

THE WORLD AS SEEN BY VLADIMIR PUTIN

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Motto

"Gentleman, the vote is 11 to 1, and the 1 has it!"
(Abraham Lincoln)

Abstract

At a strategic level, the psychological assessment of the political leader becomes primordial for a successful intelligence service, mostly because we often view a nation's foreign policy in terms of its leader's personality and we know that their decisions are influenced by their belief system (or operational code) and motivations. This paper is focused on shaping a connection between the operational code of Vladimir Putin and his actions, taken in the name of Russia, managing global crises like the American invasion in Iraq, the Iranian file, the missile defence problem, and the crisis in Syria and Ukraine. This paper seeks to discover a pattern of action within the political behaviour of the most controversial leader of the moment, as well as to develop predictions, concerning his future approaches on global issues.

Keywords: Vladimir Putin, political behaviour, political leader, international crises, cognitive system

Introduction

Understanding the phenomena of foreign policy requires a profound knowledge of the intentions and capabilities of one state and the relations it establishes in the international arena is given not only by analysis (Tetlock & McGuire, 1986, p. 152). For instance, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan acquires various meanings depending on the assumptions regarding the Russian intentions (was this military act a defensive one, in the attempt to prevent an Islamic diffusion in Central Asia, or an offensive one, in which the

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deployment of forces in the Persian Gulf had a single goal – to obtain supremacy in the region?). The American perspective offers various answers, related and sustained by subjective arguments, like Russia's motivation and capabilities and the reasoning of the American political leaders about which are their vital interests are and what policies can be implemented in order to protect them.

These cognitive patterns are used by political figures in understanding and coding new information in scenarios, operational codes, cognitive schemes, and prototypes. They can offer inside explanations regarding the purpose and the cause of a political event and the true intention that lies behind a state's foreign policy, because they emphasize the centre of each national actor – the man that rules the country and shapes the architecture of the state.

This paper addresses, in a complex approach, the cognitive patterns of the political leader – the operational code, integrating the data as it is perceived by him under the shape of cognitive images that function in a simple process of input-output. Pursuant to interpretation, an answer is offered on how to manage properly the political status quo.

The study commences with a detailed disquisition on the concept of operational code, and outlines, from a "cognitive" perspective, the international crises managed by Vladimir Putin (from the Iraqi war in 2003, the dispute over the Iranian nuclear file, the dilemma of the NATO ballistic missile shield, to the Ukrainian crisis). It attempts to identify the behavioural pattern, the motivation and the cognitive style of the political leader that was behind every important decision in the Russian foreign policy in the last decade – Vladimir Putin.

Operational code – evolution, definition, utility

Nathan Leites (1951) coined the concept of *operational code* in political psychology, describing it as being a set of rules considered necessary for an efficient governance and followed closely by the members of the politburo. His study focuses on the writings of Lenin and Stalin and presents the way relationships are established between members of the Communist Party and individuals outside it. The purpose of his study was to identify a pattern of creating and implementing these rules, in order to be able to predict the Bolshevik decisions (Leites, 1951, p. 11). According to the Bolsheviks, all significant political events can be explained by the Marxist-Leninist law, and no event is random. The person considers that an event is

the result of other forces than the political transition forces from capitalism to communism are considered to be a political Philistine (Leites, 1951, pp. 11-19). Leites identified a pattern of the Bolshevik view on power. The lack of power generates a real danger for the future and continuity of communism. This idea explains the aggressive attitude of the Bolsheviks towards the great powers in the international system, which continued even after the 1917 – revolution, when they had taken over control internally. Also, from the Bolshevik perspective, one's feelings and beliefs must be controlled completely, taking into account that they can become dominant factors in one's attitude, which may produce a catastrophe: "the political activity is a war that must be approached cold-bloodedly" (Leites, 1951, p. 20). Moreover, the members of the party must maintain a clear political direction, respect their principles in any circumstances, but simultaneously, prove they are flexible and capable to adapt to the actions of the enemy and to the changes of the external political environment, so to assure a clear victory and select the best strategy for action. These defining traits of the political organism confer both resilience and ruggedness in the race for power and supremacy (Leites, 1951, pp. 32-35).

The Bolshevik cognitive pattern supports the use of violent means for developing communism, Leites' conclusions suggesting that when the Party chooses not to use violence against its enemies, it exposes itself. From this point of view, not using violence as a form of management is a greater mistake than adopting violent measures in solving a crisis (Leites, 1951, p. 51). In a general sense, the Soviets believed that the superpowers were targeting the Russian state and that their main goal was annihilating the party, by all means. Having that in mind, every group that was not controlled by the party was perceived as an enemy and the best ally was the one supervised the most (Leites, 1951, p. 57).

Alexander George took over the concept of operational code and in his paper *The Operational Code: a Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making* (1969) transformed the standard norms (that can be mechanically applied in decision-making) in a series of premises and conceptions regarding the political universe. The central purpose of Alexander George's paper is to examine the conceptual system developed by leaders from various cultural and institutional environments in approaching the uncertainty and risk inherent in the decision-making process (choosing objectives, strategies). This conceptual system, known as operational code, is synthesized by Alexander George in a series of answers given by political

leaders that focus on illustrating their instrumental beliefs and philosophical beliefs (Alexander, 1969, p. 199).

Regarding the structure of the operational code, Alexander George designed a set of questions about the purpose of politics that covers the basic problems of knowing and acting, faced by a leader on a daily basis. The answers help define his fundamental orientation within the political universe. Concerning the philosophical content of the operational code (external references enunciated by the leader), the following questions were drafted:

1. What is the fundamental nature of politics? The political universe and the style of political opponents are conflictual or cooperative?
2. What are the leader's perspectives in accomplishing his political ambitions? Is the approach rather optimistic or pessimistic?
3. Is the political universe predictable or not? In what way and how predictable is it?
4. How much control can a leader hold on making history? What is the role of the leader in transforming and reshaping history in the desired direction?
5. What is the role of hazard in one's life and in history?

Instrumental conceptions (internal references upon the best approaches of the leader regarding political action), subsumed to the operational code, emerge to the answers from the following questions:

1. What is the best manner to select goals or objectives when talking about political action?
2. What is the most efficient way to attain a political goal (conflict/cooperation)?
3. How are risks calculated, controlled and accepted?
4. What is the proper moment of action to promote one's self-interests?
5. What is the utility and the role of various means for promoting one self's interests?

In the attempt to develop a more refined shape of the operational code-related conceptions, Ole R. Holsti elaborated six cognitive systems, based on the philosophical and instrumental questions of Alexander George. The basic entity in Holsti's analysis is individual behaviour, as restricted by the cognitive system of the decisional maker (Walker, 1990). The model, that take over his successors, is based on the principle of cognitive consistency, from which two general statements derive:

- Beliefs present themselves in a relationship of strict interdependence, they tend to form a coherent cognitive system and
- Under the impact of specific conditions, the beliefs restrain the alternatives of the decisional power, thus influencing the final decision. Therefore, the main idea of Holsti's study is that one leader's decisions are consistent with his restrained beliefs within his operational code (Walker, 1990, p. 409).

Walter and Falkowski applied Hosti's version and studied the relationship between the operational code of American leaders and how they reacted and managed a crisis. Analysing the conceptual systems of political figures like Truman, Marshall, Eisenhower, Dulles, Kennedy, Rusk and Johnson and trying to connect the results obtained to the means used by their administration, the authors were unable to situate the leaders in one of the four categories of the operational code. In exchange, they identified various sets of combinations between philosophical and instrumental conceptions on each of the analysed subject and a pattern in the cognitive schemes – an imbrication of conception and motivation (Walker, 1990, p. 412).

These conclusions lead to creating new priorities in the study of the operational code – establishing a connection between analysing the operational code and motivational psychology, which consists in identifying the needs of affiliation and power of the leader. The analyses on the foreign policy led by the American president Woodrow Wilson in the context of the ratification of the Versailles Treaty (Walker S.) and by the secretary of state Henry Kissinger (Starr H.) remain as proof of both the cognitive and the motivational dimension of the operational code analysis.

In conclusion, both the cognitive and the motivational elements determine a coherent and complex personality of the leader, as he can express various states of mind, depending on the problem approached. This perspective suggests that mapping the operational code of the political leader should start from bottom to top, by aligning mentalities, mind sets and concepts on a specific problem rather than from top to bottom, as a series of deductions, starting from a general cognitive system. A strategy from bottom to top is the VICS method (Verbs in Context System), which helps identify strategies and tactics most likely to be adopted and implemented by world leaders in managing future foreign policy crises (Schafer & Walker, 2006, p. 27).

VICS – the analysis of the operational code at a distance

According to Snyder, Bruck and Burton (2008), those who wish to understand foreign policy decisions must have access to the *black box* of the decision-making process, which is the agents involved in the process. The most efficient method to study the decision mechanism is the analysis at a distance, based on selecting and interpreting the psychological characteristics of the leader by studying his verbal demeanour (Snyder, Bruck, & Burton, 2008).

The premise from which VICS method starts addresses the way leaders communicate. The way they relate to power and the relations of power existent in the political universe reveals their conceptions about exerting power. The method focuses on the verbs used by leaders in televised interviews or printed declarations. Depending on how the international system is perceived to function efficiently (through conflict or cooperation), political leaders use specific verbs, that are oriented to one of these two directions (Schafer & Walker, 2006, pp. 3-23).

The message conveyed by the leader is analysed and divided into the following recording units: verb, subject and object or subject, predicative and adjective. The VICS method abstracts values for 6 attributes of each recorded sentence: subject (himself or others), verb (positive meaning or negative/cooperation or conflict), tense, target and context. The indicators taken into consideration by VICS are organized by the 10 questions elaborated by George, and pursuant to interpretation and analysis, to each answer a numeric value is assigned (Schafer & Walker, 2006, pp. 33-38). For instance, for the first philosophical indicator P1 – *The nature of the political universe*, and for the first instrumental indicator I1 – *The direction of the strategy* the values scale ranges from -1 (extremely hostile) to +1 (extremely friendly), with a gradual increase in intensity (very hostile (-0,75), definitely hostile (-0,5), sort of hostile (-0,25), mixt (0), sort of friendly (0,25), definitely friendly (0,5), very friendly (0,75)). For a leader that obtains a score of - 0,21, respectively 0,41 the results are interpreted in the following manner: the individual considers the political universe as being a hostile environment and believes that a line of action based on cooperation is the best strategy in the perceived context. The interpretation of the others 8 indices of the operational code follows the exact same pattern, although, in some cases, the values scale ranges differently.

Coding the leader's public speeches can be made manually or with the support of the software *Profiler Plus*¹, designed for psychological analysis at a distance. Evaluating and predicating certain beliefs, both for his image upon others (philosophical beliefs) and his own cognitive system upon different approaches of foreign policy (instrumental beliefs), we can express predictions regarding how the subject (political leader) expects others to act and how the subject is expected to act (Lo, 2003).

The operational code of Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin is an iconic figure of the Russian state, who promoted a controversial foreign policy through economic, social and political reforms, besides policies for internal development. Each time, he adopted a position consistent with Russia's national interests, regardless of the risks induced by promoting opposing visions. What truly lies behind his actions and his official public arguments?

The answer can be revealed by closely studying the cognitive system of the president, identifying his vision, his cognitive pattern, motivation and perception, all these being elements with a great deal of importance in the decision-making process in a time of crisis.

The fact of the matter is that Vladimir Putin IS the Russian foreign policy, planning and accomplishing the assumed objectives and deterring the development of courses of action with negative impact. He dominates completely the Russian decisional process. The interest shown by Putin in matters of foreign policy determines a personalization of foreign relations, a strict control of the events in the international arena, and a strategic direction dictated by one voice. Those who threaten or provoke his authority are eliminated. During debates and negotiations, Putin's attitude is defined best by the expression "le consensus, c'est moi!". Furthermore, understanding the Russian foreign policy means understanding Putin's individual traits (Lo, 2003).

The president of the Russian Federation is not an isolated case, but rather, he is a product of the Russian environment, with instincts and beliefs shaped by personal experience, the massive transformation of the Russian society, the status of the Russian power within the international system, the failures and successes obtained by his predecessors and cognitive biases that

¹ Developed by Social Science Automation, *Profiler Plus* is a software used nowadays in media analyses, profiling and electoral campaigns. Available at: <http://socialscience.net/partners/academicusers.aspx>.

encumber him to perceive the world as it is, from an objective perspective (Lo, 2003).

The international crises put the leader under pressure, forcing him to make a decision and to act within temporal, contextual and informational boundaries. Having this in mind, we can state that international crises best reveal and reflect the cognitive elements of a leader. As a consequence, this chapter identifies the operational code of Vladimir Putin and validates it, having as indicators the decisions Putin made in international crisis, such as the American invasion in Iraq, managing the international reactions regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, the problems imposed by NATO's missile shield, the Syrian civil war and the Ukrainian crisis.

Crimea entrance in the Russian dominated sphere and the presence of Russian military there generated negative reactions from the United States and other western democracies. The conclusions drawn by Angela Merkel was that Putin lives in a different reality, losing contact with what is truly happening. This observation made by the German chancellor only confirms the differences in perception that exist between West and East. Reality is perceived differently, being filtered individually and shaping different visions, attitudes, and conceptions: *We have always been proud of our nation. But we do not claim to be any sort of superpower with a claim to global or regional hegemony; we do not encroach on anyone's interests, impose our patronage onto anyone, or try to teach others how to live their lives. But we still strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving for respect and national sovereignty and peoples' independence and identity.* (Vladimir Putin's declaration, UN's General Assembly, 12th December 2013).

The above mentioned statement illustrates the key-elements in what regards Putin's vision upon the international system, applicable in the case of international conflicts that have the potential to affect Russian interests. Thus, the unilateral intervention of the United States in the Iraqi war is constantly criticised by Putin, the dispute regarding the nuclear file was solved due to the mediator role Russia played, the missile shield developed by USA in Europe was perceived as a threat to the integrity of the Russian state and as a destabilizer of the strategic balance of power, the transformation of the Syrian conflict in an instability exporter was avoided, thanks to the diplomatic measures implemented by the Kremlin and to the solution proposed by Putin to destroy all chemical weapons, and the Ukrainian crisis, currently developing, can be managed, from the Russian perspective, only through dialogue and cooperation and by granting Kiev the opportunity to manage its

own internal instability. The behavioural pattern of the Moscow leader derives from the cognitive system he has developed during the international crises and offers the possibility to identify elements with a pre-emptive character regarding the future strategies in the international arena.

In approaching the Iraqi crisis, Putin was the heir of his predecessor, Gorbaciov. He counterbalanced the consensus reached globally concerning condemning Bagdad. His vote in the United Nations' Security Council against military intervention in Iraq hides motivations like stopping the American unilateralism, preserving economic interests in Iraq and a distinct perception of crisis management towards the one of the international community. While the majority of the states consider appealing to military means in order to solve a WMD-related problem, the Kremlin only had one viable option: maintaining the presence of UN's inspectors on Iraqi soil and constant evaluations of the potential nuclear sites.

Putin balanced between avoiding a military attack in Iraq and maintaining the economic ties with Tehran. Supporting Iran in the international arena could attract Moscow in the conflict with US and EU. Negotiations were perceived as an ideal approaching method, Russian motivations revolving around the necessity of preserving the economic relationship with Tehran. However, the support given to Iran was not constant, and conforming to international norms was considered a priority. From this perspective, Putin requested Iran publicly to align to the legal framework imposed by AIEA.

Putin perceives the ballistic missile defence system that the United States is building in Europe as a threat to Russian security. Initially, the Kremlin approached this aspect from a cooperative perspective, but taking into account the refusal of the Washington administration to create a joint defence program, Putin changed his behavioural pattern and disseminates verbal threats and accusations. The problem identified in this situation derives from the subjectivity each state handles this aspect: USA claims the ballistic missile shield has as primary goal detecting a potential ballistic missile attack from Iran, while Russia does not consider the Iranian nuclear program to be a viable threat. Hence, each side is convinced the other one does not really seek to establish a genuine relationship of cooperation in the strategic field.

In what concerns the Syrian civil war, Vladimir Putin adopted rather a neutral political position. His interests in Middle East and North Africa, and especially in Syria, are motivated by historical and geopolitical grounds. When

the violence reached its peak, the UN Security Council debated the possibility of a military intervention. Russia used its veto right and proposed an alternative solution: to destroy all chemical weapons, confirming Putin's operational code, oriented to respecting international law, sovereignty and elimination of military interventions, as means to achieve peace. The similarities between the two countries regarding the sense of national identity, historical affinity, political visions and strategies support the cognitive substrate of the Russian decision-making process and confirms Putin's cognitive pattern.

The Ukrainian problem is perceived as a conflict engineered by the West and directed against the constitutional norms and the wish of the Ukrainians. Putin denies the accusations of the United States regarding the deployment of military forces on Ukrainian soil and proposes a diplomatic solution. Although his cognitive and behavioural pattern do not imply the use of force as a mean of crisis management, Putin's declaration stated that Russia will intervene, if necessary, on legitimate grounds in Ukraine.

Conclusions

Overall, the analysis of Putin's operational code reveals a cooperation-oriented leader, a man who perceives the political universe in an optimistic manner and for whom, the use of force is the last resort. He does not present himself as a leader with significant control over international events and has a medium flexibility in what concerns the transition from cooperation to conflict. The dispute revolving the ballistic missile shield reveals the most negative values of his operational code, which implies a greater risk of using force as a way of addressing the problem.

The accusations the United States made over Putin's foreign policy place Russia as being a state that uses its resources as instruments of power. From the American perspective, Putin's ambition and vision is to reconstruct the former Soviet bloc and to return to the communist ideology and principles. Also, the Americans think that Russia supports dictatorial regimes, nuclear arming and seeks to become global hegemon – statements that are gradually refuted by Putin's declaration and actions within the international arena. His decisions constantly respected until now the same principles: multi-polarity, pragmatism, democracy and legitimacy.

It remains to be seen if his foreign policy will prove to be constant and consistent with these principles in the Ukrainian conflict (maintaining the

diplomatic line of action) or if Russia will stage a unilateral military intervention, which contradicts his leadership style.

The political tensions between Moscow and Washington centre on a conflict of opinions, suspicions, covert intentions and political motivations. In order to fully understand their political decisions and eliminate or reduce the degree of uncertainty, one must identify and analyse the psychological elements on which these decisions are made. As a complementary aspect, Gabrielle Rifkind underlines the importance of empathy in her book *The fog of peace*, explaining how placing ourselves in various hypostases could help us understand better how and why others act the way they do.

During a speech held on 18th March 2014, after the results of Crimea's referendum were made public, Putin used the word *ruski* (which implies ethnicity) instead of *rosiski* (which defines citizenship) on multiple occasions. This „mistake” had not been noticed before. Historian Valery Solovei interprets this detail as Putin's desire to unite all Russians into one community, implement an ideological innovation, fact that amplifies the fear of the US (Piper, 2014).

Vladimir Putin will exploit his popularity in Russia and former Soviet republics in order to protect himself and the state from the challenges and threats posed by the US. A relevant example in that sense is the case of Crimea (58, 5% of the population is Russian²), where the will of the population was expressed through a referendum in March 2014, the results offering legitimacy to his decision to annex Crimea. His future strategy could include a unification of all Russians, dispersed in former Soviet-republics. Soon after the annexation decision, Putin explained his foreign policy towards this region, considered vital for the Moscow administration: „*They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this!*”

This statement reveals, from our perspective, the main characteristic of Putin's operational code: as long as he is in charge, Russia's actions will not be defined as offensive, and violence will be the last resort, as a reaction to the international pressure coming from Western Liberal Democracies.

² According to 2001 statistics; available at: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/Crimea/>.

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