms of propaganda. The populations of both nation-states seem not only proud of their ideological entrenchment but also willing and determined to enshrine the amplification of their long-held identity and reinforced convictions.

The crumbling of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall brought with it an unfamiliar and uneasy unilateral power structure. The world, as everyone knew it, along with the many neat political theories and institutions, turned on its head. America, perceiving itself as an undisputable superpower, quickly claimed victory at the end of the Cold War, championing both its model republic and spirited liberal

institutions. For over a decade, the US confidently showcased to a global audience its accomplishments and effectiveness against its former Soviet foe. Out of the shadows of the Soviet Union, a new modern Russia realized its loss of legitimacy, respect, and relevance. Almost overnight, the vast preponderance of laypeople and analysts perceived the Iron Curtain and all its unifying features to be exposed and erased. Notwithstanding this humiliating descent, the Russian identity and its entrenched political institutions seemed determined to prevent the quick and dramatic transition to some form of liberal democracy and free-market society.

Despite the West's dramatic and impactful victory during the Cold War, Russian society staggered forward with only its perceptions, identities, values, and images. One man, a former Soviet intelligence officer named Vladimir Putin, was able to rise from the ashes to consolidate and capitalize on the tightly held Russian identity. The President of Russia and his cadre of loyal oligarchs undoubtedly hold power and influence Russian society and politics. By skillfully and practically directing the complex Russian political system and exploiting various weaknesses and divisions in the international arena, Putin has been able to unify the once directionless and fragmented Russian society and expand its sphere of influence. He has methodically challenged and chipped away at the West's post-World War II standing throughout the world. This success is not brought about by chance or luck but by a systematic understanding and deliberate management of the unique

Russian identity and perception. It is Putin, who skillfully exploits, manipulates, and reinforces power politics, propaganda, and the malleable psychological internal workings of the collective Russian society.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Putin and his collaborating governmental apparatus has unified Russian society and expanded its sphere of influence by deliberately cultivating and integrating humiliation, identity activation, and image manipulation with more traditional sources of influence. This study argues that Vladimir Putin's and various Russian pro-government apparatuses' current domestic/foreign policy success, including the degradation of Western credibility, is a result of the comprehension, exploitation, and reinforcement of select psychological theories and traditional concepts of propaganda. This research intends to dissect the particular strategy and intentions of the Russian leader over the last two decades. It conducts a pre- and postmortem of operationalization and manipulation efforts relating to the preferred Russian power apparatuses psychological theories of choice.

The conclusions and the data drawn from this research aim to add to the knowledge that serves both international relations and political psychology interests. Scholars and practitioners around the globe currently find themselves in a time period when it is easy to incorrectly surmise that Russian leadership is merely attempting to recreate the Soviet Union (Crosston 2018). It is wrong for theorists to simply dust

off rigid and simplistic theories and paradigms. It is essential to examine in detail various constructivist lenses and theories that explain internal factors, motivations, and perceptions that end up having impacts on actions, policies, and attitudes. This research intends to advance the overall conversation about Russia's deliberate manipulation within its growing sphere of influence by combining various psychological theories and reinforcement techniques. This research showcases the comprehensive and synchronized approach that Russian leadership has engineered in an attempt to achieve a spectrum of foreign policy goals and degrade Western power and stability.

Examining an Orchestrated Russian Resurgence

Traditional theories of international relations would lead one to believe that most politics involve the rational pursuit of self-interest. However, "a more accurate picture of human beings as political actors is one that acknowledges that people are driven or motivated to act in accordance with personality characteristics, values, beliefs, and attachment to groups" (Cottam et al. 2010, 1). Individuals are not robots, but rather imperfect information processors who are influenced and manipulated as they try to find stability and purpose in a complex world. To put it in less sophisticated terms, "people are driven to act by internal factors such as personality, attitudes, and self-identity, they evaluate their environment and others through cognitive processes that

produce images of others, and they decide how to act when these forces are combined” (Cottam et al. 2010, 1).

The concept of a dynamic and influential leader who reinforces a society's specific identity and perceptions is not new. However, Putin's ability to skillfully incubate, manipulate, and exploit a unique blend of current and historical perceptions/images, emotions, and an enduring Russian social identity is both impressive and distinctive (Torbakov 2015). For two decades, Putin labored to salvage and reconstitute a “historic Russia,” determining that his version of a political system was “the best instrument available to secure the state's integrity” (Torbakov 201, 444). Since taking power, the current President of Russia has embraced varying shades of propaganda and *Realpolitik* as tools of reinforcement and amplification in his efforts to exploit the Russian political system and sphere of influence.

Putin has not only actively taken the reins in his efforts to restore Russian standing and prominence in the world, but has also begun degrading Western influence and cohesion. Tempered by the pragmatic realization that it is not possible to recreate the Soviet State, he deliberately chose to shed the many deficiencies and anchors associated with communism, despite knowing full well there is considerable nostalgia for Russia's linchpin role in the former Soviet space (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). Putin has been able to deliver social and economic progress to a Russian population eager for tangible results. By utilizing the framework of the polit-

ical psychology theories of humiliation, social identity, and image, this paper helps readers conceptualize how Putin creates measurable success throughout Russian society.

It is a common misconception that Putin is trying to reconstruct the old Soviet Union (Crosston 2018). A more detailed examination shows that the current President and former Prime Minister of Russia does not intend to resurrect the former Soviet Bloc, but instead exploit and weaponize the characteristics and the mechanisms of order, prosperity, and greatness (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). Thus his efforts allow the country to thrive while disregarding the elements that let the system flounder. This study assesses the following research questions. How has Vladimir Putin combined, applied, and exploited the political psychology theories of humiliation, identity, and image to consolidate influence and produce achievements in Russian society? Why has the Russian leader embraced propaganda and *Realpolitik* when attempting to pursue political goals? How has Putin capitalized on the malleable internal psychology within his sphere of influence?

Relationships and Key Themes

Drawing on the psychology theories of humiliation, identity, and image, this research examines active Russian policies, goals, motivations, and actions to address the research questions stated above. Despite a US Cold War victory, the new century brought with it a post-Soviet foreign

policy that emphasized Russian “wisdom to understand—ahead of the United States—the important truth that pol-yarchy is the form of governance that rules the world ... that the conflict in the world politics is the sign of a new era and ... conflict was caused by an overall decline of the influence of the West and opposition to the global rearrangement of power by the United States” (Beak 2009, 459).

With past discourse, Putin declared “to the United States and the West that the U.S.-centered unipolar model in which only ‘one master’ and ‘one sovereign’ exist is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world, that a new ‘architecture of global security’ has to be established, and that Russia is not merely a counter-hegemonic state, as it is a leading designer of the new order” (Beak 2009, 458). With a muddled American foreign policy in flux between a Pacific pivot and an enduring Middle East commitment, Russia’s leadership and ruling elite remain determined as ever to reshape the outcomes of and the conclusions drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Putin and his sculpted security apparatus keenly understand the realities of the post-Soviet security psyche. Struggling to compete with the United States and sustain a worldwide power projection image and conventional arsenal, the Russian leadership recognizes the benefits of cultivating and exploiting other types of power, including political, social, and informational ones, in an attempt to bridge the gap between the new Russia and the West. Putin and

his governmental apparatus deploy deliberate propaganda against not only foreigners, but also target their efforts against a manipulable domestic mass. Against a Russian psyche, Putin propagates “the idea that Russia is not worse than Western countries, also, to give the impression that Russia is prepared for war” (Rațiu and Munteanu 2018, 193). In this study, “propaganda” encompasses the entire spectrum of possible influence operations, political warfare techniques, active measures, and soft power approaches. For the purposes of this study, the term “propaganda” describes public or covert influence operations that intentionally “aim to affect cognitive, physiological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of a target audience” (Larson 2009, 3).

This study intends to build on the foundation set by Lebow (2009), *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. Similar to Lebow’s work, this alternative framework of psychological constructivism breaks away from the predictable realist and neoliberal camps and provides ample evidence of combinations of psychological theories that affect the international arena and specific foreign policies. Building on the most “spirit-based world concept,” Lebow declares:

... international systems were actors are driven not by fear and security dilemma but instead by the desire to bolster pride and self-esteem in their individual and collective identities. In such systems, honor and standing are

the coin of the realm, and the adult important international pecking order is established through frequent resort to armed conflict. (Hyman 2010, 461)

Putin frames political actions and methods in traditional *Realpolitik* terms. The Russian leader is known for his pragmatic utilization of systems, techniques, and modalities. However, at the same time, he ensures the careful attention and consideration of political, psychological, and constructivist realities to harness and deliberately manipulate target audiences for power consolidation and opposition suppression (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). Artfully engineering and operationalizing psychologically manipulable variables, Putin has more successfully than not met emergent challenges to his legitimacy and political agenda (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). Putin's deliberate focus, reinforcement, and weaponization of the three selected theories enable him to become the primary decider and authority of Russia's present and future.

It would seem that Vladimir Putin mastered "the art of ruling ... finding a way to derive benefit from ... the feelings of others and not in wasting one's own energy in order to destroy them. [Putin] is capable of liberating himself from blind control of his own feelings [and] is also capable of exploiting the feelings of others for his own purposes" (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2017, 340). The Russian leader understands these theories do not have to be used in isolation; often, the salient principles and elements intertwine, infuse,

and complement one another. However, with careful political and psychological assessment and refinement, specific tailoring and formulation can be used to achieve/spread the optimal and desired effects of two of Putin's essential objectives and narratives:

- 1) Russia is rising from its knees and because of that the West, first and foremost the United States, declared war on Moscow in order to preserve its diktat in world affairs. 2) Although threatened on all sides by implacable enemies, Russia has nothing to fear so long as Putin is at the helm, not only will he protect the motherland, but also, he will recover the [Russian] status being viewed and therefore respected again. (Aron 2016)

Putin has made it clear to the international community that he will not be cornered into a specific hardened political ideology. He is determined to avoid making the same mistakes that former Soviet leaders made. Using a variety of realist and constructivist foundations, he is tenacious in remaining adaptive to ever-changing domestic and international political landscapes. He is committed to making modern Russia a respected member of the international community once more. He is resolute in his acknowledgment of the maintenance and the projection of the image required for a specific national identity.

For two decades, Putin has occupied the world stage and has vaulted Russian activities and aspirations back into the mainstream global headlines.

Both Western and Russian media covered the spectrum in detailing Putin's persona and actions during this time period. However, no existing research has proven the causality between combinations of specific psychology theories and present-day Russian political goals and power methods. This research aims to fill the current gap allowing several critical themes and an illustration of the resultant bifurcation to emerge.

The review of varied primary source material highlights Putin's unique manipulation of specific psychological constructivist theories that facilitate and reinforce his overall pragmatic and power politics approach. Through analysis, the following themes emerge. First, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the floundering of the new underdeveloped "westernized" Russian system, the emergent domestic and international political power player, Vladimir Putin, has tapped into the unique Russian identity. He has forcefully constructed specific images and narratives and deliberately forced differentiation among social categories of target audiences to consolidate power, enhance stability, and achieve a variety of *Realpolitik* political goals that are meant to bring Russia the international respect and prominence that the country feels it deserves. Second, despite being calculated and pragmatic in his political approaches, Putin relies heavily on the combined effects of humiliation theory, social theory, and image theory to consolidate his power structure and influence various target audiences in order to project and facilitate heightened social categorization, tailored schemas,

and specific political aspirations. Finally, Putin and his Russian political apparatus have embraced and deployed an entire spectrum of propaganda vehicles and techniques used to reinforce the salience of and weaponize these select political psychology theories.

Research Design

Through the application of three psychological theories, Putin assessed the government's efforts to unify Russian society and expand its sphere of influence. In this study, the first step is to evaluate the various political psychology theories that have been operationalized and reinforced by Putin's effective use of propaganda and power politics. The second step is to analyze the goals, intentions, and recent successes of both Russian leadership and society. Through thematic coding and analysis of relevant and current open-source materials, the convergence indicates Putin's disciplined understanding and deliberate management of Russian identity and perception. Qualitative evidence from over two-dozen primary and secondary sources concludes and explains how Putin has harnessed and operationalized the effects of these theories to his advantage.

This research article takes a qualitative and exploratory approach in studying the direct effects of a polarizing yet consolidating Russian influence by the Putin administration to actively target and coax the internal workings of various groups and schemas. Russian leadership and the post-Soviet society's best attempt to achieve desired politi-

cal goals and fulfill societal motivations and ambitions is a holistic and complementary approach. This research highlights and examines exploitable and malleable elements of specific psychological theories and the active measures that reinforce them.

Data points from journalistic interviews, peer-reviewed academic journals, specific subject-matter books, and relevant congressional testimonies were gathered and discovered. The data exhibiting Russian leadership's capitalization and exploitation of specific psychological theories and the application of propaganda and active measures in its efforts to amplify and anchor these political-ideological frameworks were thematically coded. These developed categories were linked through the process of axial and causation coding; inductive and inductive methods formed meaningful relationships.

Successful Post-Soviet Resurrection

The post-Soviet reality left millions dazed, confused, and in search of a new identity. For those who lived under the former Soviet banner, the general consensus was that “the end of the Cold War was Russia’s equivalent of the Versailles Treaty ... a source of endless humiliation and misery” (Aron 2016, 1). From the chaff and the political confusion of an early Russian experiment with Western democracy, an unsuspecting ex-Soviet spy emerged, who was immediately tasked by a crippled and directionless

Russian society to recover the economic, political, and societal clout was needlessly squandered by a rigid and uncompromising ideology. While the West turned its attention to new strategic priorities in the Middle East, Putin effectively tapped into a historical and societal identity, exposed and exploited intergroup realities, and capitalized off emotions related to the downfall of the Soviet Union. Doing this, Putin carefully and deliberately massaged a security and political apparatus in his image. This refined vehicle of influence and authority was repeatedly employed to amplify and reinforce Putin’s distinctive and successful blend of power politics and constructivist realities.

To date, Putin has attained a string of domestic and international successes. He has not only regained a firm and controlling hold on internal information sources and mediums, but has seemingly quelled the chaos and the various insurgent “color revolutions” at the Russian doorstep. The Russian leader has “liberated” entire Russian enclaves in Crimea in Eastern Ukraine, ensuring his portrayal as the true protector of the Russian people. In Chechnya, he personally led a successful anti-terror campaign he deemed equivalent to the perceived noble and required Western crusade against Islamic terrorism. In addition, for many proud Russians, the Putin-directed “humanitarian intervention” in Syria is portrayed as legitimate and necessary due to a perceived lack of any appropriate and moral Western response (Crosston 2018).

Since taking the reins as Russia's leader, Putin has surprised the West with a reinvigorated patriotic mobilization and consolidation. The inner-workings of which present "an unprecedented challenge: a highly personalistic authoritarianism, which is resurgent, activist, inspired by a mission, prone to risky behavior for both ideological reasons and those of domestic political legitimacy, and armed, at the latest count, with 1,735 strategic nuclear warheads ..." (Aron 2016, 1). For better or for worse, Putin is determined to control Russia's destiny personally. With the unbendable components of authority and nationalism, Putin considers his actions justified and in the interest of Russian society. He believes Russia's "goal is to reinforce our country, to make our country better for life, more attractive ... more valuable, to turn our country into something that could respond swiftly to the challenges of time. To strengthen it from the internal political point of view, and to strengthen our external political stance as well. Those are the goals we are pursuing. [Russia is] not trying to please anyone" (Stone 2017, 205).

Whether a matter of fact or perception, Putin has successfully resurrected Russian legitimacy through a series of domestic and international successes. The transformational Russian leader has forced the West to re-examine and reconsider Russia's relative power and international standing. Moreover, the entire Russian people now feel that they have successfully provided the world with a credible alternative to the dominant and imposing liberal paradigm (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2017).

Putin's Propaganda Integration

“Although there are numerous discussions between scholars and military thinkers regarding whether the Russian information warfare is truly ‘a new way of war,’ a certain aspect of Russian strategy is ‘that information now has primacy and operations, while a more conventional military forces are in a supporting role’” (Rațiu and Munteanu 2018, 193). Whatever blend of information operations, active measures, covert spying, political warfare, or soft power initiatives the Russian government sanctioned, it was meant not only to influence policy, but also to deliberately cause division within a consolidated liberal Western culture and security alliance (Chivvis 2017). Putin has ensured a “whole of government” approach by forcibly and deliberately integrating power politics, propaganda methods, and select political psychological theories. Through a variety of mediums and modalities, Russian propaganda once again has tried to invade and cloud the cognitive minds of a variety of target audiences in an attempt to influence desired actions. The new battleground, “from a Russian perspective, is the people's mind, the necessity for hard military power being minimized” (Rațiu and Munteanu 2018, 193). With this paradigm shift, the Russian leadership has chosen to integrate propaganda with calculated power politics in its efforts to create tension, confusion, doubt, and weakness by slowly eroding faith in the institutions and systems that have long served as the pillars of liberal democracy (Chivvis 2017).

Russian propaganda production is not new to the world. However, Putin and his governmental and security apparatus have re-engineered and deliberately tailored the system to be successful in the twenty-first century. Speaking bluntly, General Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, noted that Russian propaganda “was the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen” (Gerber and Zavisca 2016, 80). Select messaging, identity reinforcement, and image manipulation by an entire host of sophisticated propaganda methods support Putin’s desired end state to have Russian political and social values esteemed higher than the West’s. Hostile perceptions of the US “have taken hold in Russia, where nearly 70% of the respondents view [the] United States as an enemy, and an additional 15% see the United States as a rival” (Gerber and Zavisca 2016, 85). Through official statements, mass media, social media, paid agents, and funded nongovernmental organizations, the Russian security apparatus has been able to slowly infect areas that have traditionally been outside Russia’s sphere of influence. At the same time, the same systems have turned inward. They have been used to engineer a consolidated narrative, identity, and image against the Russian people who have seemingly willingly abdicated their cognitive defense mindset and stance to a new Russian leader for the promise of stability, direction, and resurgence. There is currently an entire constellation of structured and funded Russian “civil society” institutions and media outlets (Helmus 2018). Hackers,

troll farms, *Sputnik News*, and *Russia Today* are the modern Russian equivalents of the T-34 tank; instead of penetrating the physical battlefields, these mediums force cognitive penetration, allowing a manipulated narrative and amplified differentiation within an entire spectrum of target audiences.

Deliberately choosing to make it a priority, the Russian government allocated over \$1.4 billion to international and domestic propaganda (Van Herpen 2016, 74). The influence campaigns in the Soviet era and under President Putin represent a “long-term, indirect, and low-risk approach to undermine and weaken an opponent from within in order to promote political objectives and alter the correlation of power in Moscow’s favor in order to win the clash of civilizations with the West” (McCauley 2016). Putin and his many controlled networks believe that they can deliberately change attitudes and ideas through the art of persuasion. They understand that they can effectively reinforce existing trends and beliefs to solidify and differentiate the realities of an intergroup process. The current employment and widespread usage of propaganda allow the Russian leader to influence masses near and abroad. This approach causes them to believe that the Russian past “reflects the happy future of present-day Russia ... [The Russian people] don’t expect a happy future to come in the form of modernization or the form of approaching the westernized world. [With this], the future lies in the Soviet past of Russia” (Van Herpen 2016, 77).

Putin's Humiliation Capitalization

From Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Lenin, and Stalin, the immense Russian landscape has been governed by a variety of dynamic and powerful figures. Authoritarian and hierarchical in nature, these guided and forced Russian constituencies into subjugation through various revolutions, wars, and ideologies. This collective history of these past leaders contributed to a uniquely developed and entrenched schema and identity among the Russian populace. Both the Russian elite's and laypeople's embrace of a historically bound identity has often associated with the tenets of toughness, resiliency, collectivism, stability, realism, and paternalism.

Alfred Evans highlights a distinctive Russian identity that mutated from its history of specific conditions and traditions. Evans states, "from the very beginning, Russia was created as a super-centralized state. That's particularly laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its people" (Evans 2008, 903). The Russian people who bore the brunt of horror and destruction during World War II, who saw a cosmonaut ascend to the outer reaches of space before anyone else, who cherished the advanced technology and quantity of their nuclear arsenal, and who bore the many burdens behind the Iron Curtain, all shared a specific and hardened identity fully incorporated into their collective and individual psyche.

Using Saurette's humiliation theory as one of its foundational points, this study begins to identify specific Russian emotional factors of Russian leadership and society relating to how "humiliation ... can act as the basis from which to theorize and investigate its influence in global politics" (Saurette 2006, 496). The variety of emotions and values, including, honor, respect, and mythology, are at the forefront in explaining Putin's motivations and the Russian apparatus's desire to tap into the critical and collective humiliation element widely entrenched in Russian society. Specific Russian dynamics, including humiliation, were experienced for a certain period after the fall of the Soviet Union. This humiliation dynamic has been captured and molded, allowing the Russian government to dictate a specific influential Russian national/foreign policy.

The unforeseen collapse of the Soviet system brought about an unexpected change of the longstanding bipolar international paradigm. Mikhail Gorbachev's and Boris Yeltsin's progressive and reformative *perestroika* platforms encouraged many Russian patriots to hope a new Russia would successfully transition to an economy and political system similar to the West. However, some of Russian society and some Russian elites were more resistant and unaccommodating to the dramatic changes that intended to mimic Western values and conventions. The transformation was haphazard, uncertain, muddled, and embarrassing.

The collective Russian people lost the authoritarian sources of direction and stability to which they had become accustomed. Russian society neither witnessed nor felt the great Western economic downfall that many citizens were expecting. For its part, the West was neither fully open and accommodating in embracing its former foe nor willing to fully incorporate them with the same liberalized respect and values they had now taken for granted. The West projected a collective “fear that the former communist world represented a ‘Wild East’; an area populated by violent people who, given half a chance, would love to tear each other apart” (Whitehall Papers 2008, 43). Russian elites and governing bodies were subjugated to being lectured and preached to by their perceived culturally inferior, more recently established countries throughout the West.

In 1991, Russians lost [their] buffer, the legacy of their great-great generation. With their country falling apart, Russian leaders had no choice but to accept this loss for as long as Russia would remain weak. The 1990s were a terrible decade for Russia, what a great decade for the West. For the Russian leaders and many regular Russians, the dominance of the West came at the expense of Russia's loss in the Cold War. (Senate Rept. 115–40)

Despite being uncertain, vulnerable, and alone, Russian leaders thought that they had collective assurances from NATO decision-makers that the

former foe would not exploit the new international realities and power dynamics. However, the Western security institution was quick and aggressive in capitalizing on its perceived final victory against a vanquished Cold War foe. NATO leaders rapidly developed policy and action sets to incorporate new countries that had exited the Soviet's physical and conceptual sphere of influence. Former Warsaw Pact strongholds, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, were quickly integrated and allowed to reap the institutional (security) and cognitive (stabilization) benefits of joining the matured Western defense alliance. NATO's “enlargement apparently broke a promise given to Moscow when the Warsaw Pact dissolved, in undertaking that the West would not seek to benefit from Russia's weakness” (Whitehall Papers 2008, 42).

This deliberate encroachment happened again with the incorporation of countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, and later, in 2009, Croatia and Albania, into the growing Western defense alliance. However, in 2004, the admittance of countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia into the European Union and NATO inflicted a perceived national trauma on the fragile Russian psyche. The “absorption of the Baltic republics into the European Union and NATO have been a bitter pill and, for people continue to think in all fashioned military terms, a strategic dagger pointed at Russia's throat” (Daniels 2007, 8). The West's welcoming of these three countries at the Russian Federation's doorstep, with large populations of ethnic Russians, was

perceived as a deliberate and calculated power grab meant to humiliate and embarrass the former superpower. These three countries had a powerful and enduring historical identification with the “motherland.” The Russian people, along with Russia’s defense apparatus, could not understand why NATO, whose sole purpose of existence was to defend the West against the Soviet Union, was now even allowed to exist. The newly perceived psychological and cognitive assault and humiliation by an unchecked unilateral institution was a watershed moment for the directionless post-Soviet state.

Persevering Kremlin ideologists and significant factions of former Soviet people soon sensed an embarrassing loss of control and autonomy with the intentional development of in-groups and out-groups (Crosston 2008, 33). This exacerbated humiliation dynamic decreased the strength and self-esteem of the collective Russian identity. With the rest of the international community watching, the humiliator stripped away an entrenched set of prized self-perceptions that were highly valued by a specific people and their leaders in their new infantile state (Saurette 2006, 507). Putin perceived the West, particularly US attitudes and intentions, as omnipotent and consciously flagrant. “[A]fter the end of the Cold War, a single center of domination emerged in the world, and those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid tempted to think they were strong and exceptional, they knew better” (Crosston 2008, 102).

After taking the reins as Russian President in 2000, Putin set a new

course for Russia, one in which he was determined not to repeat the rigidness or shortcomings of the former Soviet Union or the perceived degrading, incompetent, and impotent strategies of Yeltsin and Gorbachev. Putin invoked a new political model to counteract the sustained humiliation instigated by the West. His formulated system incorporated unique combinations of loose ideology, firm conservative values, and a rigid political dynamic embedded in paternalism. All of these elements were used to firmly reestablish specific degrees of consciousnesses and internal assumptions that were deemed suppressed not only by Russian society, but also by Putin himself. His triggered counter-humiliation efforts aimed at regaining international respect amid the perceived loss of both image and identity. Putin declared, “Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and particularly always use the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy, we are not going to change this tradition ...” (Daniels 2007, 8).

While serving as either President or Prime Minister over the last two decades, Putin has exploited and operationalized a perceived campaign of humiliation against the Russian people and their diaspora. Instead of attempting to re-engineer a distinctive Russian identity into a particular set of Western culture and norms, Putin embraced and weaponized past humiliations through a variety of propaganda vehicles used to exacerbate and intensify differentiation and emotions, thus expanding the social comparison. This enabled him

and his government apparatus to solidify power, achieve critical international and domestic political objectives, and, when required, to begin to erode the unified Western coalition. With these efforts, “Russia’s strategy of influence seeks to alter the perception of—if not halt and eventually reverse—Central and Eastern Europe’s Euro-Atlantic enlargement and orientation, which has the added benefits of breaking U.S. and Western dominance of the international and democratic liberal order, restoring Russia’s historic sphere of influence, and returning to a bipolar organized world” (Conley et al. 2016).

The Russian masses credited Putin’s policies and achievements with their newly restored sense of legitimacy, self-respect, and international importance. To date, the Russian population seems more than willing to endure a new paternalism well above that of Western standards to fill the void of security and collectivism left over from a perceived crusade of humiliation by the US and its Western allies. Many think that Putin exhumed “the type of Russian state that older citizens want, and the citizenry would likely allow anything other than an autocratic state in which citizens are relieved of the responsibility for politics ... and imaginary foreign enemies are invoked to forge an artificial unity” (Charles River Editors 2014).

For over a decade, the former Soviet spy-turned-politician addressed past Russian political blunders that negatively resonated in the developed Russian psyche. By successfully com-

bing constructivist realities and *Realpolitik* actions as a counterbalance against historical humiliators, Putin empowered a Russian population to regain their self-esteem and direction. However, if Putin exposes his nation’s possible economic or military weaknesses, like Gorbachev and Yeltsin did, he may be disregarded and cast to the footnotes of Russian history.

Putin’s Successful Image Utilization

Utilizing the work of Alexander et al. (2105), this study advances the notion in which “image theorists suggest that the ideas about other actors in the world affairs are organized into group schemas, or images, with well-defined cognitive elements ... comprised of cognitions and beliefs regarding the target nation’s motives, leadership, and primary characteristics” (28). The Russian leadership’s ability to frame specific perceptions of in-groups and out-groups has allowed it to consolidate power and depict the West as culturally and structurally inferior. The newly reinforced image it portrays to both in-groups and out-groups enables the emergence of a perceived equally credible Russian alternative to the once dominant Western values and institutions.

Putin has determined that an “enemy image” is the primary perception to be exploited, constructed, and advanced. “With enemy image, one considers the other nation (the West) as evil, opportunistic, and motivated

by self-interest. The nation's (Western) leaders are also assumed to be highly capable, but untrustworthy. The enemy image results when an international relationship is characterized by intense competition, comparable compatibility/power, incomparable cultural status" (Alexander et al. 2015, 29). After a series of perceived humiliating actions by NATO and the West and the encompassing embarrassment of the failed experiments of communism and *perestroika*, Putin harnessed this collective and amplified emotion to differentiate his sphere of influence from the West. Through constant exploitation and propaganda reinforcement, Putin's calculatingly framed enemy image is singled out for maturation among the Russian masses. With this operationalization, the West "is perceived as relatively equal in capability and culture. In its most extreme form, the diabolical enemy is seen as irrevocably aggressive in motivation, monolithic in decisional structure, and highly rational in decision-making" (Cottam et al. 2010, 54).

Early on as president, Putin stated to the Russian Federal Assembly that "above all else Russia was, is and will, of course, be a major European power" (Feklyunina 2008, 609). However, due to NATO's encroachment and failure to fully incorporate the new Russia into the Western system, Putin shifted this well-intended perception and imagery, stating, "Russia has always perceived herself as a Eurasian country. We have never forgotten [that] the main part of Russian land is in Asia" (Feklyunina 2008, 609). This manipulation and shifting of imagery allowed the leader

to be, at times, centrist in his direction and intentions. This calculated vagueness provides "something for everyone"; it facilitates the motivations and the desires of many business elites who desire to integrate with the established West. At the same time, it cleverly allows Russia to have its own identity. The average citizen is thus entitled to feel proud, unique, and established despite enduring the collective failures of communism, the unfulfilled promise of post-Soviet Union reforms, and the perceived Western onslaught of mental and physical encroachment.

The current Russian government and societal psyche embrace "global affairs as being the exclusive, realist domain of Hobbes and Machiavelli; life is brutish and nasty. In sum, the preservation of power it is not moral or immoral but rather amoral since the pursuit is simply about capability and effective strategy" (Crosston 2008, 103). The Russian military ventures into Chechnya, Syria, Georgia, and Eastern Ukraine prove Putin's appeal through *Realpolitik* actions and frames of reference. Conscientiously framed military actions now ensure that the Russian nation is viewed as not only powerful, but also as invoking its right to self-defense. In Chechnya, Putin has used the same patriotic language and themes to defend the homeland that the West has invoked in its seemingly never-ending "war on terrorism." Putin passionately stated in a personal interview:

we will destroy those who resort to arms. And we will have to create a local elite, which understands that it is in Chechnya's

interests to remain part of Russia. As things stand today, any discussion of any status outside the framework of Russia is out of the question 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. (Gevorkyan et al., 2000, 168)

In 2008, Putin's unexpected military intervention in the independent state of Georgia seemingly caught the West off guard. The Russian military's full display and integration of hard and soft power highlighted the new efficacy of Putin's cleverly engineered state. Despite the West's attempts to characterize Russia's actions as illegal and aggressive, invoking a deliberately built enemy image for his domestic audience and diaspora, the Russian president successfully solidified the narrative that he and the Russian military were in fact "protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, as an unquestionable priority for our country. Our foreign policy decisions will be based on this need. He will also protect the interests of our business community abroad. It should be clear to all that we will respond to any aggressive acts committed against us" (Crosston 2018, 145).

This narrative was tapped again for the intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Putin and his supporting constituents felt justified in their actions to "liberate" and "defend" parts of the historically held "motherland" where millions of ethnic Russians were living. The new

narrative is very similar to the age-old one in that the specific identities and cultures of ethnic Russians were not only being suppressed, but were being conspiratorially exploited and eroded by Western interests and manipulations. The Russian leadership determined that the illegitimate, seemingly Western-inspired "color revolutions" needed to be counterbalanced by securing the exceptional Russian identity and image. Putin wanted to be portrayed as a protector of "his" people; whether those people were actually within Russia's physical borders did not matter. The Russian people and defense apparatus wanted to contradict an ever-looming and newly reinforced paranoia and theme, ensuring that the West did not possess unilateral, unchecked power that directly contradicted Russian society's enduring conservative values and paternal preferences. In 2014, Putin solidified his opinion and the "us versus them" theme, stating, "the crisis in Ukraine, which was provoked and masterminded by some of our Western partners in the first place, is now being used to revive NATO. We clearly need to take all of this into consideration in planning and deciding how to guarantee our country's security" (Sochor 2018, 47).

During Syria's current civil war, Putin and his constructed apparatus of influence have advanced a step further. Not only have they defended their interactions with the same tonality and justifications used by the West in its Middle East excursions, but they have also attacked and embarrassed the West for setting the conditions for disaster and failing to take proper actions to

rectify the situation. On the one hand, Putin can speculate, “northern Caucasian fighters participating in the Syrian war will return to their homeland and continue the fight in native Russian soil against Russians. This is one of the primary reasons for military intervention in Syria” (Crosston 2018, 146). Putin’s appeal for respect and legitimacy in Syria is displayed in another personal interview:

we very much fear that Syria will fall apart like Sudan. We very much fear that Syria will follow in the footsteps of Iraq and Afghanistan. This is why we would like the legal authority to remain in power in Syria, so that Russia can cooperate with Syria and with our partners in Europe and the United States to consider possible methods to change Syrian society, to modernize the regime and make it more viable and humane. (Sochor 2018, 59)

On the other hand, the full-spectrum Russian propaganda machine is able to invade the cognitive arenas of select audiences with the message that “the Islamic state is a U.S. project to redraw the political map of the Middle East, or that it is used by Washington to either boost America’s supremacy in this part of the world or destabilize Russia’s Muslim dominated areas in the northern Caucasus, as well as Russia’s sphere of influence in Central Asia” (Crosston 2018, 146). It is with carefully projected and purposely engineered statements such as these that Putin influences and solidifies specific impressions within target audiences.

The forced categorization and social comparison relating to enemy imagery further entrench Putin’s supporters and distance those against him. With these efforts, he not only grows and isolates his supporting base, but he also consolidates his power and popularity. More importantly, these actions facilitate his desired tectonic shifting toward the return of a more straightforward bipolar international paradigm. These steps are one where the new Russia can compete at the military, political, and cultural echelons that it deems to have deserved. Anchoring this simple yet effective message in a Western television interview, Putin expressed his belief that “the world will be predictable and stable only if it’s multi-polar” (Feklyunina 2008, 615).

Eicher, Pratto, and Wilhelm (2012) note that “people perceive members of another group as threatening, they tend to demonize the group, which allows them to justify uncooperative even violent behavior towards this group and thereby maintain a positive self-image. Image Theory further states that images are used to filter information and interpret actions of others thus leading to a reconfirmation of the image” (128). Putin relied on this causation to start rebuilding his country’s status and structures. He personally targeted various audiences and groups for either greater inclusion or deliberate isolation, ensuring the hardened pride and loyalty of an active in-group that will fulfill not only Russians but also his motives. At first glance, his methodical military and political decisions can be perceived simply as power politics. However, a

major detailed examination uncovers rather salient constructivist inner workings. Using this unique blend of realism and political psychology, Putin knowingly expanded and solidified an in-group population, further ensuring his popularity and reducing any friction or opposition to his domestic or international agenda.

Through various political power moves and influence operations, Russia's leadership has projected a clear international and domestic image. A variety of actions offer the entire continuum of Russian society a sense of pride and hope for the future. By operationalizing image theory, Putin provides a perception of a model of society and government that challenges the Western unipolar paradigm. However, if Putin's weaponizing of image theory becomes tainted or exposed by Western institutions or the credible internal opposition as a farce or extreme manipulation, the current paternal hold on his subjects may weaken. The failure to highlight the developed "us versus them" byproducts of image theory may allow Putin's in-group to create cracks displaying divisions, thus forcing segments to find positive reinforcement and social mobility from an out-group willing to fill the new void.

Putin's Operationalizing of a Unique Identity and Social Identity

The Russian motivation and desire to elevate their own group's status should be in itself enough

for a definite intergroup discrimination against the world's only current superpower. However, Putin's task "is more complicated, being the leader of a nation in profound transition from Soviet communist ideology to a new Russian national identity that attempts to bridge 1000 years of Russian history, spanning eras of the czars to powerful oligarchs" (Stone 2017, 3). Hence, an enhanced differentiation, amplified by deliberate propaganda techniques and influencing methods, is required to accomplish this undertaking.

By operationalizing Stets and Burke's (2000) work, and by allowing the combined theory to address macro- and micro-level social processes, this article emphasizes and forms the necessary relationships to a specific Russian social identity and the particular identity that the current Russian leader depicts. The combined theory employment allows the investigation of groups, roles, depersonalization, self-verification, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in Russian society and its leadership apparatus. The approach also provides both the concept, salience, and critical components needed to link Russian propaganda, active measures, and deliberate political action to the anchoring and amplification of the internal and the external cognitive dynamics within the purposely differentiated groups.

Petersson's (2017) research regarding Putin and legitimacy successfully linked "mythscape" and the particular Russian identity through the Russian leader's influence methods and emotional allegiance to an unambigu-

ous nationalism. To date, Putin has established himself as a faithful and dedicated guardian of the proud and tested Russian identity he attempts to personify. Putin and his political apparatus, led the struggles against any possibility of a recurring humiliation or future squandering of prestige. The Russian leader's political and propaganda systems ensured the vitality of the long-standing political myth and paranoia of foreign encirclement. Throughout history, Russians have associated closely with "the conspiratorial foe, the valiant leader, in the perseverance of the people [these common characteristics] ... bring forth the supreme qualities of the people, [and] are in line with the characteristics often attributed to a charismatic leader" (Petersson 2017).

Putin's identity fits squarely within the optimal Russian historical and social identity. The population has been yearning for a resolute figure as dedicated as Stalin and Lenin, but with compassion and the promise of something better to come. The Russian president is a "mirror in which everyone, communist or democrat, sees what he wants to see and what he hopes for ... Putin was described as intelligent, competent, physically and psychologically healthy, [as] a man who kept to himself, and who was honest and respected abroad. Supporters drew attention to his toughness ... strong-willed and decisive" (McAllister and White 2003, 385). It is these identity traits that Putin has relied on to contentiously engineer himself as a powerful, safe, and proud figurehead.

Throughout his presidencies, Putin has been highly skilled at capitalizing on a small number of overarching political myths, which have tended to dominate the contemporary Russian myth-scape. First, there are Russia's aspirations to be recognized as a great power always and unconditionally. As manifested over the centuries, from Peter the Great to Stalin and up to Putin, this belief seems to function as the basic pillar of Russian national identity. The idea of the country [as] being predestined to be a great power, one that will act and be treated with proper respect, seems to be a dominant political myth upon which Russians' 'we-ness' largely relies. (Petersson 2017)

With the consolidation and promotion of a specific Russian identity, reinforced throughout the world by various influence mediums and propaganda methods, "Putin was able to reconcile policies and groups that in an earlier era would have been in conflict, notably the working class and the aspirational middle-class" (Sakwa 2008, 882). By deliberately remaining uncommitted to a static ideology, Putin's leadership represents "a distinctive type of neo-authoritarianism stabilization that did not repudiate the democratic principles of the constitutional order in which it existed, but which did not allow the full potential of the democratic order to emerge" (Sakwa 2008, 882). This endorsed and propagated concept of sovereign democracy is a

perfect fit for not only Putin, but also the Russian people who were terrified of, and resistant to, an unguided future. Until Putin, the Russian masses did not see an opportunity for their identity to survive after the West's perceived misrepresentations and encroachments. The Russian president spoke for the people, echoing their sentiment by stating, "they have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure [at] our borders" (Khrushcheva 2014, 22).

Similar to Stalinism, Putin's tenure of Russian leadership since 2000 offers the Russian populace access to a cause more significant than the individual, but without the flawed and failed political doctrine and ideology. The Russian identity is now consolidated and re-directed by Putin's systems as an effective counterbalance against an overreaching, imperial, and over-sophisticated Western foe. The ever-growing base of support that Putin has constructed feels a sense of strong membership due to the maximized differences between Eastern and Western identities. The in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, along with the highlighted partisanship between two historical foes, have "naturally create[d] a bipolar partisanship where individuals characterize [their loyalties] into 'us' and 'them' and exaggerate perceived differences [to favor] their own group" (Greene 2004, 138). Social identity theory and the harvested identity salience, when properly resourced and operationalized by Putin,

bleed over and support his already weaponized elements of both image theory and humiliation theory.

To date, Putin guards the precious Russian identity that sweat and blood has forged over several centuries. However, "despite the fact the Russian leader has consistently enjoyed markedly high approval rates and has benefited from charismatic legitimacy," he must be careful (Pettersson 2017, 253). He has used a particular blend of conservatism and paternalism to solidify the operational capabilities of identity theory. If he attempts drastic modernization or dramatic cultural inclusion in his endeavor to jumpstart a stalled economy or hindered societal elevation, he risks alienating large segments of the in-group population that he has systematically cultivated since the start of the new century. His current methods thrive on enhanced and clear-cut differentiation; any variable change resulting in non-conformity to the historical Russian identity could prove disastrous for Putin or his "elected" successor.

Conclusion

Post-Cold War security and defense discussion have often centered on technology, complex alliances, and traditional variables of influence. For the last several decades, neoliberal and realist factions have embraced highs and lows in a bipolar arena. However, it is with a new examination of the constructivist and combined elements mentioned above that now proves other frameworks and factors relevant. Expanded research at the

cross-section of psychological theory and more traditional aspects of power will likely provide evidence, relationships, and generalizations that serve policymakers, defense planners, and politicians around the globe. This entire spectrum of decision-makers must now consider the influences, relationships, and limits uncovered between psychological theories, international relations, and domestic politics. By examining these elements, leaders and decision-makers around the globe can now enable mechanisms to anticipate Putin or other world leaders who attempt to operationalize psychological theories to generate power and advance policy.

Through an investigation of three theories, selective propaganda methods, and deliberate *Realpolitik* techniques, this study examined Putin's distinctive and sophisticated integration of power politics and political psychology theory. The distinctive intertwinement and overlapping nature of the operationalized and weaponized elements mentioned above form the foundations on which Putin has started to resurrect the Russian state. These examined elements of influence are only amplified and entrenched by a modern, advanced, and ever-evolving Russian propaganda organism. These independent elements have a direct effect on the holistic approach that has given Putin's constituency hope, respect, and the possibility of a better future against the hardened and prized backdrop of a storied Russian past.

This study demonstrates that Putin's and his various Russian governmental apparatuses' current policy suc-

cess, including a degradation of Western credibility, results from the comprehension, exploitation, and reinforcement of the psychological theories of humiliation, identity, and image across Russian society. Above all, this article shows that constructive elements, such as psychological theories, can be operationalized and integrated with conventional influencing elements under unique circumstances and encroach on more realist frameworks security and power generation. At the very least, this study "challenge[s] the traditional notion that people act in politics in a rational pursuit of self-interest" (Cottam et al. 2010, 1). Putin and his accomplice institutions understand that behavior is not necessarily rational, but something to be exploited and reinforced through a variety of tailorable variables.

The various audiences around the world must understand that Putin's success and societal and psychological rearmament neither happened by mere luck nor occurred overnight. Putin does not want the world to underestimate his flexible ideology, hardened values, and nationalistic motivations. He understands that there will be setbacks and that results will not always be instantaneous. This transformational leader will continue to refine the operationalization of these psychological theories, propaganda methods, and *Realpolitik* techniques and, if required, will deviate from any rigid political circumstance. Until critics develop a strategy to effectively combat his exemplary differentiation ability and intergroup molding, the Russian leader will continue to be successful at home and abroad.

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