

Mismatched Reality: Russian Decision-making on the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

This article examines why and how Putin’s decision could have been made to go to war with Ukraine in February 2022. It starts with an analysis of whether the decision to invade Ukraine can be seen as rational, and then examines other sociological constructs for explaining the decision. These sociological constructs are based in Max Weber’s concepts of bureaucracy, Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice and Sociological Neo-Institutionalism’s theorising on the externally influenced nature of contemporary bureaucracy. Drawing on these constructs, the article argues that a better lens to understand Putin’s decision is through models that explain the effect of the Kremlin’s bureaucracy on the formation of strategic logic. These arguments and conclusions are consistent with the concerns of New Area Studies scholarship in trying to understand why a particular narrative might form and determine national security decision-making.

Putin’s illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine confounded most predictions by Western governments. Many believed that, although the Kremlin had a predilection for achieving its aims through war, any invasion was likely to be limited. In the devastating destruction of Ukraine and the failure of the Kremlin’s hugely ambitious initial aims, this seems to have been a reasonable prediction. Why would Putin suddenly decide to invade another country in such a maximalist and poorly executed way, given his history of careful and, some would argue, hyper-rational decision-making? As many have stated, it is almost never rational to go to

war; it rarely makes sense from a cost-benefit analysis.¹ But to do so in such an ambitious, destructive, and failure-prone way seems to defy any form of strategic logic.

This article examines why and how Putin's decision could have been made and builds on research on strategic decision-making in comparable situations. It starts with an analysis of whether the decision to invade Ukraine can be seen as rational, and then examines other sociological constructs for explaining the decision. The article argues that a better lens to understand Putin's decision is through models that explain the effect of the Kremlin's bureaucracy on the formation of strategic logic, and the problems this creates in understanding the external environment and other international participants in any given conflict.

A Rational Decision?

For a national security decision to be 'strategically rational', it would need to satisfy three main criteria.² First, the state's desire to address an identified international security problem would be based in a prioritised national interest. Second, the decision would be made through a formally rational national security decision-making process. This would involve an instrumentally linear deliberation that appropriately linked identified national interests with strategic objectives, a course of

¹ The classic definition of a rational war is provided in James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization*, 49-3 (1995), 379-414.

² The concept of Strategic Rationality is used deliberately as a distinction from Rational Actor Models and Rational Choice Theory that largely focus on individual rationality or aggregations of individual rationality. Despite obvious similarities, Strategic Rationality is closer to the Weberian concept of Rationality. It is the way a government collectively makes a rational decision. See Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History." *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (1980), 1155-1157.

action and the necessary resources.³ The course of action would be chosen according to a cost-benefit analysis to maximise the utility of the decision and – more importantly – would draw on established concepts of achieving strategic success. In the context of an invasion, these concepts of success would most likely come from military doctrine. Third, and underpinning this instrumental deliberation, would be probability-weighted intelligence assessments that used the best available intelligence. These intelligence assessments would be provided by national intelligence agencies or by military intelligence services. One can judge strategic rationality, therefore, on the substance of the course of action and its relative benefit over others; the instrumental alignment of the strategic objectives with the course of action and applied resources; and the quality of the process, intelligence and deliberation.

Under this definition, was Putin's decision to invade Ukraine rational? The decision certainly seems to have been based in formalised national interests. As many area studies specialists have described, the Kremlin's foreign policy has consolidated around a core set of strategic objectives since 2012.⁴ Relevantly, these include: 'exerting influence over the strategic orientation of key neighbouring states'; 'reintegrating the former Soviet space politically and economically into Russia's orbit'; 'preventing further expansion of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'; 'pursuing extended defence'; 'and securing Russia by maintaining political influence and stability in outlying states'.⁵ The Kremlin's pursuit of these interests has been consistent.

³ Instrumental at the strategic level is defined as either a process of attaching means to achieve ends or, in a substantive decision, having the correct correlation between ends and means to achieve the desired effect.

⁴ For extensive analysis of Russian decision-making that is used to inform US Government thinking, see USA. CNA. *Analytic Framework for Emulating Russian Decision-Making* (June 2017).

⁵ *ibid*, 16-17.

The debate over what Russia’s strategic objective was that led to the invasion of Ukraine centres on the question of Ukraine’s pursuit of NATO membership. In the lead up to the invasion, Putin stated that NATO’s expansion to include Ukraine was one of the central reasons for the invasion.⁶ Evidence for this, however, is ambiguous. Despite Ukrainian politicians actively pursuing membership of NATO, and enshrining it constitutionally as an aim in the Ukrainian Parliament in 2019, a decision over membership does not seem to have been imminent.⁷ The Brussels Summit in June 2021 did, however, reaffirm its 2008 commitment that Ukraine would become part of NATO through a Membership Action Plan (MAP).⁸ Undoubtedly provocative to Russia, the membership process would in reality have taken years, and potentially would never have been fulfilled. Significant domestic reforms were mandated in the MAP; the method of consensual decision-making in NATO could have resulted in the decision being blocked at key stages; and the sovereign issues of the People’s Republic of Donetsk and Russian control of Crimea would make extending Article V to Ukraine extremely difficult.

This seems to leave three other possibilities. First, wider NATO expansionism and a recent revival of NATO by its members can be seen to have determined the Kremlin’s broader foreign policy, which was actively applied in Ukraine in this instance.⁹ Second, the Kremlin may have been pursuing all of the listed strategic objectives, but used the problem of Ukraine joining NATO as the most publicly acceptable and legitimate. Third, the determining issue might have been more specifically about Russia’s problematic and complicated bilateral relationship with Ukraine, which was deteriorating with the Zelensky Presidency and the *de facto* collapse of the Minsk II

⁶ Russia. The Kremlin. *Address by President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin* (21 February 2022).

⁷ Belgium. NATO. [Relations with Ukraine](#) (11 March 2022).

⁸ Belgium. NATO. *Brussels Summit Communique* (14 June 2021), Paragraph 69.

⁹ This renewed commitment to expansionism seems clear in the Brussels Summit. *ibid*, Paragraphs 66-72.

agreement.¹⁰ Underlying all of these reasons could have been diplomatic miscalculation associated with a belief that Ukraine would acquiesce to Russia’s demands in the lead up to the invasion.

Notwithstanding this important but inconclusive debate, there are more significant questions over the strategic rationality of the decision in the latter two criteria. With very limited access to ethnographic information, it is hard to qualitatively discern whether the decision was made through a national security decision-making process. National security decision-making structures certainly exist, which centre around the Presidential Administration, Security Council and Security Cabinet. And these are believed to be underpinned by a functioning security-related bureaucracy that is expected to follow a procedurally rational process: the production of strategic assessments, the derivation of strategic objectives from these, deliberation on strategy, and choice over courses of action.¹¹ The process in this case, however, does not seem to have been followed. Decision-making and deliberation were kept to a very small number of trusted officials around Putin.¹² This was, perhaps, for logical counter-intelligence reasons, but certainly meant that the decision was not formally deliberated upon according to the established security decision-making structures. The decision was potentially also made reactively. The lack of military preparation and poor implementation of the decision suggest either a very closely held decision or a decision that was made emergently as the situation unfolded.¹³

¹⁰ For an explanation of Minsk, see Tim Lister, “What is the Minsk Agreement and is it a way out of Ukraine Crisis?” *CNN* (10 February 2022).

¹¹ Hadar Glottman, “The Decision Calculus of Putin. How Do Leaders Make Decisions? Evidence from the East and West.” *Conflict Management, Peace Economics and Development*, Volume 28, 9-54 (2020), 24.

¹² Louis Cassiano, “Russian Failures in Ukraine Leave ‘no Option for Possible Victor’, alleged FSB Whistle-blower says.” *Fox News* (7 March 2022).

¹³ *ibid.*

The second much more problematic area associated with this second criteria is the Kremlin’s deviation from its rationalised concept of achieving strategic success. Russia’s maximalist invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a massive departure from previously used concepts of achieving strategic objectives, such as in Crimea and Syria. The Kremlin has clearly had a predilection for the use of force to achieve its aims over at least the last decade, but it has been prudently used: loss-averse, limited, indirect, using unconventional proxies, and eschewing ownership of the ground to avoid quagmires or prolonged operations. It has previously implemented a large-scale build-up of forces to achieve escalation dominance, intimidate adversaries and deter external actors; but, in general, has not used them.¹⁴ Underpinning these tried and tested concepts, more importantly, is the reality of a relatively small professional Russian ground force of 50-60,000 troops. By committing to such a maximalist approach in February 2022, ambitious strategic objectives, a huge invasion and only limited resources were clearly likely to be out of alignment. As such, the invasion was a huge gamble irrespective of how the conflict unfolded.

Why this was the case is undoubtedly partly associated with problems with the third criteria. The Federal Security Service’s (FSB) intelligence gathering on Ukraine prior to the war seems to have been the source of Putin’s ambition and gamble. In a fascinatingly leaked FSB survey on Ukrainian attitudes to the UK’s Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in February 2022, one can – if true – understand the invasion. The Department of Operational Information, the FSB’s department responsible for compiling data on the ‘near abroad’, painted a picture of Ukraine ripe for subversion. Of Ukrainians surveyed, 8% trusted political parties, 11% trusted the Ukrainian Parliament, 27% had trust in the President, Zelensky had an approval rating of -34% (sic), and 40% effectively said they would not resist a foreign invasion. The only

¹⁴ USA. CNA. *Analytic Framework for Emulating Russian Decision-Making*, 20.

strong approval ratings were that 68% were supportive of the Ukrainian military.¹⁵ One can easily see how the Kremlin might have deduced from this analysis that a swift operation to 'decapitate' an unpopular Ukrainian administration would have resulted in a relatively acquiescent population. This thinking is evident in Putin's statement before the invasion. Its fallibility is also clearly evidenced in the aftermath with over 150 senior FSB officials being fired or imprisoned.¹⁶ The only comparable reaction by Putin was when he dismissed several FSB generals in 2004 after the loss of the entire region of Chechnya.¹⁷

Overall, where does this leave the question of rationality? The failure of a decision does not mean it was not rational. Miscalculation due to poor intelligence, or Russian miscalculation or disagreement over the relative power of Ukraine, are rational reasons for failure. Strategic rational models also accept environmental unpredictability, adversary reactions and chance in war; and the consequent need for adjustment and flexibility. Similarly, a last-minute decision made by Putin in a very small group does not necessarily mean it was an ill-considered decision. It may have been one that potentially emerged from updated assessments and advice, and was thereby a logical type of Bayesian reasoning.¹⁸ But where there seem to be very real problems with the extent of rationality are, firstly, in the scale of the invasion that eschewed previously successful methods and lacked the means to achieve its aims given the enormous size of Ukraine and the limited capacity of the professional

¹⁵ Nick Reynolds and Jack Watling, "Ukraine Through Russia's Eyes." *RUSI News Directory, World Headlines*, (February 2022).

¹⁶ Victor Nava, "Putin Purges 150 Intelligence Agents for Ukraine Failures: Report." *Washington Examiner*, (April 12, 2022).

¹⁷ Daniel Treisman (ed), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 91.

¹⁸ In simple terms, the application of Bayesian reasoning means individuals revise beliefs and desires when new or updated information alters the probability of their beliefs or desires being achieved. In a collective, strategic sense, this would mean updating strategic intent and plans as new intelligence became available or diplomatic circumstances changed that affected likely outcomes.

Russian Army. And secondly, given minimal language barriers, strong historical ties, and pre-existing intelligence networks, FSB intelligence failures seem less associated with strategic misperception and more to do with institutional dysfunction.¹⁹ They had every reason to be better informed and for this to inform Kremlin decision-making.

Organisational Pathology or a Different Institutional Reality?

In any bureaucratised state there are hierarchical structures of national security decision-making and formal expectations of following a deliberate analytical process. For anyone that studies or has experienced national security decision-making, however, the reality of 'how' and 'why' decisions are made is often very different to formal expectations and is routinely problematic. It seems the language and 'formal rationality' of bureaucracy exists in the way that it has been defined, yet the incentives, behaviours, collective interactions, and ultimately the outcomes, are routinely very different from these expectations. This not only questions whether bureaucracies have in-built pathologies, but – more than this – whether the reality of the strategic environment is in fact different. The interaction of agents and groups of agents within the structured strategic environment has a separate situated logic to that which is formally designed.

There are three primary ways of understanding this. The first is the traditional Weberian concept of bureaucratic pathology.²⁰ Although bureaucracies are designed to be efficient and effective, bureaucrats inevitably introduce qualitative and quantitative error that is institutionally rationalised over time and creates perverse outcomes. Moreover, the relationship between the logic of politics, the bureaucracy, and others is almost always conflictual due to bureaucratic power-seeking tendencies

¹⁹ Canantispay, "The GRU's Intelligence Failures in Ukraine." *Russian HUMINT Watch World Press* (March 11, 2022).

²⁰ Refer to Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 62, 232-237, 244.

and through differences of logic that are formed through incentivised group behaviour. This creates a 'horizontal', or layered, type of relationship in and across national security institutions. In decision-making, qualitative error in the bureaucracy is liable to lead to superficial or standardised concepts that miss the reality of the external environment being considered, and result in a debilitating focus on process, functional responsibility and simple means-related requirements. Senior bureaucrats will also be prone to control information being passed to politicians and for the process to be overwhelmingly 'bottom-up', reinforcing qualitative error and leading to antagonism and confusion. The implications of this behaviour when applied internationally are clear: decision-making is not only likely to lead to dysfunctional international outcomes, but internal logic on a particular situation is liable to be detached from the reality of the environment being considered and the logic of other state actors.

The second is taken from Bourdieu, which views the nature of the state as defined by historical and current individual and group struggle in accordance with situated rules of the game.²¹ Decisions, in simple terms, are the contingent outcome of this situated struggle. Internally, this can best be evidenced in 'vertical' inter-departmental positional 'turf wars', but one might also find this horizontally or between different groups in one department. Externally, this concept can be extended to positional and reflexive behaviour in international politics, whether between states or international governmental organisations (NATO and the EU in this case). Decisions are defined by the ongoing reflexive and positional relationship between international groups, which might include reflexive escalation.

²¹ Refer to Loïc Wacquant (ed), *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 16-18; and, for an overall explanation of Bourdieu's theories, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: CUP, 1992).

The third is derived from Sociological Neo-Institutionalism, which views contemporary organisations and bureaucracies as determined more-than-ever by the external environment.²² This creates two primary effects. First, bureaucracies are less concerned by the need to achieve efficient and effective outcomes, and more driven by appropriating legitimate concepts from their immediate field environment or from wider society. Second, greater external determination and a diminished concern with efficiency and effectiveness results in decoupled institutional behaviour. In applying this to the strategic environment, security institutions will appropriate and apply rationalised concepts of ‘successful security’ and, perhaps more importantly, follow institutional interests that are partly or completely decoupled from the substantive security concern and decision. These are likely to involve the institutional pursuit of longer-term survival, resources and legitimacy. In applying this internationally, these behaviours will lead to perverse and contingent outcomes. The pursuit of decoupled interests through international action might create all manner of unintended consequences. The appropriation of rationalised concepts from a given field or society might lead to inappropriate application that feels ideological in nature, and antagonistic to other states.²³

Can these strategic constructs that are derived from western sociology help explain the Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine? The bottom line is that it is almost impossible to discern the exact chain of events and behaviours without detailed ethnographic research. There are, however, a few very clear indications of the constructs possibly affecting and explaining the decision.

²² For a general explanation of the theory, see Royston Greenwood et al (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (London: Sage Publications, 2010).

²³ In this sense, ideology is defined as the appropriated and homogenised rationalised myths of a society.

Internal Russian Dimensions

Some scholars have defined Russian decision-making as the ‘power vertical’, meaning that Putin is unencumbered by the checks and balances of liberal democracy, and decisions are made by a small group of elites, which are hierarchically directed downwards, and then implemented.²⁴ As some with direct insider knowledge have explained, the reality is somewhat different. Putin’s relationship with the bureaucracy is problematic. His enduring theme has been to tame the ‘bureaucratic morass’, and to create a more efficient and effective bureaucracy and remove debilitating autonomous oligarchic control.²⁵ The evidence, however, suggests he has not succeeded. Notwithstanding the removal of regional authorities and autonomous oligarchic control, there has been a huge growth in civil servants through the 1990s and 2000s, the state has been further marketised and corrupted, and the *Siloviki* (security related institutions) have become dominant.²⁶ Putin has reacted to this by growing the Presidential Administration, using parallel decision-making structures, and relying on a very small group of elites to make decisions.²⁷

This means that bureaucratic behaviour associated with the first Weberian construct is likely. By some accounts, although Putin may make the key decisions, he is reliant on bottom-up information from the bureaucracy. Given the dominance of the *Siloviki*, and the FSB within this, control over information and intelligence provision to the Presidential Administration is reportedly frequently used as a bureaucratic tool.²⁸ When combined with qualitative error in bureaucratic staffing, one can see how the

²⁴ David Rivera and Sharon Rivera, “The Militarization of the Russian Elite under Putin.” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65-4 (2017), 221-232.

²⁵ Daniel Treisman (ed), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 164.

²⁶ Sila means force in Russian, and Siloviki are the members of the Russian ‘force’ ministries such as the military and intelligence agencies.

²⁷ *ibid*, 29-48, 162-185.

²⁸ *ibid*, 87.

FSB intelligence provision was formed and acted upon: rationalised as it went through successive bureaucratic levels to remove any disconfirming information, gaps in intelligence or contradictions; and passed to the Presidential Administration in a way that implied a clear policy deduction that accorded with the senior *Siloviki* officials' preference. This might have been exacerbated by a bureaucratic bias in FSB intelligence gathering to focus on strategic elites in Ukraine and Western Ukrainian nationalism at the expense of more mundane but more important grass-roots level intelligence collection.²⁹ Military planning may have experienced similar qualitative errors that were partly based in this intelligence failure. Rationalised concepts that saw sweeping manoeuvrest success in a matter of days by removing the Ukrainian administration were very clearly detached from the geographical size of Ukraine and the resources available.³⁰ These are, however, the sort of detached schemas for success that are often considered in high-level military planning. As such, blueprints were potentially decided upon without proper recourse to the environment in which they were being applied.

There are also numerous indications of the second construct determining decision-making. The nature of Russian bureaucracy can be seen as the outcome of individual and group struggle since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. 'Turf wars' between the State Security Committee (KGB) and the military Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) were typical under the Soviet Union, but were kept in-check by the Communist Party. Thereafter, the KGB was reformed due to Yeltsin's distrust in the organisation.³¹ The KGB was replaced by a 'mosaic' of competing services that became intense rivalries, which lacked the Soviet style of oversight, but which were subjected to

²⁹ *ibid*, 100.

³⁰ A manoeuvrest approach in military terms means a military action that is designed to psychologically undermine or unhinge an adversary. It is normally achieved through deception and rapid military action to overwhelm or destroy the 'centre of gravity' of an adversary. In this case, that centre of gravity was most likely assessed as the Ukrainian Government in Kiev.

³¹ *ibid*, 84-85.

Yeltsin's divide and rule tactics.³² Then, under Putin, the FSB became dominant and assumed aspects of foreign intelligence responsibility, but by some accounts the competition remained intense.³³ This could have affected the decision over Ukraine in two ways. First, the outcome of these historical struggles might have been compromise and dysfunction. The fragmentation and overlapping responsibilities of the intelligence services and positional competition over provision and associated policy outcomes, may have resulted in poor and motivated intelligence provision. Second, and potentially in addition, the dominance of the FSB is – almost certainly – to have resulted in a lack of challenge and balance in decision-making.

Overall, the way these struggles have been allowed to develop under Putin is to create bureaucratic rules of the game that are dominated by the *Siloviki*, and reinforced by Putin's own dispositions that were formed in his previous roles in the KGB. With the marginalisation of other voices and organisations that were in evidence in the early period of Putin's first presidency, a situated security logic has been established in the Kremlin through reflexive and positional struggle. This internal logic 'favours a strong and highly centralised state, supported by large and well financed security structures'; 'has a common view that Russia is menaced by external forces'; and believes that the '*Siloviki* are uniquely competent to understand the perceived dangers and respond to them'.³⁴ Applied to the decision on Ukraine, this would have resulted in a predilection for foreign intervention. Given that this was an internally formed logic, it is no surprise that it did not correspond to the actual socio-political environment in Ukraine. In this sense, the strategic objectives listed in the first part of this article are the manifestation of this internally rationalised logic born from the outcome of situated struggle.

³² *ibid*, 88.

³³ *ibid*, 90.

³⁴ *ibid*, 95-97.

Indications of the last Neo-Institutional construct are harder to determine. There is no clear evidence that suggests the decision was made for vested, or decoupled, institutional reasons. This may be a facet of the closed Russian bureaucracy, control that is exerted by the state, or just merely not the case in this example. Notwithstanding this lack of evidence over immediate decision-making, there are three obvious areas that might have affected the decision to invade Ukraine and its later implementation. First, the modernisation of the Russian military and the concept that was initially used to invade Ukraine have the characteristics of rationalised myths being taken from the broader international security environment. Russia's recent modernisation programme has focused on high-end technology that seems to provide greater 'security legitimacy' at the expense of real warfighting capability and capacity, such as the size of the armed forces, its training and logistical capacity.³⁵ At a stretch this could be extended to the way Russia invaded Ukraine, which was reminiscent of American concepts of 'Air-Land battle' that were implemented in the second Iraq War. In this sense, Russia appropriated and applied these external concepts, which deviated from their previous concepts of success, were clearly unaligned to the reality of the situation in Ukraine, and were found to be superficial as the situation unfolded.

Second, there have been frequent reform initiatives in the Russian bureaucracy, which have all been problematic. These initiatives have attempted to make the Russian bureaucracy more efficient and effective, which many believe have largely failed.³⁶ The number of civil servants has continued to increase and, by one detailed analysis, only 30% of that which is directed is ever implemented.³⁷ The persistence of these reforms and bureaucratic intransigence in implementing them seem to reflect hierarchical decoupling and buffering that are at the heart of Neo-Institutional

³⁵ Alexander Crowther, "Russia's Military: Failure on an Awesome Scale." *CEPA*, (15 April 2022).

³⁶ Svetlana Inkina, "Bureaucratic Reform and Russian Transition: The Puzzles of Policy-making Process." *Palgrave Communications*, 5-30 (2019), 1-15.

³⁷ Treisman (ed), *The New Autocracy*, 44.

interpretations of institutions. Decoupling is a disconnect between senior officials’ concerns and the main engine rooms of bureaucracy designed to deliver efficient and effective outcomes. This effect creates hierarchical dysfunction, a lack of incentivised concern with implementation, and organisational buffering. Buffering is the method of addressing or disguising hierarchical dysfunction and poor implementation, such as through a focus on reform or human resources. Albeit potentially for reasons of disguising intent, there is an overwhelming sense with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that direction was being given that did not result in intended action.³⁸ Lastly, institutional interest in securing long-term resources and survival through corrupt means colours almost everything in the Russian bureaucracy. It can be assumed – at every level – this led to overly focused attention on securing corrupted resources at the expense of some more substantive areas to deliver policy. This must have had a debilitating effect on the implementation of the decision to invade Ukraine. In many ways, the hollow shell of Russian military capability that came to light with the invasion demonstrated the effect of long-term misdirection of resources due to corruption.³⁹

International Implications

All of these constructs explain how a particular form of strategic logic may have been established in the Kremlin over time, and informed and directly determined decision-making on Ukraine. As has been shown, this logic does not seem to have been entirely instrumentally connected to the socio-political environment in Ukraine. In implementation, this resulted in a situated logic being transitioned from Russia into a different environment in Ukraine that was found to be substantively inappropriate. These problems of misunderstanding are common in international interventions, where an imposed logic takes a significant amount of time to evolve and adjust to the reality of new conditions and determinants. Structures may change rapidly through

³⁸ Crowther, “Russia’s Military.”

³⁹ *ibid.*

the imposition of something like an invasion, but the dispositions of those that are implementing them take far longer to readjust. In general terms, rapid flexibility of thought to understand and realign to the logic of a new environment is unlikely.

But more than just the difference of logic between Russia and the environment in which the invasion took place, there is also clear evidence of other logics at play that created a more complex international dynamic. NATO expansionism and out-of-area operations over the last twenty years have been as much about internal organisational role seeking after the Cold War as it has been associated with substantive security requirements in Eastern Europe.⁴⁰ For each alliance member, there will be any number of situated reasons for taking positions on NATO or the conflict in Ukraine. This complexity of rationale, when combined with a situated adversary logic, results in significant international contingency over how a war could unfold and the unintended consequences of position-taking within each stage. As such, it resembles a sociological, complex and contingent form of game theory.

Lastly, and as has been discussed, the Russian decision to invade Ukraine may have been made as the situation unfolded. There is evidence that Putin has previously made decisions like this in Crimea, and some believe it is a characteristic of Russian decision-making.⁴¹ Internationally, this type of decision-making is likely to lead to a greater likelihood of international positional reflexivity, or position taking by states on the basis of anticipated action or reactions by other states. For example, the language used by the Ukrainian Government or at the Brussels Summit as Russian forces deployed in 2021 may have escalated Russia's invasion intent. This in no way excuses Russia's illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine, but is the reality of interactive

⁴⁰ Julian Lindley-French, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Enduring Alliance* (London: Routledge, 2015), 106-126.

⁴¹ Treisman (ed), *The New Autocracy*, 279.

international behaviour. Escalation of action is more likely with intense reflexive positioning on an issue, particularly if the decision has not been made.

Conclusion

In conclusion, determining exactly why and how Putin decided to invade Ukraine is very difficult, given the closed nature of the Russian bureaucracy. What seems clear, however, is that it was not entirely rational. As has been demonstrated, the causes of the invasion are obscure; procedurally the decision-making did not follow established processes; there was a huge misalignment between ambitious aims and the means to deliver them; and the best available information and intelligence cannot have been sourced to underpin the Kremlin's analysis. In a rational sense, it was a gamble, and one that was not based in any meaningful and deliberative cost-benefit analysis.

Why this was the case is almost certainly the result of how the Kremlin functions, how an internally situated logic was formed and, thereafter, affected Russian understandings of Ukraine and the international community. A combination of horizontal bureaucratic behaviour, the outcome of vertical struggle, and modernisation based in rationalised but inappropriate myths, are the most likely explanations for why the decision was made in the way it was. These structured forms of behaviour, not only created a situated logic that was unaligned to the situation in Ukraine and the international community, but most likely led directly to dysfunction in the actual decision-making. Qualitative error in the FSB resulted in an incorrect assessment on the permissibility of the environment in Ukraine. The outcome of bureaucratic struggle established an unchallengeable *Siloviki* who – with Putin – had a particular world view and ambitious motivations for using force. A Russian modernisation programme, which had appropriated westernised concepts, produced a belief in rapid technologically-based success, but created a hollow shell of capability that ultimately resulted in a highly destructive and ham-fisted invasion.

The question that arises from analysis of this case is whether using a strategic rational model to make decisions, anticipate others' decisions, or analyse a strategic decision *post hoc* is appropriate. As is seen in many cases like this, understanding formal decision-making structures and deviation from them is important – and governments must always strive for clear rational thinking – but the other constructs seem to explain the reality of decision-making. They better anticipate contingency, and the reasons for misperception and miscalculation. They identify the way structures and agency interact to form individual and institutional logic, and the very real influences this has on formal national and international processes. As such, there is no *tabula rasa* for decision-making. There is always something before a decision-making process that is determining collective and individual beliefs and desires. Formally understanding this would not only lead to better decision-making, and better structural reforms in governments, but would also lead to a form of realism that amplifies the rational determination that going to war like Russia has done is almost never worth it.

These deductions on the formation of logic and the effect this has on decision-making are very similar to New Area Studies concerns with narrative.⁴² The theoretical constructs discussed in this article, however, determine different and specific reasons for why a logic, or narrative, forms. In simple terms, the Weberian construct determines logic as a mixture of ideationally-based and incentivised rationalisation over time, and the specific nature of a bureaucracy and how it inter-relates with the logic of politics and subordinate organisations. The Bourdieusian construct determines logic is derived from the interplay of individual dispositions and situated,

⁴² See Susan Hodgett and Marguerite Cassin, "Feelingful Development: Redefining Policy Through Interpretation." *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 25-2 (Fall 2012), 267-286. See also the introduction and conclusion in Susan Hodgett, and Patrick James (eds), *Necessary Travel: New Area Studies and Canada in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).



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relational and positional struggle over time in accordance with structured rules of the game. The Neo-Institutional construct suggests that logic in government and a bureaucracy is significantly determined by external influences in the contemporary environment, particularly through the increasing dominance of ‘knowledge centres’. These constructs therefore not only illuminate why a particular policy narrative might be arrived at and altered through a decision-making process, but also suggest new and more realistic ways of improvement and reform in bureaucracies.



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