

Understanding Putin: The Man, His Psychology, and His Actions

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Executive Summary

Vladimir Putin is not an ideologue pursuing grand imperial ambitions, nor is he a madman acting irrationally. Rather, he is a pragmatic operative whose behavior emerges from formative trauma, deep threat-perception, and a fundamental need to maintain control—both personal and national. His actions in Ukraine, his confrontation with the West, and his consolidation of power are all comprehensible through the lens of a man shaped by witnessing institutional collapse, experiencing national humiliation, and developing an acute sensitivity to powerlessness. This analysis excavates the biographical, psychological, and operational dimensions of Putin to explain why he acts as he does—not to excuse his actions, but to understand them.

Section 1: The Formative Trauma—Dresden 1989-1990

Witnessing Institutional Collapse Without Agency

The most consequential experience in Putin's life was not triumphant but tragic: he witnessed the Soviet Union's disintegration from the periphery—specifically, a modest KGB residency in Dresden, East Germany, in 1989-1990. This was not abstract geopolitical development but visceral institutional collapse.

Putin, a KGB officer deeply invested in the apparatus he'd joined at sixteen, watched his institution—the supposedly permanent, invulnerable KGB—simply **dissolve**. Critically, he could do nothing to prevent it. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy describe this moment as the crystallization of Putin's "survivalist ethos": the profound realization that loyalty to institutions provides no protection against historical currents beyond any individual's control.

What Putin observed was not heroic last stands or principled resistance, but rather **capitulation and pragmatic adaptation**. Soviet officials and KGB officers, facing collapse, simply accommodated themselves to new circumstances. There were no ideological last stands, no dramatic resistance—merely the recognition that power had shifted and one must adapt or perish.

This experience implanted a core psychological operating principle: **never again be powerless in the face of external forces determining your fate**. This is not paranoia but a rational lesson from lived experience. When institutions you trusted prove fragile, when external actors reshape your world without your consent, the only response is to build unassailable personal and institutional control.

The Survival Imperative

From Dresden onward, Putin operated with what can be called "defensive pragmatism": ruthless adaptation to circumstances, cultivation of personal networks providing mutual protection, and relentless accumulation of power to ensure never again facing the helplessness he experienced. He

carried forward from the KGB not ideological commitment but **operational technique**: how to identify weaknesses, exploit opportunities, maintain control through network loyalty rather than institutional stability.

Critically, Putin developed **no ideological convictions** during his KGB years. He was a technician, not a believer. This rendered him infinitely adaptable—he could serve Soviet communism, embrace post-Soviet democracy, or construct "sovereign democracy" with equal pragmatic detachment because the ideology was irrelevant. What mattered was power, control, and the networks sustaining both.

Section 2: The Years of Humiliation—Russia in the 1990s

Powerlessness Redux: The National Experience

If Dresden taught Putin personal powerlessness, the 1990s taught him national humiliation. After the Soviet collapse, Russia experienced what can accurately be termed **civilizational demigrading**: the rapid loss of superpower status, territorial shrinkage, economic devastation, and systematic marginalization in international affairs.

From Putin's perspective—and this is crucial—Russia did not choose this trajectory. Rather, Western powers and Russian oligarchs imposed it while Russia watched, unable to prevent it:

- **NATO expanded eastward** despite Gorbachev's informal request for restraint
- **Oligarchs plundered Soviet assets** while Western capital and expertise looted Russian industry
- **Russia was excluded** from decision-making forums regarding European security and global order
- **Western interventions** (Bosnia, Kosovo) proceeded without Russian consent or even consultation

The specifics matter less than the psychological imprint: Russia experienced the 1990s as **loss of agency**. The country was weak, chaotic, impoverished, and subjected to external will. Russian elites—particularly the KGB apparatus from which Putin emerged—absorbed a second traumatic lesson: powerlessness invites predation.

NATO Enlargement: The Narrative of Betrayal

Whether Gorbachev received binding assurances against NATO enlargement is historically debatable. However, the historical accuracy is irrelevant for understanding Putin's psychology. What matters is that Russian elites **perceived** NATO expansion as betrayal and encirclement—and perception, once internalized, shapes behavior as powerfully as objective fact.

Putin interpreted NATO's eastward expansion not as the freely chosen integration of sovereign states (the Western narrative) but as **Western strategic encirclement**. This reading has specific geopolitical content:

- **Baltic States**: NATO established multinationally-rotating forces and "Forward Land Forces" battlegroups (Enhanced Forward Presence rotating contingents) rather than permanent U.S. bases in Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. The presence is structured through rotational deployment rather than permanent American basing.

- **Poland:** Conversely, the U.S. maintains genuine permanent military presence through U.S. Army Garrison Poland and V Corps Forward Headquarters, representing sustained American commitment on Russian borders.
- **Missile Defense:** NATO's Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense installations in Romania and Poland are, per NATO official documentation, structured as defensive systems targeting threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic area rather than specifically directed at Russia. However, Russian strategic assessments view these systems as anti-Russian regardless of NATO's stated posture.

From Putin's perspective, even rotational NATO presence in the Baltics represents encirclement—the distinction between rotation and permanent deployment is secondary to the fundamental fact of Western military proximity. Russian threat-perception encompasses NATO's institutional presence in former Soviet space, not merely quantitative basing levels.

The security architecture Russia opposed was installed over Russian opposition—this remains Putin's core grievance regardless of NATO's defensive framing or rotational versus permanent designation.

The Formative Realization

By the late 1990s, Putin had absorbed a consistent life lesson: **Powerlessness is catastrophic. Control is survival. The West cannot be trusted. Institutions alone cannot protect you. Personal networks and accumulated power are the only reliable safeguards.**

This was not theory but empirical observation repeated across two decades of his adult life. When Putin seized power in 1999-2000, he did so with this psychological architecture firmly embedded.

Section 3: Putin's Psychological Structure—The Warrior Mentality

Pragmatism and Ideological Framing: The Operational Synthesis

Before discussing psychology, a critical clarification: while Putin possesses no deep ideological convictions, ideology functions as a **crucial legitimization instrument** supporting his pragmatic actions. This is not contradiction but rather operational strategy. Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" and his 2022 annexation speech explicitly deploy historical-civilizational framing—invoking "shared Orthodox heritage," "one people," and "gathering of Russian lands"—to justify policy decisions that are fundamentally pragmatic (maintaining regional control, preventing NATO encroachment). Similarly, his anti-Western rhetoric serves legitimization function alongside security calculation. Ideology is not *motive force* but rather essential *justification apparatus* for domestic and international audiences. Understanding this requires recognizing Putin as pragmatist who instrumentalizes ideology rather than ideologue pursuing ideological vision.

The Immelman Profile: Ambitious Yet Suspicious

Alfie Immelman's psychological assessment of Putin, derived through rigorous Millon Inventory methodology, identifies two seemingly contradictory traits that explain Putin's behavior:

1. Ambitious/Confident Dimension:

- High agency and initiative
- Willingness to take calculated risks
- Dominance-seeking behavior
- Need to demonstrate power and capability

2. Retiring/Suspicious Dimension:

- Deep distrust of others' motives
- Defensive threat-perception
- Wariness of betrayal
- Tendency to withdraw when uncertain

These are not contradictions but rather **complementary defensive mechanisms**. They explain apparent inconsistencies in Putin's behavior:

- **Why he takes huge risks (Ukraine invasion) yet remains cautious (won't directly attack NATO):** He calculates risks, but when confident conditions permit, he acts boldly.
- **Why he demands control in all domains:** The suspicious dimension makes him unable to delegate or trust institutions; only personal control reduces anxiety.
- **Why he displays strength compulsively:** The ambitious dimension needs constant validation through dominance displays, offsetting the suspicious dimension's anxiety.

The Need to Demonstrate Strength

A core psychological drive appears to be Putin's **compulsive need to demonstrate power and dominance**. This emerges from his suspicious dimension—deep anxiety about vulnerability—which he counteracts through aggressive assertion of strength. This explains behaviors that seem unnecessary or risky:

- **The annexation of Crimea (2014):** Militarily unnecessary but served domestic legitimization function by demonstrating Kremlin strength
- **Interference in U.S. elections (2016):** No tangible gain but demonstrated Russian capacity to strike at American power
- **The Ukraine invasion (2022):** Despite predictable NATO reaction, Putin proceeded, suggesting domestic political need for dominance assertion outweighed rational cost-benefit analysis

Psychologically, Putin appears driven by what can be called **defensive dominance seeking**: he needs to prove power to himself and others because underlying anxiety about powerlessness threatens psychological stability. Each demonstration of strength temporarily alleviates the anxiety; therefore, the demonstrations must continue.

Threat-Perception as Operational Reality

For Putin, threat-perception **is operational reality**. He does not perceive NATO as defensive alliance; he perceives it as offensive encirclement specifically targeting Russian weakness. He does not view the Ukraine Maidan as internal Ukrainian political movement; he views it as Western coup installing hostile proxy regime.

This is not distortion of facts but **fundamental interpretive lens** shaped by his biographical experiences. When you've experienced powerlessness twice, any external development appears as

threat requiring preemptive response. Hill's analysis notes that Putin exhibits "threat-centered worldview"—he filters new information through lens of "how does this threaten me/Russia?" rather than "what are the neutral implications?"

Critical implication: Attempts to reassure Putin through diplomatic gestures often backfire because he interprets reassurance as **weakness or deception**. From his perspective, genuine power doesn't reassure—it intimidates. This is why NATO military exercises near Russian borders, intended as defensive deterrence, Putin interprets as offensive preparation.

Section 4: Operational Philosophy—The Survivalist Pragmatist

Contingency Planning and Opportunistic Execution

Putin operates through what can be termed "contingency-driven opportunism": he plans extensively for various scenarios, prepares capabilities in advance, and then exploits opportunities when they align with his preparations.

Hill and Gaddy describe the Crimea annexation (2014) as a prepared "backup plan" that Putin unleashed when the opportunity presented itself through Ukraine's Maidan revolution. This is quintessentially Putinian: the invasion wasn't impulsive but rather a contingency maintained over years and deployed when circumstances permitted.

This methodology explains Putin's decision-making pattern:

- He maintains options and preserves flexibility
- He does not commit to fixed objectives but adapts goals to emerging circumstances
- He tests opponents' resolve through graduated pressure
- He exploits windows of opportunity when they align with prepared capabilities

Example: Georgia 2008 served partly as test case—did the West respond to Russian military action? The limited response (sanctions, rhetoric, but no military intervention) signaled to Putin that the West would not directly counter Russian action. This prepared psychological and strategic foundation for Crimea 2014 and Ukraine 2022.

The Judo Metaphor: Exploiting Opponent's Weakness

Putin frequently employs judo metaphors for his leadership approach. This is significant. In judo, you don't overpower opponents through brute force; instead, you identify their weight distribution, their psychological state, their positioning, and then redirect their own momentum against them.

Operationally, this means:

- **Identifying vulnerabilities** in Western resolve and cohesion
- **Testing boundaries** through graduated provocations
- **Exploiting divisions** (Europe vs. U.S., NATO members with different threat perceptions)
- **Using hybrid tactics** (disinformation, election interference, energy manipulation) that generate costs for the West without triggering direct military response

This is not expansionist empire-building through frontal assault. Rather, it's **opportunistic exploitation of perceived Western weakness and disunity**. Putin believes—and his 1990s

observations supported this—that the West lacks unified will and strategic clarity, and therefore can be outmaneuvered through sophisticated indirect pressure.

Section 5: The Regime Survival Imperative—Why Aggression Serves Domestic Purposes

Foreign Policy as Domestic Consolidation

Michael McFaul's analysis crystallizes a critical insight: Putin's foreign policy is fundamentally **driven by domestic legitimization needs**, not by inherent expansionist ideology. Put differently, aggression serves regime survival purposes at home.

The siloviki network that dominates Russian governance operates through patronage and patronage requires resources. Military adventurism provides:

- **Justification for increased defense spending**, funneling resources to military-industrial elites
- **Demonstration of strength** validating Putin's claim to leadership
- **Nationalist mobilization** uniting the population around leadership
- **External threat** explaining away internal problems (economic stagnation, corruption, repression)

The Ukraine invasion specifically served domestic consolidation:

- Russian economy was stagnating pre-2022
- Elite consensus was fragmenting (different factions advocating different policies)
- Putin's public image was showing age and fatigue
- Regional instability was emerging

The invasion provided: instant nationalism, rallied elite around war effort, mobilized military-industrial complex, and positioned Putin as decisive leader defending civilization. Domestically, it served critical regime-consolidation purposes regardless of military outcome.

Public Opinion Management: The "Reluctant Consensus" and Its Contradictions

Russian public opinion surveys reveal more nuance than initial data suggests. While aggregated polling shows 70%+ approval for Ukraine operations, simultaneous Levada Center surveys (2024-2025) reveal critical distinction: **majorities support "the operation" while simultaneously endorsing negotiations and peace settlements**. This indicates support for state policy coupled with war fatigue and reluctance for unlimited conflict extension—a "reluctant consensus" far more fragile than approval percentages suggest.

The Atlantic Council terms this "**reluctant consensus**"—support maintained through information monopoly and social pressure rather than genuine enthusiasm for continued conflict. Critically, this consensus is **fragile and operationally dependent**:

- Dependent on state media dominance (any alternative information source threatens it)
- Dependent on elite unity (factional divisions make public doubt)
- Dependent on absence of significant war casualties affecting family networks
- Dependent on economic conditions not deteriorating catastrophically

- Dependent on framing operations as defensive rather than indefinite expansion

The simultaneous support for operations and preference for negotiations reveals public sentiment operates through **resignation rather than conviction**. Putin understands this precarity. Public opinion cannot be sustained through rational argument; it must be perpetually mobilized through threat narratives, victory announcements, and external enemy construction. Information monopoly becomes regime necessity rather than optional tool.

The Elite Bargain: Why Oligarchs and Siloviki Tolerate Putin

Putin's regime operates through patronage networks binding oligarchs, regional governors, and security apparatus officials. The bargain is essentially:

- **Siloviki** receive budgetary allocations, operational authority, and wealth-generation opportunities
- **Oligarchs** retain property and wealth in exchange for political loyalty and media support
- **Regional governors** receive local autonomy in exchange for federal revenue delivery
- **Putin** receives unified elite support and exclusive control over apex decisions

This system generates distinctive pathology: corruption becomes embedded rather than aberrant, rent-seeking incentivizes extraction rather than productive investment, and factional competition produces decision-making instability.

Critically, this bargain **depends on continuous external threat and expansion**. If Western threat diminishes or Russia ceases military adventurism, the revenue flows decline and elite cohesion fragments. Therefore, maintaining threat-perception and periodically demonstrating Russian power become regime-necessities, not optional foreign policy choices.

Section 6: The Threat-Response Cycle—Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

How Putin's Defensive Actions Generate Western Defensive Responses

A critical dynamic emerges from Putin's psychology: his threat-perception creates **self-fulfilling prophecies**. Yet the trajectory is more complex than simple linear escalation. Putin perceives NATO as offensive threat, therefore adopts aggressive postures to deter. The West interprets these aggressive postures as threatening, therefore adopts defensive measures. Putin's subsequent actions both validate his threat-perception AND demonstrate that Western response capacity has intensified.

The Trajectory Shows Growing Western Response:

1. **Putin perceives Western encirclement** (NATO expansion 1990s-2000s)
2. **Putin tests Western resolve** (Georgia 2008)
3. **Limited Western response** (diplomatic protests, rhetorical criticism but no military intervention)
4. **Putin escalates** (Crimea 2014 assumes limited Western capacity to respond)
5. **Western response substantially increases** (NATO Warsaw Summit 2016, Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups expand to eight forward land forces battalions by 2025; EU sanctions regime initiated 2014 and expanded continuously through 2025)
6. **Putin continues despite increased response** (Ukraine invasion 2022)
7. **Western response reaches maximum** (sanctions packages multiply, NATO membership expands, military aid unprecedented)

Critically, post-2014 NATO did not remain passive. The Enhanced Forward Presence, established following Crimea annexation, represents structural commitment rather than rhetorical gesture—by 2025 expanded to eight multinational battlegroups with permanent infrastructure. EU sanctions, continuously expanded through 2025, target Russian financial systems and oligarch networks systematically. Putin proceeded with Ukraine invasion despite—not because of absence of—demonstrable Western capacity for response.

This suggests Putin's calculations involved not faith in Western passivity but rather **confidence that military objectives could be achieved faster than Western response capacity could manifest**. The failure of this calculation—Ukrainian resistance proved far more formidable than anticipated—does not invalidate the underlying logic but demonstrates miscalculation of Ukrainian military-political capacity and Western commitment to sustaining Ukrainian defense.

The cycle persists not because the West fails to respond but because **Putin's perception of existential threat combines with underestimation of opponent capacity**, generating persistent escalation despite accumulating evidence of Western response capacity.

Misunderstanding the Other Side's Rationality

The cycle persists because both sides fundamentally misunderstand each other's decision-making:

Western perspective: NATO expansion was rational, demand-driven integration of sovereign states seeking protection. Russia's aggressive response was unprovoked expansionism.

Putin's perspective: NATO expansion was deliberate encirclement despite Russian opposition. Russian response was necessary defense against Western aggression.

Neither side is "wrong" in the sense of violating their own logic. Both are *perfectly rational within their own threat-perception framework*. The tragedy is that neither framework aligns with the other's actual intentions, yet each interprets the other's actions through the lens of their framework, generating mutually reinforcing hostility.

Section 7: Understanding Putin's Constraints and Motivations

What Putin Actually Wants (And Doesn't Want)

Clarity on Putin's actual objectives is essential:

What Putin Wants:

- **Regional primacy:** Russian dominance over former Soviet states, particularly Ukraine
- **Great-power recognition:** International acknowledgment of Russia's prerogatives and sphere of influence
- **Domestic legitimacy:** Demonstration of strength validating his regime
- **Control:** Elimination of external threats to his power and his regime's stability

What Putin Does NOT Want (Based on Behavior):

- **Direct NATO confrontation:** He has avoided escalating to direct military conflict with NATO
- **Regime overthrow:** He fears internal collapse more than external threat

- **Unlimited expansion:** His objectives are bounded (Ukraine, not Poland; Eastern Europe, not global dominance)
- **Economic warfare:** He prefers resource-based rather than ideological competition

What Putin Fears Most:

- **Loss of control:** Both internally (elite fragmentation, public dissent) and externally (Western military encroachment)
- **Isolation:** Complete exclusion from international affairs
- **Succession uncertainty:** Ensuring regime continuity after his departure
- **Ukraine victory for NATO:** Ukraine joining NATO represents maximum failure of his strategic objective

The Rationality of Ukraine

Understanding the Ukraine invasion requires recognizing it as **rational from Putin's threat-perception**, even if strategically catastrophic:

From Putin's perspective:

- Ukraine's Maidan represented Western takeover of Russian sphere
- NATO membership for Ukraine was unacceptable security threat
- Preemptive action was necessary before NATO integration solidified
- Military advantage was exploitable given presumed Ukrainian weakness
- The West would not militarily intervene (based on 2008 Georgia experience)

The invasion failed because Putin's **assumptions proved incorrect**:

- Ukrainians resisted far more fiercely than anticipated
- Western military aid exceeded expectations
- NATO cohesion strengthened rather than fragmented
- Russian military capability proved inadequate for prolonged conflict

But the decision was rational given his beliefs at the time. The tragedy is that his threat-perception systematically distorted his assessment of Ukrainian resilience and Western resolve, producing catastrophic miscalculation.

Section 8: The Psychology of Power and Aging

Declining Capacity, Intensifying Need for Legitimation

By 2024-2025, Putin confronts a psychological predicament: he is aging (born 1952, now 72-73), yet his regime depends on projecting invincible strength. Carnegie Endowment research notes Putin's "outdated image" and denial of senescence—he continues appearing virile and dominant in carefully staged media even as underlying cognitive and physical decline is evident.

This creates psychological pressure: as his actual capacity declines, the need to *demonstrate* strength intensifies. Aging leaders frequently adopt more aggressive foreign policies to prove continued vitality. This suggests Putin may become **more dangerous, not less**, as physical decline intersects with psychological need to prove continued dominance.

The Succession Problem and Its Implications

Putin's regime lacks institutionalized succession mechanisms. The system is fundamentally personal —power flows through Putin because of his accumulated authority and network relationships, not because of institutional design. His potential successors face inherited commitments (Ukraine war, NATO opposition, great-power aspirations) and inherited enemies without the accumulated power to maintain regime cohesion.

RAND and NEST analyses suggest managed devolution to council-based governance rather than dramatic succession crisis. However, the underlying problem remains: Putinism as ideology (anti-Western, civilizationally nationalist, security-obsessed) likely survives Putin's death. New leaders would face powerful constituencies demanding continuation of his foreign policy lines.

Section 9: Conclusion — Understanding the Man and His Actions

Putin: Not a Madman, Not a Strategist Genius— A Traumatized Survivor

The most accurate characterization of Putin is **defensive pragmatist shaped by trauma**. His behavior emerges comprehensibly from:

1. **Witnessed institutional collapse** (Dresden 1989-1990)
2. **National humiliation** (1990s Russia)
3. **Psychological need for control** (to prevent recurrence of powerlessness)
4. **Deep threat-perception** (filtering all external developments through security lens)
5. **Regime survival imperatives** (requiring continuous external threat to maintain domestic coalition)
6. **Aging psychology** (intensifying need to demonstrate strength as physical capacity declines)

He is not pursuing grand imperial vision but rather attempting to prevent nightmare of powerlessness recurring. He is not irrational but rather operates within threat-perception framework that systematically distorts his assessment of external intentions and capacities.

Why He Does What He Does

Putin acts to:

- **Maintain control** over Russia and deny external influence (primary driver)
- **Demonstrate strength** to himself, his elite, and his public (secondary psychological driver)
- **Consolidate regime** through nationalist mobilization and military patronage (domestic legitimation)
- **Prevent Ukraine NATO membership** and Western encirclement (strategic objective flowing from threat-perception)
- **Reassert Russian primacy** in former Soviet space (aspirational goal derived from civilizational identity)

These motivations are psychologically coherent, strategically rational (given his assumptions), and institutionally embedded in regime structure. They explain both his aggression and his hesitation— he is willing to take enormous risks when he perceives threat but carefully calibrates to avoid direct NATO confrontation.

Implications for Understanding His Future Actions

Putin's trajectory will likely continue:

- **Clinging to power** despite aging and declining capacity
- **Intensifying threat narratives** as actual power declines
- **Maintaining Ukrainian commitment** as regime legitimation cornerstone
- **Avoiding direct NATO confrontation** despite strong rhetoric (rational risk-aversion despite aggressive posturing)
- **Seeking strategic "victory"** that preserves regime legitimation (not necessarily military victory, but settlement allowing him to declare success)

His successors will likely inherit these same regime imperatives even if individual personalities differ. The system of Putinism transcends Putin himself—it is embedded in elite consensus, nationalist ideology, and institutional incentive structures.

The Tragic Element

Understanding Putin generates tragic recognition: his actions, psychologically understandable and strategically rational from his perspective, have generated outcomes contrary to his objectives. His attempt to prevent NATO encirclement accelerated it. His attempt to prevent Ukrainian independence strengthened it. His attempt to demonstrate strength created vulnerability.

The tragedy is not that Putin is incomprehensible but rather that he is comprehensible—his actions follow logically from his psychology and threat-perception—yet that very comprehensibility does not prevent catastrophic outcomes. Understanding the man does not require accepting his actions, but it does provide clarity regarding why he acts as he does and what strategic calculations underlie his decisions.

Annotated Reference List

Biographical and Psychological Foundation

Hill, F., & Gaddy, C.G. (2023). *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Updated ed.). Brookings Institution Press.

The definitive biographical analysis integrating Putin's personal trajectory, KGB formation, and operational pragmatism. Hill and Gaddy's portrait of Putin as "survivor" rather than ideologue illuminates his adaptive decision-making, contingency planning, and network-based trust dynamics. The 2023 edition incorporates Ukraine war developments. Essential for understanding Putin's psychological architecture—particularly his "survivalist ethos" emerging from witnessed institutional collapse and the rendering of ideology as irrelevant to operational practice.

Hill, F. (2021). *What Makes Putin Tick, and What the West Should Do*. Brookings Institution.

Focused analysis of Putin's motivational structure, historical grievances, and decision-making framework. Hill's synthesis of biographical analysis with contemporary policy implications provides essential grounding for understanding threat-perception and its role in foreign policy decision-making.

Immelman, A. (2022). *The Political Personality of Vladimir Putin*. St. John's University.

Rigorous psychological assessment utilizing Millon Inventory methodology identifying Putin's "ambitious/confident" traits coupled with "retiring/suspicious" dimensions. Immelman's framework

explains apparent behavioral paradoxes—simultaneous boldness and caution, opportunism and contingency planning—through coherent personality structure. Essential for understanding the psychological drivers of Putin's dominance-seeking behavior and threat-perception.

Decision-Making and Foreign Policy Drivers

McFaul, M. (2025). *Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy*. Belfer Center, Harvard University.

Causal analysis demonstrating how domestic regime imperatives drive foreign policy, particularly the necessity of external threat for elite consolidation and public mobilization. McFaul's framework illuminates why Putin's aggressive actions serve domestic regime-survival purposes regardless of external outcomes, explaining the persistence of confrontational foreign policy despite mounting costs.

Graham, T. (2025). *The Limits of Putin's Ambitions*. Council on Foreign Relations.

Strategic assessment of Putin's actual objectives versus aspirations, identifying his defined goals (regional primacy, great-power recognition) versus what he does not actually seek (unlimited expansion, direct NATO confrontation). Graham's analysis calibrates understanding of Putin's rationality—demonstrating bounded ambitions despite aggressive rhetoric.

Threat-Perception and Decision-Making Pathology

Sherr, J. (2021). *Russia and the West: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. Chatham House.

Analysis of how threat-perception frameworks generate misunderstanding between Russia and the West, illuminating the self-fulfilling prophecy dynamics whereby Putin's defensive actions generate Western defensive responses that he interprets as confirming original threat-perception. Essential for understanding how rational actors operating within divergent threat frameworks produce mutually reinforcing hostility.

Regime Consolidation and Elite Dynamics

Taylor, B.D. (2024). *Russian Politics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Concise analysis of polycentric governance structures where siloviki factions negotiate policy outcomes rather than executing centralized directives. Taylor's institutional framework illuminates regime consolidation requirements and dependency on continuous military-strategic advantage for elite patronage maintenance.

Noble, B., & Schulmann, E. (2022). *Rethinking Myth 15: Is Russia Manually Run?*. Carnegie Endowment.

Refutation of omnipotent autocrat narrative, demonstrating instead polycentric decision-making among competing bureaucratic actors. Essential for understanding regime resilience and vulnerability—simultaneously more stable than externally assumed (through redundant institutional structures) yet more brittle (through factional instability).

Public Opinion and Mobilization

Chicago Council on Global Affairs. (2025). *Russians Rally Around Putin's Foreign Policy*. Polling Data.

Survey research documenting "reluctant consensus"—apparent 70%+ public support for Ukraine operations coexisting with war fatigue and skepticism. Essential for understanding regime dependence on information monopoly for opinion management and underlying fragility of public consensus.

Atlantic Council. (2024). *The Reluctant Consensus: War and Russia's Public Opinion*. Atlantic Council Research.

Longitudinal analysis tracking opinion evolution post-2022 invasion, demonstrating declining support trajectories and divergence between official polling and private sentiment. Critical for understanding regime vulnerability to information environment changes.

Historical Context and Trauma

Sakwa, R. (2015). *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. I.B. Tauris.

Historical analysis of centuries of territorial competition and Ukrainian vulnerability, providing context for understanding Putin's threat-perception and civilizational identity claims regarding Ukraine's place in Russian worldview.

Van Herpen, M.H. (2022). *Power and Ideology: Vladimir Putin and the Russian Political System* (Updated ed.). Brill.

Ideological analysis tracing Putin's "sovereign democracy" doctrine and Orthodox nationalist positioning. Van Herpen's framework illuminates how ideology serves psychological function for Putin—constructing Russian civilization as vulnerable and therefore requiring strong authority and external assertiveness.

Succession and Regime Continuity

RAND Corporation. (2025). *Preparing for the Death of Putin*. RAND Corporation Research.

Scenario analysis of succession pathways and implications for foreign policy continuity, demonstrating that regime imperatives likely transcend individual leadership transitions.

NEST Centre. (2025). *Transition without a Successor: The Transformation of Putin's Regime*. NEST Research.

Analysis of 2024-2025 governance reshuffles suggesting managed devolution rather than dramatic succession crisis, with regime structures likely persisting beyond Putin's tenure.

Ideological Framing and Strategic Legitimation

Putin, V. (21 July 2021). "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." President of Russia official website (kremlin.ru).

Putin's major ideological statement explicitly deploying historical-civilizational framing ("shared Orthodox heritage," "one people," "historical Russkiy mir") to justify regional primacy claims. Demonstrates that while Putin operates pragmatically, ideology serves essential legitimation function for domestic audiences and international justification. Critical for understanding that

pragmatism and ideological framing are not contradictory but complementary—ideology justifies pragmatic action to constituencies requiring legitimation narrative.

Putin, V. (30 September 2022). Address on Annexation of Ukrainian Territories. President of Russia official website (kremlin.ru).

Explicit invocation of civilizational and historical claims in justification of territorial claims, replicating pattern of using ideological framing to justify pragmatic expansion objectives. Demonstrates continuity of ideological-pragmatic synthesis across Putin's presidency.

NATO Military Presence and Strategic Deployment

NATO. (2016). *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*. NATO official documentation.

Official NATO statement establishing Enhanced Forward Presence following 2014 Crimea invasion, detailing multinational rotational battlegroup deployments to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as structural response to Russian aggression. Documents Western defensive adaptation post-2014.

NATO. (2025). *Forward Land Forces Deployments*. NATO current operations documentation.

Describes expanded Enhanced Forward Presence reaching eight forward land forces multinational battlegroups by 2025, demonstrating sustained Western military commitment and response capacity post-2014. Critical for understanding that Western response intensified rather than atrophied, contradicting linear "lack of Western response encourages Putin" narrative.

U.S. Army. *U.S. Army Garrison Poland and V Corps Forward Headquarters*. Official U.S. Army documentation (home.army.mil).

Describes permanent American military presence in Poland including Forward Headquarters command structure, distinguishing Poland's permanent U.S. basing from rotational Baltic deployments. Important for precise characterization of NATO's military distribution.

NATO. (2015). *Ballistic Missile Defence Factsheet*. NATO official documentation.

NATO's official statement that Aegis Ashore installations in Romania and Poland constitute defensive systems targeting threats from outside Euro-Atlantic region, not specifically directed at Russia. Documents NATO's stated defensive posture regardless of Russian threat-perception divergence.

Public Opinion and Strategic Preferences

Levada Center. (2024-2025). *Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine Operations*. Levada Center polling (levada.ru).

Longitudinal survey data demonstrating simultaneous support for Ukraine operations and majority preference for negotiations/peace settlements—revealing "reluctant consensus" characterized by resignation rather than enthusiasm. Critical nuance distinguishing aggregate approval percentages from underlying opinion fragility and preference for conflict termination.

EU Sanctions Response

Council of the European Union. *CFSP Sanctions Timeline: Russia (2014-2025)*. Official EU documentation (consilium.europa.eu).

Comprehensive timeline demonstrating continuous EU sanctions regime initiation (2014) and sustained expansion through multiple sanction packages through July 2025, contradicting narrative of limited Western response. Shows structural Western response capacity and commitment despite Ukraine invasion cost-escalation.

Regional Context and Historical Justification

Putin, V. (2021). *Essay on Historical Unity*. Complete text and analysis available through multiple international media archives.

(See separate entry above—included here for emphasis of ideological framing component.)

Kremlin. (24 February 2022). *Address Announcing Military Operation*. Official Kremlin transcript.

Putin's invasion announcement explicitly invoking historical claims, imperial framing, and civilizational narratives in justification of military action, demonstrating ideological-pragmatic synthesis at moment of major strategic decision.