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Leadership style and foreign policy: The role of Vladimir Putin's dual-framing style in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to demonstrate the potential of measuring decision-making in foreign policy from a distance by examining the leadership traits of political figures. The methodology employed is the leadership trait analysis proposed by Margaret Hermann and implemented through ProfilerPlus software to analyse Vladimir Putin's decision to invade in Ukraine in 2022. In this study, Putin's leadership is systematically analysed using one of the most comprehensive methods of assessing leadership styles, namely, leadership trait analysis. The study compares the results of Putin's conceptual complexity score, derived from his responses to direct questions during various interviews with both domestic and international media, with a reference group of 214 world leaders identified by Hermann. The findings suggest that Putin's leadership exhibits lower cognitive complexity. This reduced conceptual complexity appears to have influenced his foreign policy behaviour during the Ukrainian crisis. The study demonstrates that Putin's foreign policy choices in 2022 were significantly influenced by this individual trait, which is associated with his constricted black-and-white worldview. Consequently, the study emphasises the significance of Putin's personal characteristics in shaping foreign policy and provides a systematic assessment of how measuring from a distance can elucidate the behaviour of high-level political leaders.

KEYWORDS: Russian foreign policy; leadership trait analysis; Ukrainian crisis 2022; political psychology; Putin

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INTRODUCTION

Political psychology, as a research tradition, provides a means to explore whether the personalities and styles of leaders matter in foreign policy. Psychological analyses often operate at the individual level by asking how a leader's psychological characteristics affect state action (Schafer, 2000). Despite numerous studies of Putin, there is a lack of research on how he, as an individual, plays a significant role in critical cases. Therefore, it is worthwhile to evaluate Putin's behaviour in response to situational demands during the Ukrainian crisis in 2022 and to delve into individual trait research.

'At-a-distance' approaches and broader political-psychological theories are two well-established approaches to research that can be used to explain why individuals in politics act the way they do. Determining a leader's traits can be achieved through direct interviews using 'at-a-distance' techniques and by examining existing literature that provides guidance on interpreting traits and constructing a leadership style profile.

Furthermore, the literature on personality and psychological theories offers a wealth of data on various influences on a leader's style. This article primarily aligns with the former approach but also draws connections to psychological theories. This perspective is supported by cognitive explanations, which posit that a leader's words reflect their personality (Dille & Young, 2000).

Political figures frequently utilise language strategically to accomplish various objectives, whether it's rallying public support, presenting a diplomatic stance, or shaping perceptions. This deliberate use of language complicates the task of distinguishing statements that genuinely reflect a leader's personality. To navigate this complexity, a nuanced approach is essential. Cognitive cues, such as the unconscious selection of words, possess the potential to offer insights into the depths of a leader's motives and perceptions. Additionally, examining the consistency of messaging across diverse contexts and aligning rhetoric with observed behaviours over time remains crucial. Through this process patterns emerge, enabling a better understanding of which statements authentically mirror a leader's true personality and which ones are strategically devised to serve specific aims. This multifaceted analysis aids in unravelling the intricacies of a leader's communication strategy and underlying motivations.

The decision unit dealing with a particular foreign policy problem is likely to be a predominant leader if the regime has one individual in its leadership who is vested with the authority—by a constitution, law, or general practice—to commit or withhold the resources of the government with regard to the making of foreign policy (Hermann et al., 2001). Foreign policy analysis requires an understanding of the key individuals in politics who serve as key decision-makers; the long-term thinking of these individuals is shaped within a broader framework that constitutes part of the country's strategic culture (Alibabalu, 2020). The significance of individuals in politics is evident, as they generate a substantial amount of written and spoken material that often becomes part of permanent records. This material

can, in principle, be subjected to content analysis to uncover cognitive characteristics (Lee & Peterson, 1997), just as it can be utilised to uncover affective, motivational, attitudinal, and other personological traits.

In international relations, psychological content analysis, as a method in political psychology, primarily focuses on the psychology of leaders, especially in governments such as those of Russia, China, and Iran, whose decisions affect the political process and results (Alibabalu, 2023). Its main objective is to anticipate and mitigate potential or existing conflicts, as well as to analyse individual characteristics in politics. This enables the prediction of politicians' behaviour and the provision of specific recommendations regarding their traits. Modern political psychology employs various methods to study individuals in politics, elucidating their 'psycho-political' characteristics and behaviour. The ultimate goal is to predict the decisions that individuals in politics may make, and determine their leadership style, perception, thought patterns, approaches to problems, and unique decision-making systems. Content analysis extensively employs advancements in linguistics, mathematics, and statistics.

Given that political leaders are individuals with psychological characteristics, this work addresses three key questions for analysis. First, it aims to demonstrate how researchers in the field of foreign policy can effectively utilise content analysis of leaders to study their decision-making processes using remote measurements and software development programs. Second, this article provides a detailed explanation of the methodology employed to study leadership at a distance, employing software programs that enable the construction of a comprehensive leadership style profile through this innovative approach. Third, the study applies this method to a prominent and widely discussed leader, Vladimir Putin, in order to examine his leadership style and decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. By analysing Putin's behaviour and traits, the research aims to gain insights into his decision-making process and shed light on the underlying factors that influenced his actions during the Ukrainian crisis.

In summary, this article contributes to the existing literature on foreign policy analysis by introducing a novel approach to studying leadership and decision-making in the context of international affairs. It emphasises the potential benefits of utilising leaders' content analysis and remote measurements in foreign policy research, while also providing a practical application of this approach through a case study of Putin.

AT-A-DISTANCE MEASUREMENT AND LEADERSHIP TRAIT ANALYSIS

The focus of at-a-distance approaches is primarily on the verbal output of political leaders, operating under the assumption that analysing this output through content-analytic schemes derived from underlying psychological concepts can provide insights into the beliefs, motives, and personalities of key figures (Dyson, 2006; Schafer, 2000; Winter, 2003). A conceptual

framework that incorporates the leader's cognition, motivation, interpersonal skills, communication style, and other personality characteristics, along with the influence of situational stimuli, has the potential to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis for understanding critical cases.

Content analysis involves the translation of verbal information, such as spoken text, into a more objective and non-verbal form by analysing and coding the psychological characteristics of an individual. It is a rigorous scientific method that requires systematic and reliable processing of specific words and documents, followed by quantitative analysis of the collected data. Content analysis finds extensive application in various scientific fields, and this article specifically focuses on its use in the study of foreign policy.

In the 1970, Margaret Hermann developed an at-a-distance approach using leadership trait analysis (LTA) to examine the influence of individual traits on foreign policy patterns. She established a method for analysing the psychological traits of individuals and their impact on foreign policy outcomes. Hermann's research encompassed various politicians, including US presidents, British prime ministers, sub-Saharan African leaders, Iranian leaders, Soviet Politburo members, and heads of international organisations such as the European Union and the United Nations (Cuhadar et al., 2017).

The current method for studying leadership styles follows a specific set of steps and guidelines. It primarily involves collecting data, particularly the spoken words of the leader, and categorising those data based on the elements desired for observation. The ProfilerPlus program, available at https://profilerplus.org/, does not have an option for processing data in Russian, which is why all materials were collected in English. Although Hermann (1999/2002) suggests using the native language of the leader being studied, the distortion in results obtained from translated material is minimal. To accurately define a leadership style, the dataset should consist of at least 5,000 words.

Hermann (1999/2002) recommends utilising question–answer material as data to minimise the possibility of relying on prepared material, which may be written by staff and not leaders themselves. However, in-depth interviews are also recommended as they not only provide insight into leaders' characteristics but also focus on specific traits obtained. Direct interviews with politicians can offer a broader picture of motives and instil greater confidence in understanding the political personality through the derived traits.

Personality is understood as comprising different (and independent) elements; hence, it follows that the fullest assessments of individual and collective personality, and the most accurate predictions from personality to political behaviour, will be made by using combinations of variables—preferably variables drawn from different personality elements (Winter, 2003). The framework for leadership style consists of seven distinct traits: the need for power, belief in the ability to control events, self-confidence, in-group bias, distrust of others, task focus, and complexity. These traits provide a comprehensive understanding of a

leader's psychological characteristics and their potential impact on decision-making in foreign policy.

The approach entails assessing a leader's leadership style through the development of a leadership profile comprising seven key traits. This article particularly focuses on one trait, namely, low conceptual complexity, which consistently appears in Putin's leadership profile. This specific trait significantly influenced his decision-making process leading to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It notably shapes how Putin perceives and responds to threats, impacting the trajectory of hostilities, his rhetorical strategies, and the subsequent aftermath of the conflict.

To construct the leadership profile, several steps are followed. First, the period of interest is determined, specifying the timeframe in which the leader's actions and decisions are analysed. Second, data are collected from the official site of the Russian government, Kremlin.ru, utilising question–answer material. This data collection procedure ensures that the spoken words of the leader are captured for analysis. Third, the collected data are inputted into the ProfilerPlus software program, which utilises LTA methodology. The software automatically calculates the scores for each trait and categorises the results accordingly. Finally, based on the calculated scores, the leadership profile is constructed, providing a comprehensive overview of the leader's psychological traits.

To establish a reference point for analysis, the author utilises a reference group. The reference group consists of results from various leader profiles compiled by different scholars. The purpose of the reference group is to serve as a statistical benchmark based on previous research on leadership style. In this study, the reference group proposed by Hermann, which includes the results from 214 world leaders, is used. The selection of the reference group is focused on detecting deviations or similarities in the examined leader's traits, without specific emphasis on the nationality of the leaders within the group. This approach ensures that accurate results are obtained when analysing the foreign policy of a specific national leader.

The constructed table compares the results of the examined leader with those of the reference group on the seven different leadership style traits. By highlighting the differences between the examined leader and the reference group, the table provides valuable insights into the leader's unique psychological characteristics and leadership style. In this article, particular attention is given to the conceptual complexity trait, as Hermann (1999/2002) identifies it as significant in analysing foreign policy decisions.

Furthermore, the obtained results are applied by incorporating empirical evidence from existing literature and referencing the leadership style proposed by Hermann. Hermann's LTA methodology, published in 1980, offers detailed explanations of the seven traits and their expected influence on political behaviour. By drawing on this theoretical framework, the obtained trait scores can be interpreted in the context of leadership behaviour and decision-making.

In subsequent sections of the article, the focus is on Vladimir Putin, utilising the obtained conceptual complexity score to explain his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. The conceptual complexity trait is considered crucial in understanding foreign policy decisions, and the analysis aims to explore how Putin's dichotomous foreign policy vision shaped the Ukrainian crisis. This case study provides a practical application of the research methodology and contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership and decision-making in international affairs.

CONSTRUCTING VLADIMIR PUTIN'S LEADERSHIP PROFILE

Vladimir Putin, one of the most significant political figures in modern-day Russia, holds a central position in this article, focusing on his unwavering perception of the global environment. Over the past two decades, Putin has wielded power as both prime minister and president. This article seeks to demonstrate the potential of personality as a causally significant factor in explaining foreign policy, particularly in certain situations. It argues that employing multi-method approaches, which combine the objectivity of quantitative content analysis with the contextual richness of qualitative approaches, is particularly suitable when examining the challenging topic of individual explanation in politics and the significance of the human factor in analysing critical episodes (Dyson, 2006).

In understanding the significance of unit-level explanation and how leadership influences Russian foreign policy within the framework of relatively constant structural determinants, the leadership trait analysis technique holds great promise. Given the crisis in Ukraine, there is an increased urgency to examine leadership in the context of Russian foreign policy. The structural nature of Russia's internal system, shaped by its Soviet past, ultimately determines its foreign policy, which is significantly influenced by Putin's personality. The personological underpinnings of his political style is revealed by his verbal expressions, which have been measured using the ProfilerPlus automated system.

The analysis in this study is based on various interviews with Putin, including spontaneous question-and-answer sessions from sources such as CNN (Cable News Network), the TASS media group, and the Valdai 18th interview (see Appendix for a full listing). The majority of the data are derived from the English version of the official Russian site, Kremlin.ru. Although the ProfilerPlus program developed by Young does not support Russian language analysis, Hermann (1999/2002) has determined that translated materials are acceptable for analysis. The potential distortion resulting from the use of translated material in the leadership analysis of non-English speaking leaders is not deemed significant, as observed by Hermann.

Nevertheless, several recent studies, such as Hallin (2023), affirm the impact of the unique grammar in the Russian language, highlighting potential discrepancies between translated texts and the nuances captured through analysis conducted in Russian—particularly in how

English-based LTA looks to achieve semantic equivalence with Russian—and concludes that 'an accurate understanding of Russian leaders' personalities requires Russian language specific LTA profiling' (p. 223).

Two major types of statements are readily available for most political leaders in the latter part of the 20th century: speeches and interviews with the media (Hermann, 2005). The profile of Putin's cognitive style is derived from 80,000 words he used prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which is significantly more than the 5,000 words required for a thorough analysis according to Hermann's methodology. The use of spontaneous material, rather than prepared speeches, mitigates the risk of the analysis reflecting the personality of Putin's staff rather than his own. As mentioned earlier, direct answers in interviews with the media represent a more spontaneous type of material.

The significance of spontaneous interviews lies in the fact that political figures must respond quickly without assistance during question-and-answer sessions (Hermann, 1999/2002). In order to measure Putin's personality, a substantial number of direct answers from press conference responses and interviews were gathered and analysed from February 21, 2020 to November 23, 2021.

Hermann (1980) developed and refined a relatively simple measure of conceptual complexity based on the frequency count of words spoken by the political figure under examination. Her technique incorporates cognitive terminology that applies words to capture subtle, random unconscious processes. Thus, words such as 'trend', 'possibly', 'perhaps', and 'sometimes' are classified as having a high level of complexity. Conversely, words like 'always', 'never', and 'absolutely' are considered indicators of minimal complexity. The percentage of high-complexity coding choices in relation to the total number of coding opportunities determines the total complexity score for a text sample. Hermann notes that conventionally the initial calculation of traits was performed manually, but thanks to Young and the ProfilerPlus developers, the automatic system can now be utilised, minimising the influence of human factors.

By comparing Putin's results with the average scores of the reference group leaders before the Russian intervention in Ukraine, researchers can ascertain whether Putin's low conceptual complexity is a cognitive trait. A lower conceptual complexity score suggests a binary worldview, characterised by a tendency to categorise the political world into starkly drawn, often dichotomous, categories such as 'us and them', 'good and bad', and 'friend and enemy'. Conversely, individuals with a higher complexity score tend to perceive the world in more nuanced shades of grey (see Dyson, 2006; Hermann, 1980; Preston, 2001; Tetlock, 1985).

Putin's low conceptual complexity may specifically indicate the validity of the claims that his decision to intervene in Ukraine in 2022 was influenced by his dualistic cognitive style, ultimately leading to military action. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive,

systematic, and unbiased analysis of the psychological traits that shape Putin's leadership style.

Table 1 reports Putin's complexity scores from 2020 to 2022, leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Compared with the average world leader, Putin consistently and noticeably performs lower on cognitive complexity.

Table 1. *Vladimir Putin's Conceptual Complexity Compared with a Reference Group of Leaders*

Trait	Reference group of 214	Vladimir Putin (2020–2022)
Conceptual complexity	0.65	0.579
		Low

Note: low < 0.61; high > 0.69.

Table 2: *Conceptual Complexity*

Trait	Description	Coding
Conceptual complexity	Capability of discerning different dimensions of the environment when describing actors, places, ideas, and situations.	Percentage of words related to high complexity (i.e., 'approximately', 'possibility', 'trend') vs. low complexity (i.e., 'absolutely', 'certainly', 'irreversible') (Dyson, 2006, p. 292).

DISCUSSION

The results of content analysis reveal that Putin's actions align with a leadership style characterised by lower conceptual complexity. This empirical evidence regarding Putin is examined and analysed in this section of the report, taking into account his speeches and timeline factors.

Putin's dual-framing style

Conceptual complexity, extensively explored in psychology and leadership research, refers to an individual's cognitive capacity to encompass, discern, and accommodate multiple dimensions within an idea, concept, or situation. Psychologists and leadership scholars have studied this concept to understand how individuals process and handle complex information,

especially in decision-making scenarios, where nuanced understanding is pivotal. Hermann delves into how conceptual complexity influences an individual's approach to problem-solving, decision-making, and overall leadership style, shedding light on its significance in various cognitive processes and behaviours. She defines conceptual complexity as the degree of differentiation that an individual shows in describing or discussing other people, places, policies, ideas, or things (Hermann, 1999/2002).

Previous research has demonstrated that leaders with high levels of conceptual complexity are more effective in complex and uncertain environments (Preston, 2001; Tetlock, 1985). They display greater openness to multiple perspectives, possess a higher tolerance for ambiguity, and exhibit better adaptability to changing circumstances.

On the contrary, leaders with low levels of conceptual complexity tend to view the world in simplistic and dichotomous terms, which can result in inflexible responses to complex issues. People with low conceptual complexity tend to view situations in dichotomous, universal, and generally rigid terms. Hermann also identified low conceptual complexity as a trait that influences a leader's inclination towards an aggressive foreign policy (Dille & Young, 2000; Hermann, 1980, 1983). As a cognitive style, it is negatively related to the 'intolerance of ambiguity' (black-and-white thinking) component of authoritarianism. Among leaders, high nationalism and distrust and low conceptual complexity are associated with an aggressive, autocratic, and often simplistic political style (Winter et al., 1991).

Dyson (2006) argues that leaders with a simplistic mindset often rely on preconceived categories and frameworks to interpret and respond to events, leading to rigid thinking and an inability to adjust to evolving situations. Low complexity correlates with higher risk propensities by the state, less reliance on diplomacy, and quicker commitments of state resources to a conflict (Schafer, 2000).

Furthermore, researchers in the field of Russian policy have highlighted the notion of Putin's low conceptual complexity and his reliance on a close circle of advisors. Fiona Hill, a Russia expert and former National Security Council official, has specifically mentioned Putin's tendency to trust a 'very small group of people', which can limit the range of perspectives and result in narrow decision-making (Hill & Gaddy, 2015).

The composition of Putin's inner circle is comprised of individuals with whom he has had longstanding relationships from his previous governmental work. His policies have concentrated power in the executive at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of the federal government and the once-powerful regional bosses (Bremmer & Charap, 2007). Putin's elites are less likely to hold a postgraduate degree, are somewhat more provincial, even more overwhelmingly male, more likely to come from the business world, and more likely to come from St Petersburg (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2005). These include Dmitry Medvedev, Igor Sechin, Nikolai Patrushev, Viktor Ivanov, Sergei Bogdanchikov, and Sergei

Stepashin. This arrangement has led to the characterisation of Russian politics as being influenced by a core group of Putin's inner circle.

Putin's inclination to surround himself with familiar faces and his reliance on a close-knit group of advisors reflects his low conceptual complexity. This approach to domestic politics can have contradictory effects. On one hand, it may contribute to a sense of trust and loyalty within the inner circle; on the other, it can limit exposure to alternative information sources and diverse viewpoints, reinforcing a binary and divisive worldview. Individuals with low conceptual complexity, like Putin, often perceive the world in simplistic and dichotomous terms, lacking tolerance for ambiguity and doubt. This tendency to divide the world into 'us' and 'them' can result in decision-making based on binary thinking, disregarding nuance and complexity.

Putin's low conceptual complexity and his inclination towards binary thinking are further supported by the post-Soviet perception and the Cold War mindset that shaped the views of the Soviet people. The historical context of the Cold War, with its absolute conceptualisation of Russia versus the West, has influenced Putin's psychological attitudes and foreign policy decisions. Many studies have drawn connections between Putin's actions and his desire to restore a USSR-style empire, highlighting his Soviet past and ambitions (Brzezinski, 2014; Coughlin, 2008; Götz, 2017; Harding, 2008).

An important moment that exemplifies Putin's dichotomous thinking is his 2007 Munich speech. Experts widely recognise this speech as a declaration of Russia's intent to revise its position in the international system and shift from a defensive to an offensive foreign policy approach. During the Munich conference, Putin's tendency to divide the world into categories of 'them' and 'us' with strong moralistic undertones was evident, revealing his inclination to frame issues in terms of two opposing alternatives.

This dichotomous thinking and moralistic worldview can limit Putin's perspectives, leading to narrow decision-making. By perceiving the world in binary terms, Putin may overlook nuances and complexities, disregarding alternative viewpoints and strategies that could contribute to more balanced and effective policies. This dual-framed mindset, rooted in the Cold War era, continues to shape Putin's approach to international relations and his aspirations for Russia's role on the global stage. As Putin stated in his Munich speech:

> One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural, and educational policies it imposes on other nations…

> And of course, this is extremely dangerous. It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasize this—no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them. Of course, such a policy stimulates an arms race. (Putin, 2007, paras. 20, 22)

In his speech, Putin's announcement of an active foreign policy reflected his low conceptual complexity, according to several experts. The speech revealed Putin's internal perception of world processes in a black-and-white manner, where one actor is seen as the subject and the other automatically becomes the object. This kind of thinking resembles a return to Cold War mentality and is consistent with Putin's low complexity score and his ethnocentric psychological attitudes.

During the Munich speech, Putin emphasised the notion of international morality, where one actor dominates international relations. This highlights his inclination towards a simplistic view of power dynamics. Additionally, Putin made clear distinctions between Russia and the West, construing those who do not support Russian dominance in post-Soviet territories as a direct threat from the West and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) against Russia.

Putin's style in foreign affairs closely aligns with expectations based on his lower complexity score. He tends to divide foreign policy, as well as domestic colleagues and advisors, into absolute categories of 'friend' and 'enemy', within the broader context of a struggle between Russia and the West. Coming to power in 2000, Putin enhanced a form of anti-American propaganda, which was already strong by the end of Yeltsin's rule that described the United States as rather hostile toward the Russian Federation and complicit in the failure of the country's economic reforms. Anti-Americanism became an important part of Putin's official ideology (Shlapentokh, 2009). In his foreign policy speeches, he can exhibit a critical and aggressive demeanour, portraying himself as a strongman who is haunted by almost paranoid illusions of weakness and external danger (Dyson, 2006).

Research on the effect of complexity on decision-making processes suggests that individuals with low complexity tend to have a more decisive style and engage in a restricted information search compared with those possessing higher complexity (Preston, 2001). Putin's low conceptual complexity aligns with this tendency, as he exhibits a dichotomous information processing style characterised by a constrained search for information and a reliance on conceptual categorisations. This results in a decisive decision orientation with limited internal domestic debate and a relatively low degree of reconsideration of fundamental policies.

Overall, Putin's low conceptual complexity shapes his approach to foreign policy, characterised by black-and-white thinking, a limited information search, and a decisive decision-making style. These factors contribute to his perception of the world in simplistic terms and his tendency to maintain a firm and unwavering stance on key issues.

Putin's Ukraine decision

Putin's low complexity score is reflected in his decision to invade Ukraine, which can be attributed to his dual-framed leadership style of information processing. As a result, Putin is

more likely to categorise the policy environment in absolute terms, heavily rely on stereotypes and analogies, adopt an overtly ideological approach to policy and problem framing, and uncritically adopt existing views of other countries (Yang, 2010).

These tendencies towards dichotomous thinking provide compelling evidence of the Ukrainian conflict, which arguably has been the most significant development in Russian foreign policy since 2014. Putin's dichotomous thinking and his unwillingness to consider any compromise or partial settlement further indicate his black-and-white perspective on the moral issues at play. In a speech on February 21, 2022, Putin emphasised the historical, cultural, and spiritual connection between Russia and Ukraine, presenting it as an inalienable part of Russia's identity. He stated, 'Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our history, culture, and spiritual space' (Putin, 2022, para. 5).

With these words, Putin highlighted the deep-rooted attachment he perceives between Russia and Ukraine, reinforcing his belief in a unified historical and cultural heritage. This rhetoric reflects his absolute view of the situation, where Ukraine is seen as an integral part of Russia rather than an independent entity. By framing the conflict in terms of historical and cultural unity, Putin portrays Russia's actions as a defence of its own identity and values. The Russian government views the situation in Ukraine through a lens of repeated Western betrayal, creeping NATO encroachment, and disrespect for its security concerns (Wolff, 2015). This further emphasises Putin's inclination to view the world through a binary lens, where Russia is the protector of Ukraine as a bulwark against Western expansion. When he ordered the Ukrainian invasion in 2022, Putin justified his decision with a brutally absolute vision of Ukraine's future, stating the need to clean Ukraine of Nazism (Putin, 2022). He quickly framed the situation in stark terms, portraying the Ukrainian government as nationalistic and presenting Russia as liberators. This swift and decisive action, without leaving room for a diplomatic solution, aligns with the decision-making style of leaders with low conceptual complexity. Such leaders are expected to handle information without considering its appropriateness within the existing policy environment, showing insensitivity to the context. Once a decision is made, it becomes resistant to modification or reconsideration.

Putin's reaction to system stimuli—in this case, the invasion of Ukraine—is consistent with the expectations for leaders with low conceptual complexity scores. They are typically less inclined to engage in consistent, detailed decision-making aimed at minimising risks. Putin's limited access to information and reluctance to revise his beliefs contribute to his rigid decision-making process. Major policy setbacks, dramatic stimuli, or jolts from the international environment can trigger his reactions (Cottam et al., 2004; Yang, 2010).

Putin's low conceptual complexity is evident in his approach to the Ukrainian conflict. His binary thinking, ideological framing, and reluctance to consider compromise illustrate his leadership style and decision-making processes. These characteristics, influenced by his low complexity score, shape his responses to international events and contribute to the dynamics

of Russian foreign policy. Putin's definitive worldview and intolerance of ambiguity decisively shaped the Russian approach to the Ukrainian invasion in 2022. This absolute view of the morality involved led Putin to further behaviour indicative of lower-complexity leaders: a resistance to consider any compromise or partial settlement.

First, Putin's framing of the Ukrainian conflict in terms of right and wrong, using binary categorisations of 'good and evil', aligns with the characteristics often associated with leaders of lower complexity (Dyson, 2006). This can be observed in his characterisation of Volodymyr Zelensky's regime as comprising 'neo-nationalists' and 'direct NATO agents', portraying them as part of a fascist regime (Putin, 2022). Putin's tendency to view the situation in such simplified terms demonstrates his low conceptual complexity.

Furthermore, Putin's justification for military action in Ukraine reflects his low complexity score, as leaders with low conceptual complexity tend to perceive military interventions as battles between 'good and evil'. Putin framed the situation as a fight against Nazism and a defence of Russian identity, presenting the invasion as a humanitarian mission (Putin, 2022). He emphasised the alleged Russian-speaking ethnic cleansing and racial policies of the Ukrainian government, employing surface-level analogical comparisons. After months of exaggerated public narratives about a neo-fascist and radical right-wing threat to Russian interests and 'ethnic kin' in Ukraine, it is implausible to believe that Putin can simply back down (Barkanov, 2014). This absolute political behaviour aligns with the characteristic tendency of leaders with lower complexity to rely on simplistic and binary categorisations.

Putin's decision-making style consistently prioritises fundamental principles over specific details, indicating his limited information search and resistance to considering information that contradicts his existing beliefs. This can be observed in his speech to the nation about the necessity of military operations in Ukraine and his article on the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine (Putin, 2022). These speeches reflect the decision-making style of leaders with lower complexity, who rely on broad principles and are reluctant to reconsider their beliefs.

Putin's framing of the Ukrainian conflict in terms of right and wrong, his use of binary categorisations, and his justification for military action based on broad principles rather than specific details are all consistent with the behaviour expected from leaders with low conceptual complexity. These characteristics shape his decision-making processes and influence his approach to international events, such as the invasion of Ukraine. Putin's mention of the support of far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine by leading NATO countries in his speech further demonstrates his moralistic style and use of historical references (Putin, 2022).

While the idea of a 'historical mission' alone may not fully explain foreign policy decisions, it aligns with the style of information processing exhibited by leaders with low complexity. Putin's decision-making style and behaviour during the invasion of Ukraine exemplify how leaders with low conceptual complexity tend to divide the world into simplistic categories

such as 'us and them', 'good and bad', and maintaining a categorical course of action without deviating from their fundamental principles and political assumptions.

Putin's growing obsession with Ukraine has developed over many years (Liik, 2022). For Russia's leaders, what happens in Ukraine has little to do with their imperial ambitions being thwarted; it is about dealing with what they regard as a direct threat to Russia's future (Mearsheimer, 2022). His approach to the Ukrainian conflict reflects his literal interpretations, where he portrays Russia as the defender of its identity and values against what he perceives as the threat of Ukrainian nationalism. This perspective is evident in his speeches and statements, where he emphasises the alleged ethnic cleansing and racial policies of the Ukrainian government. His rhetoric during this time captures his belief that military intervention is a battle between 'good and evil', with Russia representing the forces of good.

This uncompromising stance, rooted in his low conceptual complexity, led to a rigid decision-making process and limited consideration of alternative perspectives. Putin's black-and-white thinking and categorical approach to the Ukrainian conflict meant that he was less inclined to explore diplomatic solutions or engage in nuanced discussions about the complexities of the situation. Instead, he adhered to his preconceived notions and fundamental principles, viewing the conflict through a narrow lens that reinforced his binary worldview.

By failing to fully consider alternative perspectives or engage in comprehensive analysis, Putin's decision-making process became constrained and inflexible. This limited his ability to adapt to changing circumstances or explore potential diplomatic resolutions that could have mitigated the escalation of the conflict. His adherence to a rigid framework based on simplistic categorisations prevented him from fully grasping the intricacies of the situation and finding a more nuanced and peaceful approach.

Furthermore, Putin's unwillingness to consider alternative perspectives also contributed to a lack of internal domestic debate and limited input from advisors who may have offered different viewpoints. This echo chamber effect further reinforced his dual-framed view and hindered the exploration of more comprehensive and inclusive decision-making processes.

As a result of his low conceptual complexity and the limitations it imposed on his decision-making, Putin pursued a course of action that disregarded the complexities of the situation and the potential for diplomatic solutions. The invasion of Ukraine underscored Putin's constrained worldview, framing the conflict as a dichotomy between good and evil, and framing it as a standoff between the West and Russia. This limited conceptual complexity shaped his preference for an assertive foreign policy stance rather than seeking softer resolutions to the conflict. This uncompromising approach had extensive ramifications, exacerbating tensions not only between Russia and Ukraine but also within the broader international community. Consequently, it escalated hostilities in the region, amplifying the repercussions for both the immediate conflict and global international relations.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the leadership trait analysis (LTA) methodology has the potential to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of foreign policy decision-making by analysing the stable personality traits of leaders. The methodology focuses on determining key leadership traits as a basis for understanding and predicting the political behaviour of specific leaders. This article aimed to demonstrate how political personality can be studied through remote measurement, utilising leadership trait analysis assisted by ProfilerPlus software.

First, the empirical data obtained through both quantitative content analysis and qualitative analysis of Vladimir Putin in this study demonstrates its effectiveness in understanding personological determinants in the foreign-policy behaviour of high-level leaders. The multimethod research approach has proven to be effective in explaining the importance of leadership influence in the process and outcomes of foreign policy decision-making. By complementing one method with another, more accurate results can be obtained. This highlights the potential for future empirical studies that link leadership characteristics to the formulation and execution of foreign policy, utilising the LTA framework as a methodological advancement in political psychology—specifically, high-level decision-making.

Second, this article emphasises a broader point that goes beyond discussions of Putin as a leader and his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. The goal of the multi-methodological framework is to demonstrate the utility of considering a leader's conceptual complexity when seeking to understand political behaviour.

The methodology employed in narrowing down Putin's leadership profile effectively explains that a different individual, faced with the same circumstances as Putin, could have made different choices regarding the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This research illustrates that remote personality-in-politics research focusing on high-level decision-makers in politics has the potential to explain critical cases. The key finding is that personal traits can drive political decisions. It is important to note that a study of Putin's traits cannot explain all aspects of Russian foreign policy, and not all circumstances are susceptible to the influence of individuals in politics. However, the significance of such studies on individuals in politics resides in their ability to construct an understanding of critical events, such as the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, in a context-specific and empirical manner, offering an alternative perspective on events and outcomes.

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APPENDIX

List of Interviews

1.	February 20, 2020	TASS News Agency
2.	February 21, 2020	TASS News Agency
3.	February 25, 2020	TASS News Agency
4.	March 4, 2020	TASS News Agency
5.	March 8, 2020	TASS News Agency
6.	March 9, 2020	TASS News Agency
7.	March 17, 2020	TASS News Agency
8.	August 27, 2020	Rossya TV channel
9.	October 7, 2020	Rossya TV channel
10.	June 14, 2021	NBC
11.	July 13, 2021	Interview in Kremlin
12.	October 14, 2021	CNBC
13.	November 13, 2021	Rossya TV channel
14.	October 22, 2021	Valdai 18th
15.	November 23, 2021	Annual press conference

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