

Opinion – A Psychological Perspective on Putin's War with Ukraine

Written by Katie Titherington

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KATIE TITHERINGTON, NOV 28 2022

One of the most interesting, but less discussed, catalysts to the Ukraine war and Russia's harsh foreign policy rhetoric is Vladimir Putin's age and background. These two factors help shed a psychological light on the reasoning why Putin chose the path of conflict and constitute what we might think of as his "identity" (a set of complex multi-layered constructs that cultivates one's sense of self). Our identity is filled with many complex layers, all shifting to reflect the present positions an individual is facing. In Putin's case, these two multi-layered factors have worked together to bring about a more dominant layer of his identity that has impacted his decisions, namely his ultra-nationalism and desire to leave a legacy behind.

Although numerous factors contributed to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, there are two that stand out. The first is the war provides Putin the opportunity to create a legacy for himself. Legacies play a unique psychological role in which it helps an individual cope with certain aspects of their life, especially regarding one's age (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, 141-144 and Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2015, 100-123). It also provides a way for a leader to shape not only their identity but the identity of their country. The second is Putin's personality. A leader's personality can help explain their political behavior. According to political psychologists, Putin is considered to exhibit a 'dark personality.' A leader with such a personality is believed to have certain psychological traits, which include being manipulative, deceptive, and narcissistic. These leaders even display psychopathic tendencies such as being impulsive, aggressive, and lacking empathy. These traits, according to research, makes him less competent as a leader (Linden and Wilkes 2002). It also illustrates that with such a personality, Putin is a high risk-taker, and it is probable, given his narcissism, that he believed Russia's army would easily be able to annex part of Ukraine quickly and effectively. In doing so, Putin would not only illustrate Russia's strength on a global stage but reinforce the Russian nationalistic identity, an identity that he is attempting to shape.

Putin's background and beliefs play a unique role in the reasoning behind the war with Ukraine. Putin was part of the KGB and had military training but never saw combat. Evidence suggests that leaders with such military and agency backgrounds are more likely to start a war than leaders who have had military combat experience (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, 129-134). Being a part of such an agency will install certain qualities, beliefs, and behaviors in an individual. One being extreme patriotism and ultra-nationalism. Nationalism is the most dominant layer of Putin's identity, which allows us to understand his motivations. Part of the KGB's motto was 'loyalty to the motherland'. Putin believes Ukraine is a part of the 'motherland,' and therefore, he is merely taking back Russia's land. Putin once stated, "modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia. This process began immediately after the revolution of 1917..." and that "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood." He told Russians that the motherland is sacred and that "today you are fighting for our people in Donbas, for the security of Russia, our homeland."

Putin, who has been in power since 1999, is 70. Age can impact the decision-making process of a leader; more specifically, as one ages, it creates a sense of urgency for leaders to leave their mark on the world. Given Putin's age, he may be more aware of his own mortality. This awareness of one's mortality often leads people to behave differently (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2015). In fact, older leaders are more likely to start a conflict. This could be due to what is known as 'legacy mode.' Legacy mode is when a leader strives to establish their own status

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and position within history (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, 141-144). Putin's action's against Ukraine illustrates such a legacy mode.

Putin's age and background, coupled with his personality, heightened his nationalism and created an important sense to leave a legacy which helps understand and explain the national militarized behavior he is exhibiting. Taken together, these factors are creating a dangerous nexus between Putin's impending mortality, his nationalism, and the desire for what he would view as a legacy of value. Putin has already compared himself to the likes of Peter the Great, but how far will Putin go for his legacy?

According to behavioral psychologists, leaders tend to reason by analogy and draw parallels from history (Stein 2013, 195-219). Essentially Putin aspires for geopolitical and potentially territorial dominance within eastern Europe. Putin discussed how Peter regained Sweden: "he seized nothing, he reclaimed it." He elaborated on Ukraine, "It seems it has fallen to us, too, to reclaim and strengthen." Putin uses such parallels and analogies that are without qualifying conditions. By drawing on analogies of Peter the Great expansionism and Putin's own invasion of Ukraine, there is little attention paid to the difference between the two leaders and the historical time differentiation. By situating himself in an existing frame of Peter, Putin was able to justify and validate his course of action. After all, Putin believes Ukraine is a part of Russia. Expansion equates strength in Putin's eyes, which helps solidify and shape not only his identity but Russian identity and, more importantly, helps create his legacy.

Putin, who is known as a reactionary tyrant, is able to shape Russian identity through dichotomous rhetoric and manipulation tactics (Shorten 2022). Putin says Russia was 'forced' into conflict and that the "European Union has fully lost its sovereignty. A decision aimed at protecting our citizens, residents of the People's Republics of Donbas, who for eight years were subjected to genocide by the Kyiv regime and neo-Nazis who received the full protection of the West." He further elaborates, "they were preparing a punishing operation in Donbas to intrude on our historic lands. In Kyiv they were saying they might get nuclear weapons and NATO started exploring the lands close to us, and that became an obvious threat to us and our borders." He uses this rhetoric to create a distortion of the conflict designed to bolster the support of the Russians for an unjust war. He is trying to reshape the security architecture of Europe and shape Russian identity. Putin once again used analogical reasoning to justify the invasion of Ukraine by comparing Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government, as well as the entire Western world, to that of Nazi Germany. By reinforcing dichotomous rhetoric, he is trying to create a narrative, not one based on truth and facts, but one grounded in his own beliefs and identity that Ukraine is a part of Russia and that Russia is equal to or greater in strength than the West. Putin's immediate objective was to defeat and subjugate Ukraine, demonstrate Russia's strength, and create a legacy for himself. However, it is doubtful Putin will stop until he has conquered all of Ukraine, not just the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Putin's personality also sheds light on his psychological state and his overall decisions. In fact, Putin's foreign policies are grounded in his personality and identity. Before Putin took power, the last two leaders of Russia were Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. These former leader's foreign policies were grounded in their perception that the USSR/Russia was weak on the international level, and both desperately wanted Russia to be accepted as part of the West. By contrast, under Putin, his foreign policies are grounded in Russia's newfound strength and ultra-nationalistic beliefs that are driven by grievances he holds towards the West (Breslauer 2013). According to the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC), which also confirms his dark personality traits, Putin is also a high risk-taker, distrusting and controlling. This leads to Putin being categorized as an 'expansionist hostile enforcer.' He also exhibits paranoia and a fundamentalist mindset (Strozier and Terman 2022). Unfortunately, due to his overall personality traits, cognitive inflexibility, and uncompromising demeanor, it will be extremely challenging to negotiate with Putin over the Ukrainian war (Immelman and Trenzeluk 2017). What is even more troublesome is he may not stop at Ukraine, or even worse, the possibility of nuclear weapons use could be probable.

This leads to the most concerning aspect of Putin's recent actions, is he capable of using Russia's nuclear weapons? The answer is not clear-cut or as straight forwards as it seems. Any nuclear state's leaders have the capability to use and deploy nuclear weapons, which depends on several factors ranging from political to security, but the most overlooked factor is the psychology of a leader. Given the right political and security climate, as well as the right physiological factors of a leader, can lead to disastrous consequences on a nuclear weapons level, hence a great

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need for global nuclear disarmament. One of the most critical aspects of leadership is to think conceptually, draw innovative conclusions, and seek creative solutions but this can be distorted and impacted by personality, age, background, and beliefs. In Putin's case, his identity, personality, and desire to leave a legacy, coupled with other factors, make him more susceptible to using nuclear weapons. Putin's actions seriously erode such critical aspects of leadership, which can have catastrophic consequences on an international level.

Russia has already warned that outside intervention in the Ukraine conflict could lead to "consequences as you have never experienced in your history." The global community should be aware that Putin's use of nuclear weapons is very much a possibility.

About the author:

Katie Titherington is a Ph.D. student at the University of Leicester's School of History, Politics, and International Relations. Her research is concerned with leadership psychology, specifically regarding nuclear weapons.