

# Vladimir Putin: His Strategic Leadership and Decision-Making

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## **Abstract**

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Engaging Russian President Vladimir Putin as a credible world leader, building a stronger economic relationship with Russia, and acknowledging Russia's regional influence as a coalition partner may be far more successful in influencing Putin than the confrontational approach currently used by Western leaders. Strategic leader competencies contribute to leadership skills that include the ability to determine future requirements and to use integrative thinking techniques to address complex challenges. The four strategic leadership competencies most important for Western leaders to understand and appreciate in order to better interact with and influence Putin's decision-making are frame of reference development, envisioning the future, systems understanding, and communication. While some may argue that the only way to deal with Russia is through policies that subordinate Russia to the West, this paper identifies three more effective recommendations related to acknowledging Putin as an influential leader in world affairs, building greater economic interdependence between the West and Russia that is mutually beneficial, and bringing Russia into a coalition partnership to comprehensively address global security issues.



## **Vladimir Putin: His Strategic Leadership and Decision-Making**

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea, a former Ukrainian peninsula on the Black Sea, shocked the West and provoked a resurgence of Cold War rhetoric against Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. In an effort to prevent similar actions in the future by Putin, the European Union (EU) and the United States (U.S.) implemented economic sanctions against Russia that may also harm other European countries.<sup>1</sup> Is this the best way to influence Putin? What alternative approach do Western leaders-- primarily those from Western Europe and North America who share Western values of democracy, individualism, and liberalism--have that may provide greater global stability?<sup>2</sup> Some may argue that the only way to deal with Putin is through policies that subordinate Russia to the West. This analysis offers a different perspective. It argues that engaging with Putin by acknowledging Russia as an influential partner in global affairs would be a more effective approach than economic sanctions.

Engaging Putin as a credible world leader, building a stronger economic relationship with Russia, and acknowledging Russia's regional influence as a coalition partner may be far more successful in influencing Putin than the confrontational approach currently used by Western leaders. To support that approach, this paper recommends ways to engage and influence Putin by analyzing his decision-making process using the following four strategic leader competencies: frame of reference development, envisioning the future, systems understanding, and communication. Strategic leader competencies contribute to leadership skills that include the ability to determine future requirements and to use integrative thinking techniques to address complex challenges.<sup>3</sup> As this paper will show, Putin's leadership style reflects his deep sense of patriotism, his belief that Russia has earned an important role in global affairs,

and his conviction that a strong state is essential to survive a crisis just as Russia's role in the global economy averts its traditional isolation. Putin's first and perhaps most important strategic leader competency is his frame of reference development.

### Frame of Reference Development

A strategic leader with a well-developed frame of reference uses timely and proactive decision making to address challenges with creative solutions. According to Stephen Gerras, "Every leader builds a complex knowledge structure over time from schooling, personal experience, and self-study."<sup>4</sup> These factors critically influence strategic leaders' frame of reference development. Standard classroom instruction is not enough to build a good frame of reference; in addition leaders must be able to reflect on their varied experiences and be able to work with complex ideas and challenges.<sup>5</sup> Putin's frame of reference includes three key components: his deep sense of patriotism developed during his Russian upbringing in the Soviet era; his belief in a strong state that can endure a crisis based on his experiences in East Germany as a Russian Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (KGB) officer; and his recognition of personal connections and loyalty in politics gained while working for the mayor of Saint Petersburg.

The image of Putin as an aggressive leader has its roots in his childhood. He was born in Leningrad on October 7, 1952. His family lived in communal apartment in which six people shared a 215-square foot space that did not have hot water, a bathtub, or an indoor toilet.<sup>6</sup> Although considered good conditions for postwar Leningrad, Putin was no child of luxury. His standard of living was typical of that of his Soviet Russian fellow citizens. The courtyard outside his home was typically full of drunken thugs and Putin would often react violently to any insult to include fighting men much larger than

him.<sup>7</sup> He carried this attitude into school where he was a poor student. He was often impulsive, uncontrollable, and bullish until he entered a martial arts program, which taught him the value of setting goals to achieve something worthwhile.<sup>8</sup> Putin's aggressive decisions as prime minister and president reflect the defensiveness exhibited in his early years, but his decisiveness illustrates the mental and emotional maturity achieved through his mastery of martial arts.

Growing up in an era of Soviet patriotism explains much about Putin's view of Russia's place in the world. Intrigued by spy stories, Putin read all of them he could find and watched many KGB-sponsored spy movies that glamorized the Soviet secret services.<sup>9</sup> Following his dream of becoming a Soviet secret agent and using the discipline gained through martial arts, Putin's grades improved.<sup>10</sup> He began to show a penchant for social science and language, especially German.<sup>11</sup> He decided to attend law school at Leningrad State University after a local KGB receptionist told him that he should join the military or study law if he wanted to be part of the KGB.<sup>12</sup> Putin finally began his KGB career in 1975 where he conducted counterespionage and developed tactics to reduce dissent within Leningrad.<sup>13</sup> In 1985 he relocated to Dresden, East Germany; although he did not consider Dresden as one of the better assignments, he was happy to have the chance to work abroad.<sup>14</sup> As a KGB agent working outside Russia, Putin fulfilled his dream of becoming a spy for the country he passionately believed in, which reinforced his childhood patriotism.

While in Dresden, Putin experienced an event that led to his steadfast belief that a strong state is necessary, one that is able to fully function during a crisis. One month after the fall of the Berlin Wall an angry mob threatened to storm the KGB office where

Putin was working.<sup>15</sup> To defend against the mob's rage, he called on Moscow for assistance through a local Soviet military post.<sup>16</sup> But Moscow did not respond to his plea for assistance. Putin realized then that the Soviet Union was in a disastrous state, recalling later "Moscow was silent. I realized that the Soviet Union was ill. It was a fatal illness called paralysis. A paralysis of power."<sup>17</sup> Feeling abandoned, Putin directed his limited staff to provide security, ordered all sensitive material be burned, and violated protocol by engaging with the mob outside by claiming to be an interpreter.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, the local Soviet troops arrived and dispersed the crowd.<sup>19</sup> But Moscow's initial silence, which indicated a paralyzed government, left a lasting impression on Putin, thereby convincing him of the necessity for a strong state that can remain fully effective in a crisis.<sup>20</sup>

After the Dresden incident, Putin returned to Leningrad, where he began working at Leningrad State University monitoring foreign students' activities, a task normally given to retirees.<sup>21</sup> Putin realized that his KGB career was going nowhere, so he reached out to his old law professor, Anatoly Sobchak, who gave him a job at city hall.<sup>22</sup> After officially resigning from the KGB in 1991, Putin worked for Sobchak until 1996, eventually serving as deputy mayor of Saint Petersburg, formerly Leningrad.<sup>23</sup> While working as deputy mayor, Putin dealt with several government issues, created and implemented several significant policies, and worked with international and nongovernmental organizations.<sup>24</sup> He learned a great deal about the failure of the Soviet Union. He learned how to implement market economies while attending to what is best for the state. He learned the importance of political connections and loyalty. These

lessons would later have a significant influence on decisions he made during his Russian presidency.

Working for Sobchak, Putin also learned a lot about politics and the benefit of personal connections, especially during Sobchak's campaign for reelection in 1996, when Putin witnessed smears and underhanded tactics.<sup>25</sup> Sobchak lost the election. Then when Sobchak's rival, Vladimir Yakovlev, offered Putin a position on his staff, Putin refused saying, "It's better to be hanged for loyalty than for betrayal."<sup>26</sup> His loyalty to Sobchak led him to coordinate transport so Sobchak could flee to Paris after President Boris Yeltsin's administration indicted Sobchak.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, Putin's loyalty to Sobchak impressed Yeltsin when he learned Putin was the one that got Sobchak out of the country, despite Yeltsin's feelings towards Sobchak.<sup>28</sup> So Putin's initial exposure to politics reinforced his commitment to loyalty and showed him the advantages of personal connections.

During this period in the early 1990s, Russia's dealings with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) affirmed Putin of the need for a strong state that can look after its interests and not crumble under international pressure. NATO's unrelenting eastward expansion towards Russia and Russia's ineffective response continues to influence Putin's decisions today. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then president Mikhail Gorbachev thought an agreement brokered through U.S. Secretary of State James Baker would prevent NATO from moving east in return for Soviet approval of the reunification of East and West Germany.<sup>29</sup> Whether the agreement was misunderstood or ever really existed is not clear, but NATO moved east despite pushback from Gorbachev whose domestic issues prevented him from objecting too

strongly. Putin viewed this as another Dresden moment, another failure of the state to ensure security. These perceptions of weakness have set the tone for future interactions between Putin and NATO.<sup>30</sup>

After Sobchak's exile, Putin relocated to Moscow and filled a number of administrative government positions. In July 1998 he became Director of the Federal Security Bureau.<sup>31</sup> As Director he continued to impress Yeltsin, not just because of his loyalty, but also because of his competence and ability to act decisively.<sup>32</sup> In March 1999 Putin became head of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and by the middle of that year his efforts had earned Putin the complete trust of the President.<sup>33</sup> Yeltsin needed a strong and decisive prime minister to manage the increasing challenges in Chechnya. Putin was his best choice and later that summer Yeltsin appointed Putin to this position.<sup>34</sup>

Fulfilling Yeltsin's expectations, Putin immediately initiated a full-scale military operation to quell the rebellion in Chechnya. This decisive action was extremely popular with the Russian people; they craved a strong leader who would bring about order.<sup>35</sup> With his rise in popularity from one percent in August to over fifty percent by December, Putin had become a viable candidate for president.<sup>36</sup> After providing only two weeks' notice to Putin, Yeltsin announced on December 31, 1999 that he was resigning from the presidency, leaving Putin as acting president in accord with the Russian constitution.<sup>37</sup> By this time the Russian population yearned for relief from the poor economic conditions that plagued the country. Unemployment was high, the crime rate was staggering, and the armed forces had deteriorated significantly.<sup>38</sup> The depression Russia fell into from 1990-1998 was twice as severe as the 1930s Great Depression in

the United States.<sup>39</sup> Russians were eager to support any leader who could improve their situation and stabilize the region.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, Putin's upbringing inculcated a strong sense of patriotism, which fuels his efforts to promote nationalism in Russia. His experiences as a KGB officer in Dresden convinced him of the need for a strong state to ensure Russia's survival. Then the depression of the 1990s taught him the necessity of a strong economy to support the state. Putin's attitude toward the West has grown more hostile in response to several actions taken by NATO, especially its expansion into what Putin considers Russia's sphere of influence. Putin's frame of reference development and his commitment to Russia's return to greatness have strengthened the Russian people. Clearly, he has given them an inspiring vision.

#### Envisioning the Future

Another of Gerras' strategic leader competencies is the ability to envision the future to include the ability to develop and explain strategic concepts that support a vision.<sup>41</sup> Strategic leaders must be able to do more than just understand the ends, ways, and means that make up a strategy. They must also be able to provide clear concepts and the direction and focus necessary to implement them.<sup>42</sup> An effective strategic leader looks at situations not as they are, but as they should be. The leader then works to shape the environment to enable achievement of their vision.<sup>43</sup> When Putin became president in 2000, his vision included a desire for global recognition of Russia as a great power independent from Western ideologies with a strong state that could manage a market economy.<sup>44</sup>

Putin's strategic vision has evolved throughout his tenure as president, prime minister, and once again president of Russia, buttressed by a conservatism described

as traditional and patriotic.<sup>45</sup> He still believes Russians, as they envision their nation's future, should renew their pride in the past, when Russia was a great empire with significant international influence.<sup>46</sup> According to Putin, an important goal of Russia is to encourage "soglasie" or "harmony in society," by identifying moral values shared by society, while considering those who violate these values as disloyal to the nation.<sup>47</sup> Demonstrating his fear that differing values in society indicate weakness, Putin claims progress is not possible "in a society finding itself in a condition of division, internally disintegrated, a society in which social strata and political forces adhere to different basic values and fundamental ideological orientations."<sup>48</sup> He continues to believe the future of Russia depends on Russian's pride in the nation's history and traditions.

Putin's vision to return Russia to the world stage as a great power includes the obligation to regain lost territory that is home to ethnic Russians. During the Soviet era, large portions of Russian territory were given to other Soviet republics. Russia did not recover this territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving 30 million ethnic Russians living outside the country.<sup>49</sup> This territory includes portions of Kazakhstan, Pridnestrovie (also known as Transnistria), the Black Sea coast, and eastern Ukraine (including Crimea).<sup>50</sup> Many revanchist politicians, who support policies to recover lost territory, stress the need to adjust territorial boundaries of Russia as part of a "re-gathering program."<sup>51</sup> Putin's decisions reflect this revanchist perspective as illustrated in his 2005 annual address to the State Duma:

First and foremost it is worth acknowledging that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. As for the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory. The epidemic of collapse has spilled over to Russia itself.<sup>52</sup>

Accordingly, Putin unsuccessfully encouraged the return of “foreign Russians” in 2006 since the ethnic Russians he was targeting considered themselves at home in their respective countries.<sup>53</sup> Indeed many had lived outside the current borders of Russia for generations.<sup>54</sup>

Putin’s vision also requires maintaining Russia’s territorial sovereignty by countering NATO expansion and Western influence in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Many of these former Soviet republics do not share this concern, particularly Georgia and Ukraine, whose governments are interested in building relationships with the West. The color revolutions, including Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004, have produced popular uprisings and protests that have enabled anti-Russian governments to gain power without military action.<sup>55</sup> For Putin, these revolutions do not represent the will of the people as he regards these anti-Russian movements as Western incursions into the Russian sphere.<sup>56</sup> Following these color revolutions Georgia and Ukraine have exhibited interest in NATO membership.

Russia responded to Georgia’s interest in NATO by squeezing Georgia’s economy. When this was unsuccessful, Russia sent its army into the pro-Russian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>57</sup> In 2008 Putin formalized the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia, using the United Nation’s (UN’s) support of Kosovo’s 1998 declaration of independence from Serbia as justification for the annexation.<sup>58</sup> Putin then accused the West of promoting the unrest in 2013 that caused former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to flee to Russia. The following year, unrest in Ukraine led to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Putin justified

Russia's involvement as its support of ethnic Russians in Crimea who were exercising their right to self-determination, again citing the UN's support for an independent Kosovo in 1998. Putin still considers Russia the rightful beneficiary of former Soviet influence in the CIS and he expects the West to respect that position.<sup>59</sup>

As part of Putin's vision of a strong state, he recognizes that ensuring Russia's security depends on economic growth and modernization.<sup>60</sup> He believes that a weak economy leaves Russia politically and militarily vulnerable in a world that is growing more competitive.<sup>61</sup> Putin's doctoral thesis highlighted several points regarding state influence in Russia's economy, particularly in the energy sector. He emphasized the need for state monitoring of large financial institutions.<sup>62</sup> He also advocated for better state regulation of oil and natural gas reserves, specifically noting that market-based regulation of the energy sector is not appropriate for Russia.<sup>63</sup> He views globalization as an undeniable force, so Russia must integrate into the global economy, as isolation is not an option.<sup>64</sup> Despite his belief that the state must have a role in Russia's economic development, he does not support the old Soviet concept of a centrally planned economy.<sup>65</sup>

In accordance with his vision to maintain Russian traditions, Putin believes a strong state requires a more centralized government than a traditional democracy. Putin agrees that democracy is a valid concept; however, he feels modifications are needed to preserve the nation's values and traditions as Russia democratizes.<sup>66</sup> He does not believe that the people can make such modifications without the state setting the conditions for the implementation of democratic mechanisms.<sup>67</sup> Putin often refers to Russia as a European country; he claims that Russia's efforts to protect individual

freedoms are consistent with European democratic values.<sup>68</sup> He sees Russia's transition to democracy as the people of the country working together to recover from the chaos of the 1990s and building a government that can meet the needs of today's Russians.<sup>69</sup> He disagrees that Western democratic norms are the only model for democracy and wants Russia to be accepted by the West "as is" rather than blithely conforming to Western models.<sup>70</sup> Centralized power is a Russian tradition that Putin plans to maintain to ensure a strong state that can respond to the needs of the Russian people.

In summary, Putin's vision for Russia resonates well with the Russian people who still view their country as a great empire, regardless of the current economic situation. Putin views Russia as a significant player in global affairs, so he expects the West to respect Russian interests in the former Soviet republics. Although Putin sees the West as a potential economic partner, he does not see a need for Russia to subordinate itself to Western demands. Putin has implemented governmental reforms that reflect his belief that Russians require strong state control to manage their democratization and to guide economic globalization. Putin's vision for Russia provides the basis for his domestic and foreign policies. However, his failure to address corruption prevents effective implementation of those policies. Putin's lack of systems understanding, which will now be discussed, may be the greatest flaw in his strategic leadership.

### Systems Understanding

A third strategic leader competency identified by Gerras is systems understanding, which refers to strategic leaders' ability to understand how the organization fits in the bigger picture.<sup>71</sup> Strategic leaders must consider the complex ways in which organizations interact since an action taken by one organization can have

significant unintended impacts on another if leaders do not understand the relationship among the organizations.<sup>72</sup> World leaders may effectively employ this competency through their regional and international interactions. Putin does demonstrate systems understanding through his domestic and foreign policies; but Russia's widespread corruption, which he has failed to address, limits the effectiveness of these policies.

Putin's election as president in 2000 marked the end of a decade of challenges for the Russians' efforts to transform from a socialist to a capitalist economy. The devaluation of the ruble hit Russia's economy hard in August 1998.<sup>73</sup> Fortunately, the price of oil was increasing, thereby providing significant revenue to the state, and putting the Russian economy on the road to recovery before Putin became president.<sup>74</sup> In an effort to continue this economic growth, Putin sponsored several policies, some of which permitted the sale and purchase of land, reduced capital gains on foreign investments, and established a flat income tax of 13 percent.<sup>75</sup> The significant increase in standard of living for the Russian population during Putin's first two terms as president greatly enhanced his domestic popularity.

Putin also imposed several regulations regarding Russia's energy revenue. Such initiatives affirmed his governmental and economic acumen.<sup>76</sup> Russia has the largest natural gas reserves in the world and now produces 669 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually.<sup>77</sup> However, Putin recognized that dependency on energy revenues was risky, so he created a state trust fund when revenues were at their highest.<sup>78</sup> By 2008 the trust accumulated significant reserves when it received up to 90 percent of the revenues collected when oil prices exceeded \$27 a barrel.<sup>79</sup> In another decision to eliminate dependence on foreign creditors, Russia used its energy revenues to pay off

all its foreign debt--including the debt inherited from the former Soviet Union.<sup>80</sup> As president, Putin acted decisively to strengthen the Russian economy and to support Russians' standard of living.

Putin may have demonstrated an understanding of economic systems and global interdependence, but his failure to implement modernization programs has limited Russia's economic growth in non-energy sectors. Putin developed an economic reform program that included investment in the country's industrial, transportation, and communications infrastructure.<sup>81</sup> This program was funded from another state investment fund supported by energy revenues; however, these funds were needed to offset the impact of the global recession in 2008.<sup>82</sup> As a result, Russian infrastructure has deteriorated even further, despite Putin's acknowledgement early in his presidency that long-term dependency on energy revenues would be risky for Russia.<sup>83</sup>

Several decisions made in the early days of the transition from a socialist to capitalist economy triggered hyperinflation, which has exhausted many Russians' life savings.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, the Russian elite benefited from these changes, especially the privatization of state property.<sup>85</sup> Poorly developed plans to privatize state assets excluded privatization of industries and natural resources.<sup>86</sup> Then the purchase of these assets at prices well below their value later created massive wealth for Russia's oligarchy, which has emerged as a new ruling class--one that expected to maintain their holdings and would resist efforts to nationalize them.<sup>87</sup> These small groups of very wealthy people have gained significant influence in running the country.

Soon after Putin took over the presidency, in an effort to increase state control, he stated that he would not tolerate the oligarchs' newfound influence on Russian policy

and governance.<sup>88</sup> Ironically, Western observers praised these same oligarchs, lauding their successful transformation to a capitalist system and their assurance that communism would not return.<sup>89</sup> One example of Putin's efforts to reign in the power of these oligarchs was the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the principle owner of Yukos, Russia's largest company.<sup>90</sup> Khodorkovsky had been working with foreign oil companies in an effort to fund an opposition party; he often spoke publicly about using his wealth to acquire political power.<sup>91</sup> In response to their growing political influence Khodorkovsky and his business partner, Platon Lebedev, were convicted of fraud and sentenced to nine years in prison and Putin's government broke up their oil business in 2005.<sup>92</sup> Hence, Putin has reduced the political influence of some oligarchs; however, they have continued to increase in number and wealth in the changing Russian economy.<sup>93</sup>

Under Putin's administration nearly forty percent of the economy has fallen under state control as the state now supervises energy, aviation, nuclear energy, arms exports, and nanotechnology.<sup>94</sup> Although Putin intended that state control would enhance modernization of the economy and improvements in industry, Russia's weak legal system has not curtailed the corruption that is usurping state revenues needed to bolster the nation's economy.<sup>95</sup> The greatest destabilizing factor in Russia is corruption, particularly in the government itself, as the state's control of energy revenues has become the fat target of corrupt officials. Putin's recent move towards greater state regulation, combined with Russian dependence on energy revenues, reveals a state significantly weaker than it was during his initial two terms.

Putin's vision of a strong state is based not only on his personal experience, but also on the traditional structure of Russian government.<sup>96</sup> During Putin's term as president, Russia's government has become a one party system. Increased state control, an improved economy, and messaging by state media have created a situation in which opposition parties cannot prevail, especially when the current government remains popular with the Russian people.<sup>97</sup> That popularity, combined with frustration over corruption in local governments, allowed Putin to make major changes to centralize government structure without much pushback. He organized Russia's 83 regions into seven super regions and appointed their governors, thereby gaining significant control over local governments in those regions.<sup>98</sup> The West views Putin's return to a traditional approach to government as a move towards greater authoritarianism and away from the Western model of democracy. Criticism of these recent changes in Russia's government undermines engagements between Putin and Western leaders.

In response to his fear that foreign investment from the West comes with malicious intent, Putin believes that self-reliance is the only way forward for Russia. At the 2007 annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, Putin declared, "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today."<sup>99</sup> Although Russia seeks greater inclusion in European affairs, Putin's government is put off by the EU's commitment to human rights.<sup>100</sup> As globalization continues to improve economies outside the Western sphere, Russia has engaged with these countries, turning some of its attention away from Europe. Many of

these countries feel they should have a greater role in world affairs, especially the BRICS group: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.<sup>101</sup>

In summary, understanding the interdependence of global systems is only one part of the challenge for strategic leaders; effective employment of policies that reflect that understanding is critical. Until its economic base is modernized, Russia's economy is extremely vulnerable to changes in oil prices, so Russian power brokers are more interested in reaping short-term windfall profits from this precious resource than they are interested in needed social programs and long-term economic growth.<sup>102</sup> Putin's economic policies reflect an understanding of globalization. He does not want Russia to be isolated, yet his effort to have Russia recognized as an equal player has not been supported by the economic integration needed with the West. Although his policies have led to some progress, he fails to recognize that increased state control and massive corruption are strangling the Russian economy. Although Putin struggles with systems understanding, his mastery of communication enables him to influence domestic and international audiences.

### Communication

The final strategic leadership competency considered in this analysis is communication. Effective communicators carefully choose their words to ensure clear understanding of changes in policy, regulation, or vision.<sup>103</sup> Strategic leaders have a number of venues for communicating to include news media, social media, and public speeches. Clear and persuasive communication is critical for effective negotiation, to gain support, and to build consensus.<sup>104</sup> Putin communicates with the Russian people through strategic messaging carefully managed by state-controlled media, while he communicates with the world by means of global forums and classic public diplomacy.

The impact of the chaotic and destructive 1990s on a Russian population that prefers order cannot be overstated. Putin's popularity reflects the Russian people's desire for a leader to bring back systematic order and predictability to a country that recently suffered significant regional corruption, loss of their savings, and loss of Russian territory.<sup>105</sup> Early in his presidency Putin noted, "For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly, which should be got rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a guarantor of order, the initiator, and the main driving force of any change."<sup>106</sup> Russian support for government regulated media is an example of their acceptance of increased state control. When asked whether the censoring of Russian media was necessary, 76 percent of Russians polled agreed that some level of censorship was necessary, primarily in response to their suspicions about the oligarch-run media outlets that pushed the owner's agendas.<sup>107</sup> Russians were eager for stability, even if it meant losing some of the freedoms they had enjoyed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, such as an independent media.<sup>108</sup>

The catalyst that allowed Putin to take control of state media was an incident in August 2000 that involved a Russian nuclear submarine, the Kursk, being significantly disabled from an explosion.<sup>109</sup> The efforts by Russian military to save the crew were ineffective, and Russia refused assistance from Great Britain, the U.S., and Norway until it was too late.<sup>110</sup> Russian media covered the story and broadcast critical views of the government that were shared by the Russian people, who perceived the government as either indifferent towards the sailors or incompetent.<sup>111</sup> Putin relied on the military to address the issue, but they handled it poorly.<sup>112</sup> After the incident, rather than address the military failures, Putin went after the messengers and began

monitoring the media and curtailing their independent reporting.<sup>113</sup> State-run media provides a way to manage the information released, especially if there are situations with uncertain outcomes, such as the sinking of the Kursk.<sup>114</sup> Fearing loss of control is a fundamental part of Putin's personality, perhaps a result of his experience in Dresden after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This fear of losing control dominates his decision making. By controlling the media and conveying carefully crafted messages, Putin could then appear to manage any situation effectively, whether or not that is really the case.

Although the government controlled about 90 percent of Russian media by 2008, communication was not as restricted then as it was under the Soviet Union.<sup>115</sup> The internet was not censored, several independent media outlets still operated, and publications critical of the government were widely available.<sup>116</sup> This does not mean that open criticism of the government was acceptable. It is generally believed that several politically influential and outspoken journalists have been murdered in Russia, including the highly publicized murder of Anna Politkovskaya, who was a harsh critic of Putin's policy towards Chechnya.<sup>117</sup>

Prior to the 1990s many Russians viewed the U.S. as the World War II liberators who defeated Hitler, and they also believed that U.S. citizens lived ideal lives.<sup>118</sup> This changed dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union when a decade of difficulties led to a weakened Russia, one that the U.S. appeared to be exploiting rather than aiding.<sup>119</sup> The vast difference between the aid promised by the West and the aid actually provided left many Russians blaming the West for the massive economic collapse in Russia.<sup>120</sup> Putin recognized this frustration and frequently belittled the West in his speeches, particularly when defending Russia's aggressive foreign policy decisions. He

often claimed that the West is responsible for recent Russian military action, alleging the West created instability that necessitated Russia's intervention. One of Putin's strongest anti-American speeches addressed the U.S. use of military force. In an address to world leaders in Munich in February 2007 Putin stated that U.S. military actions "have not resolved any problems, but only caused new human tragedies and created new centers of tension and are plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts where political settlement also becomes impossible."<sup>121</sup>

Russians consider Putin a superb public speaker. They are awed by his ability to speak without scripts, to clearly articulate ideas, and to spin off quick witticisms.<sup>122</sup> His influential speaking style has become a weapon in his arsenal; he uses it to promote his agendas to domestic and foreign audiences. Putin accuses Western leaders of promoting the destruction of traditional values and embracing immorality. He frequently cites the decadence of Hollywood, and he claims global support for Russia's defense of universal values.<sup>123</sup> Western media tends to portray Putin as an authoritarian who uses capitalism to exploit his country's resources for personal gain, without giving credit to the increased international support of his conservative reforms. Although discounted by Western leaders, Putin offers an alternative ideology that can effectively compete with Western views.<sup>124</sup> Putin is trying to establish Russia as the protector of Christian traditions, conservatism, and family values as he speaks out against the influence of the U.S. catering to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations, to multiculturalism, and to advocacy of birth control.<sup>125</sup> Putin's messaging indicates his confidence that he has greater appeal to a global audience than his Western counterparts have.

Some of Putin's more deliberate efforts to sway world opinion affirm his understanding of classic public diplomacy. He reached out to the American people in an opinion-editorial published by the *New York Times* in September 2013. His op-ed responded to the announcement that the U.S. may use military force against Syria if they did not cease employing chemical weapons. He reminded Americans of the U.S.–Russian alliance against Nazi Germany, and then he highlighted Russia's call for “peaceful dialogue” to resolve the conflict in Syria.<sup>126</sup> By addressing the American people directly through the media, Putin showed he understands the potential value of communicating directly with foreign audiences.<sup>127</sup>

In summary, state regulation of the media provides Putin a tool for managing information which greatly increases his control in a crisis, or at least provides the perception that his government has control of the situation. The Russian people accept the state influence on the media, since their only other recognized option appears to be the corrupt oligarch-run programs. Putin is an effective speaker and a clear communicator with both foreign and domestic audiences. The West may view his communications as propaganda, but his delivery is persuasive domestically and with some foreign audiences as well. Putin communicates as an effective strategic leader by clearly articulating his vision for Russia. Western leaders should consider his messaging capabilities as they attempt to influence his decision-making.

### Recommendations

Should Western leaders engage Vladimir Putin as a great strategic leader or a bully? The answer to this question requires consideration of both perspectives. The description of Putin as a bully is only partially valid; he is an intelligent, calculating leader. Hence, it is not effective to aggressively confront him. Economic sanctions and

tough talk do not seem to influence Putin's decisions. Like most Russians, Putin is a classical realist who respects hard power above all other threats. Effective engagement with Putin requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes Putin as the leader of a country with strong influence in world affairs, that promotes an economic relationship beneficial to Russia and the West, and ultimately that welcomes Putin's leadership to bring Russia into global security discussions as a coalition partner.

The paper's first recommendation centers on other leaders explicitly acknowledging Putin as the leader of a country with a strong influence in world affairs. This involves engaging Putin in respectful dialogue that acknowledges his perspective, but it does not mean the West condones his decisions. This provides an opportunity to elicit a positive response on some issues--perhaps making him a team player in global affairs. Continually putting him on the defensive will only lead to more aggressive behavior. As Russian nationalism increases, a people who historically regard their country as "Great" welcomes Putin's bold stance against the West and NATO's influence in the former Soviet republics.

Regarding the history of Eastern Ukraine and its mostly ethnic Russian population, Putin likely views the conflict there as merely an opportunity to reclaim old Russian territory while keeping NATO out of Russia's sphere of influence. Putin is not alone in his view of Ukraine; most Russians consider Ukraine's separation from the Russian Empire as an "unfortunate, but temporary situation."<sup>128</sup> Putin will continue to support annexation despite economic sanctions imposed by the international community because he knows that the likelihood of NATO military intervention over the conflict in Ukraine is small. President Barack Obama has specifically stated in numerous

speeches that there is no military solution to the conflict in Ukraine. Economic sanctions are not effective with a leader who respects only hard power. Dialogue that provides alternative solutions to resolve Putin's concern over NATO's perceived encroachment will have a much greater influence on his future decision making than a confrontational approach.

The paper's second recommendation calls for removing the economic sanctions and instead building greater economic relationships between the West and Russia that are mutually beneficial. Putin recognizes Russia's need for a strong economy, one that requires embracing globalization. But he also recognizes that the Western model does not work well in Russia. He believes the state must manage the influence of globalization in a way that works best for Russia, in a manner that keeps Russian traditions intact. He does not, however, want a return to Soviet style communism or socialism. Building an economic partnership with Russia has the opportunity to create greater global stability than continuing economic sanctions. European markets will eventually suffer, possibly some more than Russia, from the current sanctions imposed to discourage Russia's actions in Ukraine. Increasing economic ties between Europe and Russia will create an interdependence that will not only stabilize markets in Europe, but may forestall future conflict.

The West may not agree with Putin's decisions, particularly in Ukraine. But the West has a responsibility to work towards solutions that provide global stability in today's interdependent environment. Russia's economy is not something the West should want to destroy; the impacts of economic collapse could reach well beyond Russia's borders. The U.S. investments have considerable interest in Russia; if Russia

defaults, what happens to those investments?<sup>129</sup> The U.S. is not alone: France, Germany, and Italy all have shared concerns that Russia's financial difficulties may significantly affect their countries as well.<sup>130</sup> French President Francois Hollande has described the sanctions as unnecessary and counterproductive.<sup>131</sup>

The paper's third recommendation is to bring Russia, under Putin's leadership, into a coalition partnership to address global security issues. Putin is willing to be a partner, but not if it requires Russia to subordinate itself to the West. As an example of his willingness to work with the West, Putin reached out on several occasions during his first term as president. The lack of reciprocation, perhaps reminding him of the sense of abandonment he had experienced in Dresden, has led to his recent anti-Western rhetoric. After the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., Putin was the first world leader to offer assistance, despite disapproval from the Russian national security team.<sup>132</sup> Putin opened airspace and encouraged several Central Asian states to allow U.S. military bases in their countries, critical factors in America's new war on terrorism.<sup>133</sup> Putin thought that by becoming part of the coalition, Russia would begin to be heard in deliberations on global affairs. But just two months later, the U.S. rejected the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, a decision Putin regarded as discrediting his role in supporting operations in Afghanistan, once again alienating Russia.<sup>134</sup> Recognizing that Russia would have little influence in NATO's war planning, Putin tried once again to reach out to the West in his speech to the German Bundestag in Berlin when he described a global environment in which Russia, Europe, and the U.S. faced threats from radical Islamists.<sup>135</sup> Although the speech was well received in Germany, the U.S.

refused his request for security collaboration, sending the message to other NATO members that Russia would not be included in the coalition.<sup>136</sup>

Having Russia as a coalition partner may provide the West with a promising option to address challenges in Iran, Syria, and North Korea. After all, it was Putin who intervened and convinced Syria to relinquish its chemical weapons to international control, thereby possibly preventing the use of American military force against Syria.<sup>137</sup> If the current negative dialogue continues, Russia may reverse course on its cooperative efforts in these regions that are considerably more significant to U.S. interests than eastern Ukraine.<sup>138</sup> Engaging Putin on global issues beyond Ukraine is much more significant than the continued rhetoric over increasing economic sanctions. Putin believes strongly that Russia is a great power; hence he expects the rest of the world to treat it that way. Engaging in discourse over issues the West can agree on will create a path towards dialogue on contentious issues more effectively than the current condescending and often confrontational approaches.

### Conclusion

The four strategic leadership competencies most important for Western leaders to understand and appreciate in order to better interact with and influence Putin's decision-making are frame of reference development, envisioning the future, systems understanding, and communication. As Western leaders condemn his recent aggressive actions in the Ukraine, they should as well consider the role they may have played in precipitating the actions Putin has taken in concert with how these four strategic leadership competencies influenced his decisions. The frame of reference competency is perhaps the most important, as research has shown how Vladimir Putin's Soviet upbringing, combined with his KGB and initial governance service in Saint Petersburg,

have greatly influenced his perspective during a time of critical change in Russia. This has helped drive his deep patriotic desire for Russia to be strong during a crisis and return to the world stage as an influential global player, which Putin's vision for Russia's future illustrates. Putin believes the future of Russia depends on Russian pride in its history and traditions as well as their view of Russia as a great Empire. He communicates his vision effectively through a combination of his superb speaking skills and state run media. However, Putin's lack of systems understanding puts his vision at risk through his failure to address corruption, the lack of modernization of Russia's economy, and Russia's dependence on energy revenues. While some may argue that the only way to deal with Russia is through policies that subordinate Russia to the West, this paper offers three more effective recommendations related to acknowledging Putin as an influential leader in world affairs, building greater economic interdependence between the West and Russia that is mutually beneficial, and bringing Russia into a coalition partnership to comprehensively address global security issues.

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