When the Soviet Union collapsed, competition between the United States and Russia also ended, temporarily. Under the guidance of President Boris Yeltsin, the new leadership in Russia aspired to consolidate democracy and capitalism at home and championed integration into the liberal international order. Although the results of both agendas were mixed throughout the 1990s, ideological competition played little to no role in shaping Russia’s relations with “the West,” in general, and the United States, in particular.

Times have changed under President Vladimir Putin. Gradually over the last two decades and increasingly since 2014, when Putin annexed Crimea and intervened in eastern Ukraine, Russia and the United States, as well as Russia and the West, have clashed. Many politicians and analysts now compare

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1. “The West” appears in quotation marks because in the 1990s, this group of states was often treated as a monolithic actor, rooted in democracy, capitalism, and multilateral institutions. Today, “the West” does not have these same unifying properties. On this earlier conception of the liberal West, see Michael Mandelbaum, The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002); and Timothy Garton Ash, Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West (New York: Random House, 2004). Some Russian thinkers also have conceptualized “the West” as a unified actor, but with a negative connotation, in opposition to Russia. For reviews of this thinking, see Charles Clover, Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016); Marlene Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Martin Malia, Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999).
the current level of confrontation to the Cold War. At the Munich Security Conference in 2016, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev referenced the Cuban missile crisis as a similar moment in bilateral tensions: “Speaking bluntly, we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war. . . . I am sometimes confused: is this 2016 or 1962?” Echoing Medvedev, Ernest Moniz and Sam Nunn wrote, “Not since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis has the risk of a U.S.-Russian confrontation been as high as it is today.” In April 2018, President Donald Trump declared on Twitter: “Our relationship with Russia is worse now than it has ever been, and that includes the Cold War.”

What happened? How did the United States and Russia move from cooperative ties, strategic partnerships, shared domestic goals, and international norms a few decades ago to a new era of conflict in U.S.-Russian relations and Russia’s relationship with the West more generally?

One explanation—perhaps most widely held—is that cooperation was an interregnum driven by Russian weakness. After Russia’s recovery from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, normal great power competition has returned. The Soviet Union annexed territory, intervened militarily to prop up regimes, and even tried to influence elections in Western democracies. Upon regaining these capabilities, a rising Russia is “destined” to clash with the incumbent global superpower, just as China is currently doing as well. Russia’s
negative reaction to U.S. unipolarity was inevitable, determined by the structure of the international system. For thousands of years, great powers have risen, fallen, and clashed. There is nothing new or peculiar about current clashes between Russia and the United States or between Russia and the West more generally, according to this perspective.

A second explanation of Russia’s increasing confrontation with the West focuses on historical and cultural continuities in Russian international behavior. Whether Committee for State Security (KGB) agents, democrats, Communist Party general secretaries, or tsars sit in the Kremlin, Russian international conduct has remained largely consistent. Well before the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, Russian tsars annexed territory, intervened militarily to assist allies, and meddled in the domestic affairs of foes. Russia, today, is acting like Russia has always acted, or so this argument contends. The Gorbachev and Yeltsin years were an aberration. Russia is back on its historical equilibrium path.

Both of these explanations allow no role for the agency of individual leaders and their ideas in the analysis. This article advances an alternative explanation that focuses on individuals, ideas, and domestic institutions as important factors shaping Russian international behavior. Russia was not destined to return to a confrontational relationship with the United States or the West because of the balance of power in the international system or historical and cultural determinants. Rather, President Putin chose this path. Despite consciously invoking realist rhetoric and historic traditions to justify his international behavior, Putin has demonstrated agency in the making of Russian...
foreign policy. Individuals matter.10 A different Russian leader could have chosen a different path.11

Second, and closely related, ideas matter. If all leaders acted rationally and in the same way, it would be impossible to identify the unique causal impact of individual leaders in shaping foreign policy.12 In the case of Russia, if Putin had defined his foreign policy agenda always through a realist lens, his individual impact on Russian foreign policy would be difficult to distinguish from realist theory explanations. Putin’s behavior, however, has not always correlated with realist predictions. A second argument advanced in this article is that leaders have a menu of ideas from which to choose in seeking to explain the world and then act in it. Realist ideas offer one, but not the only, option. International factors, domestic institutions, and bureaucratic politics shape, but do not determine, individual decisions and actions. Different choices made by individuals regarding analytical frameworks produce variation in foreign policy outcomes even when other factors—the international balance of power, historical legacies, or regime type—are held constant. Putin selected a unique trajectory for Russian foreign policy because of a set of particular ideas that he developed about the nature of Russia, the United States, and international relations more broadly.13 He embraced and propagated illiberal, conservative na-


11. On operational code analysis—one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks for examining how the characteristics of a political actor affect his or her state’s foreign policy—see Nathan Constantin Leites, The Operational Code of the Politburo (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1951).

12. The assumption of rationality at the individual level of analysis has helped produce many powerful theories concerning the microfoundations of many political and economic phenomena. The much more modest argument advanced in this article is that not all interesting outcomes can be explained using this analytic framework.

13. On the causal impact of ideological distance on threat perceptions between leaders of great
tionalism to advance his definition of national interests. Putin also developed a particular theory about U.S. foreign policy, which he defines as hostile to Russian national interests and antithetical to Russian orthodox values. Some analysts have labeled this set of ideas “Putinism,” while others see Putin as part of a broader transnational ideological movement in support of autocracy. In either instance, Putin’s ideas play a causal role in the conduct of Russian foreign policy. Had Putin embraced a different theory of international politics or a different ideological framework—realism, liberalism, or even communism—Russia under his leadership would have behaved differently on the global stage. Regarding the three cases examined in this article, Putin’s decisions to intervene in Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, and the United States in 2016 reflect the triumph of his illiberal ideas over other analytic frameworks (i.e., realism or liberalism) in shaping Russian foreign policy. Different from a powerful state intervening in other states solely to maximize power, Putinism divides the world along ideological lines. These ideas both encourage certain interventions, including the cases discussed in this article, and constrain intervention in support of perceived liberal projects, including Libya in 2011 and Syria in 2012, that might have produced gains in Russian power and prestige.
Third, institutions matter. The Russian system of government became increasingly autocratic during Putin’s two decades of rule, giving Putin more autonomy and more influence over Russian foreign policy. A more democratic system would have placed greater constraints on Putin’s individual foreign policy decisions.18

Of course, power matters, too.19 Without the capabilities to annex territory, conduct air strikes, or steal digital property, Putin could not have intervened in Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, or the United States in 2016. A narrow focus on Russian power or the global balance of power, however, cannot fully explain these interventions. As Elizabeth Saunders argues, “Theories relying on relatively stable or slow-changing factors such as the structure of the international system or regime type cannot fully account for changes in a state’s intervention choice over time. Moving the level of analysis to individual leaders can help to address this variation.”20 New Russian capabilities did not make these Russian interventions inevitable. Other options were available.21 A different Russian leader, with different ideas, ruling in a different political system could have chosen to use Russian power in a different way.22 Only by adding domestic-level and individual-level variables—leaders, ideas, and institutions—can a comprehensive explanation of Russian foreign policy be developed.

The argument advanced in this article is not that Putin and his illiberal ideas avoided. If the United States would have supported such an outcome, Russia would have kept access to its port, and the world would have celebrated Russian leadership.

18. New research blurring the lines between democracies and autocracies as constraining institutional arrangements on foreign policy makes this counterfactual claim less compelling, but as argued in the case studies below, still important. See a review of this literature by Susan D. Hyde and Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space,” International Organization, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 363–395, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000365.


22. Putin was a necessary condition for these interventions. As James Mahoney explains, a “necessary condition” conceptualization captures the intuition that a cause is something that, when counterfactually removed while holding all else constant, yields a different outcome. See Mahoney, “Process Tracing and Historical Explanation,” Security Studies, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2015), p. 203, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1036610.
always shape Russian foreign policy behavior on every issue in ways inconsistent with realist and liberal theories or ideologies. Nevertheless, interventions in the domestic affairs of other countries offer a good test of this argument, given that such actions are rare and often costly.23 This argument parallels many accounts of U.S. foreign policy in which realism explains some, but not all, international behavior.24 Realist scholars have invoked the causal impact of liberal ideas—“the hell of good intentions” or “liberal dreams”—to explain U.S. foreign policy departures from realist predictions, especially regarding interventions in other states.25 This article makes the same theoretical move, tracing the impact of Putin’s illiberal ideas to understand specific Russian foreign policy actions that depart from realist predictions.

Explaining scientifically the causal relationship between individuals, ideas, and institutions, on the one hand, and Russian foreign policy, on the other, is challenging. To ignore the domestic determinants of contemporary Russian behavior in the world, however, is to oversimplify and distort the drivers of current tensions in U.S.-Russian relations: a danger for theorists and policymakers alike.

To develop this argument, this article proceeds in five parts. The first section examines in greater detail the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy. The second section explains the causal impact of Putin and his ideas on the decision to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine in 2014; the third sec-


tion does the same to explain Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015; and the fourth section repeats the exercise to explain its intervention in the U.S. presidential election in 2016. The fifth section concludes with a reevaluation of the explanatory power as well as limits of focusing on the role of individuals, ideas, and institutions for explaining Russian foreign policy today, and the behavior of states in the international system more generally.

**Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy**

Any explanation of a country’s foreign policy must begin with an assessment of that state’s power and the balance of power between states in the international system. Measuring capabilities, however, is not enough. To develop a complete explanation of state behavior in the international system requires adding to the analysis an assessment of the state’s leader, their ideas, and regime type. After acknowledging the importance of power and the balance of power between states, this section explains why leaders, their ideas, and regime type must be added to the analysis to develop a complete account of Russian foreign policy today.

**Power Matters: Russia as a Great Power**

No theory seeking to explain state behavior in the international system is complete without some accounting of the power capabilities of individual states and the balance of power between them. Not all conflict or cooperation is shaped by great powers. Weak or failed states can lead to civil wars, which can then attract external intervention from great powers, and occasionally generate impactful outcomes for the entire system, including, for example, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, great powers play a more consequential role in international politics given their capacity to substantially influence events.

Although neither the greatest power nor the most prominent rising power, Russia is nonetheless a major actor in international politics today. Russia possesses military, economic, cyber, and ideational power to influence outcomes beyond its borders—capabilities that most other states lack. Although it has yet to (and perhaps never will) attain the superpower status of the Soviet Union, those who describe Russia today as a weak or declining power have not reviewed recent metrics.26

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Regarding military power, Russia has substantially greater capabilities in 2020 compared to 1992 with its modernizing nuclear arsenal, new missile defense and space capabilities, and a vastly expanded conventional military budget.\(^{27}\) Russian conventional military power in the European theatre is particularly threatening. As one of two nuclear superpowers, Russia far outpaces China, France, and the United Kingdom. Russian military doctrine also has modernized.\(^{28}\) During the last two decades, its intelligence and cyber capabilities have grown immensely, positioning Russia as one of the world’s top three countries in these domains.\(^{29}\) Despite trailing well behind the United States and China, Russia is currently the world’s eleventh largest economy, and ranks sixth if using purchasing power party (PPP) numbers.\(^{30}\) The state’s role in the economy has grown considerably over the last two decades, giving Putin greater control over these resources compared to his Western counterparts.\(^{31}\) Despite slow diversification and high dependence on energy exports, the Russian economy is less dependent on external actors today than it was during the 1990s. These economic capabilities and conditions are sufficient to enable the pursuit of ambitious foreign policy objectives.\(^{32}\) Current Russian resources for generating soft power are a shadow of the Soviet Union’s ideological appeal. Nevertheless, Russia has reemerged as an influential ideational actor. Putin’s orthodox illiberalism appeals to millions around the world, including heads of states, political parties, religious groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals. The Kremlin has devoted extensive resources to improving access to government-owned or government-friendly television networks, radio, and media in the Russian-
speaking world, particularly in countries that gained independence after the Soviet Union’s collapse. With an annual budget of more than $300 million, RT claims to be the most-watched news channel on YouTube. In 2014, Putin merged the radio broadcasting service Voice of Russia and the news agency Ria Novosti to create Sputnik International, a multimedia platform to provide “alternative news” to Western sources. The Russian state and its proxies have created numerous fake personages and organizations, including most famously the Internet Research Agency (IRA). The Kremlin also has created numerous parastatal organizations such as Russia Houses, the Foundation for National Values Protection, the International Agency for Sovereign Development, and the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation, as well as cultivated direct contacts with NGOs, religious groups, and political parties around the world through scholarships, conferences, and sometimes direct financial assistance. Russian consultants have studied U.S. democracy promotion strategies and organizations to mimic them in the promotion of iliberal, conservative values. In addition, Putin has courted like-minded leaders, including Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Geert Wilders in the

Netherlands. Finally, Putin has employed coercive instruments to support ideological allies, including “little green men” (masked soldiers wearing unmarked green army uniforms in Ukraine whom Putin initially denied were Russian soldiers), hybrid warfare, and more conventional military intervention.

Although far behind the United States and China on most measures, Russia currently demonstrates impressive power capabilities, providing Putin with the means to influence both international outcomes and domestic politics in other countries. This growing level of power has enabled Putin to reach beyond state survival or basic security objectives and to pursue ideological goals. Putin controls fewer power capabilities than Chinese President Xi Jinping, but has shown a willingness to deploy these resources to intervene in the domestic affairs of other countries in ways that Xi has not, including territorial annexation, military intervention to prop up an autocratic ally, and digital violation of U.S. sovereignty to influence the 2016 presidential election.

**INDIVIDUALS AND IDEAS MATTER: PUTIN AND PUTINISM**

Assessing power capabilities is a necessary but insufficient condition for explaining state behavior. Because power and the balance of power change slowly, tracing a direct causal impact between changes in power and changes in state behavior is difficult. Moreover, just because Russia has the capability to influence outcomes in other countries does not mean that it will predictably do so. Identifying the unique intentions of state leaders must be added to the analysis. Individuals and their ideas can play an independent, autonomous role in determining the foreign policy of states. In Russia over the last several years, Putin and his ideas have played such a role.

If all leaders behaved identically in response to structural constraints, the

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40. Saunders, “Transformative Choices,” p. 120.
41. Before Putin, President Boris Yeltsin had the power capabilities to annex Crimea, but did not. Putin today has the power to intervene in Moldova or Belarus, but has not chosen to. Assessments of power capabilities alone, therefore, do not offer an explanation or prediction about when Russia does or does not intervene.
pursuit to understand their unique role in shaping state behavior would be misplaced.43 Leaders facing the same challenges and empowered by the same capabilities act, however, in different ways. To explain recent Russian interventions in other countries, leaders and their ideas must be added to the analysis.44 A singular focus on power and the distribution of power cannot explain Russian interventions in Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, or the United States in 2016. Instead, one leader and one set of ideas, Putin and Putinism, must be added to the equation. Putinism has guided Russian foreign policy along a unique path when more than one strategy was available.45

Determining the causal influence of leaders and their ideas on state behavior in the world is difficult; quantifiable data are scarce, and firsthand accounts of meetings at Putin’s dacha or the White House Situation Room are few. Careful process-tracing and counterfactual reasoning are often the only methods available.46 A focus on leaders, however, does allow for a “minimal rewrite” of counterfactual reasoning,47 as imagining a different leader minimizes the number of historical factors that must be changed to construct a compelling counterfactual.

The best research design for measuring the role of leaders and their ideas is to compare case studies with different outcomes when power and regime type are held constant.48 With frequent changes in leadership, democracies offer nu-

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43. There are compelling arguments as to why leaders might behave in similar ways, based on constraints, incentives, socialization, or the possibility that “all people who might come to power, at least in a particular country at a particular time, have roughly the same values and beliefs.” See Robert Jervis, “Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?” Security Studies, Vol. 22, No. 2 (May 2013), p. 155, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.786909. This article makes a more contingent claim about the variable impact of leaders and their ideas.

44. This article does not focus on other domestic factors that might influence Russian foreign policy outcomes, such as bureaucratic politics, interest groups, or public opinion. The assumption is that these variables matter less in today’s Russia than in other political systems, but this major assumption should be interrogated by future research. See Jessica L.P. Weeks, “Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 106, No. 2 (May 2012), pp. 326–347, doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000111; and Alexander Dalin, “Soviet Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics: A Framework for Analysis,” Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1969), pp. 250–265, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24356627.


merous examples of identifiable shifts in foreign policy. Different autocratic leaders— with power and regime type remaining constant—also have produced distinct foreign policy variations. The change from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping sparked a major transformation in China’s international behavior, as did the transitions from Joseph Stalin to Nikita Khrushchev and from Leonid Brezhnev to Mikhail Gorbachev for the Soviet Union. More recently, the transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping has produced identifiable changes in Chinese foreign policy. In the Libya/Syria case discussed in this article, the change in Russian policy under Medvedev versus Putin is clear. For the other two interventions discussed in this article, counterfactual analysis must be deployed.

Vladimir Putin is an unlikely ideologue; he did not spend his youth poring over philosophy books or debating revolutionary ideas. As a KGB officer, he aspired to preserve, not destroy, the status quo and keep elites in power, not overthrow them. In the first decades of his career, he was dedicated to defending communism, not conservative values. As communism began to fade, Putin exhibited attributes of an opportunist, not a populist nationalist. He could have joined Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, a nationalist party that achieved shocking electoral success in 1993. Or he could have aligned with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, whose presidential candidate in 1996 almost won. Instead, Putin joined the new ruling elite, first as a deputy mayor in St. Petersburg (even before the Soviet Union collapsed) for one of Russia’s most charismatic liberal reformers,
Anatoly Sobchak, and later as a mid-level Kremlin official working for anti-communist, pro-Western President Boris Yeltsin.54

Putin became president almost accidentally. When Yeltsin anointed him as his successor and voters ratified Yeltsin’s choice in 2000, few could articulate Putin’s ideas about the polity, the economy, or the world.55 Putin himself struggled.56 Yeltsin did not select Putin to pivot Russia away from market economics and closer relations with the West. Instead, Yeltsin and his entourage picked Putin as a successor to maintain continuity with existing political and economic practices, including the protection of property rights of those who had become wealthy during the Yeltsin era. Similarly, Russian citizens at the time were not yearning for a return to autocracy or divergence from the West.57 With time, however, Putin defined (or revealed) more clearly his philosophy about politics, economics, and international relations—a philosophy that represented an ideological departure from the previous leader and regime.

One of Putin’s core ideas emerged right away—a clear commitment to weakening checks on executive power. Putin seized control of national television networks and enacted policies to weaken regional leaders, political parties, NGOs, and independent businesses, including the cancellation of direct elections for governors in 2004.58 Since 2000 and especially after 2003, Russian elections have become less competitive and oftentimes marred by falsification. After winning a third term in 2012, Putin made demonstrations harder to organize, arrested journalists and opposition leaders, and pushed most independent media off the airwaves.59 By criminalizing the receipt of for-

54. On Yeltsin’s ideological orientation, see Michael McFaul, Russia’s Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).
eign funds, the Kremlin forced the United States Agency for International Development and numerous other foreign organizations to terminate their operations in Russia.\textsuperscript{60} Putin signed laws punishing the distribution of information that “exhibits blatant disrespect for the society, government, official government symbols, constitution or governmental bodies”\textsuperscript{61} and empowering prosecutors to block these sources prior to judicial review.\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, Putin’s “sovereign internet” law empowers the Kremlin to conduct online censorship.\textsuperscript{62}

To sustain this level of repression, Putin has invested heavily in the coercive elements of the state, while expanding the role of intelligence officers throughout the government and the economy.\textsuperscript{63} Analysts and academics quibble over the degree of Putin’s dictatorship, but most agree that Russia is an autocracy.\textsuperscript{64} This kind of political system has helped strengthen Putin’s hand in Russian foreign policy.

Putin’s views on economics changed more gradually. In December 2000, Putin sounded pro-market: “The state should ensure a maximum degree of economic freedom for individuals and legal entities.”\textsuperscript{65} A year into his presidency, Putin proclaimed, “We are building an economic system that is competitive. . . . Above all, we must protect property rights.”\textsuperscript{66} Initially, these

\textsuperscript{60} Vladimir Fedorenko, “V stop-list NKO voshli Fond Sorosa i Vsemirnyy congress ukrainsev” [Soros Fund and Ukrainian World Congress are in the NGO stop-list], \textit{Ria Novosti} [Ria News], July 7, 2015, https://ria.ru/society/20150707/1118850670.html.


rhetorical pledges were backed with liberal reforms, including a flat income tax of 13 percent and a reduced corporate tax. Putin also appointed senior economic advisers committed to tight fiscal and monetary policies. Over time, however, Putin grew more suspicious of private economic actors, both foreign and domestic. He redistributed property rights away from the 1990s-era “oligarchs” and placed KGB loyalists and his St. Petersburg friends in the leadership of major state-owned enterprises. Putin reduced the size of the private sector, expanded the role of the state, and further weakened the rule of law. Increased state ownership, a redistribution of property rights guided by political motivation, and a system of patronage have resulted in economic stagnation. As an alibi for Russia’s economic woes, Putin increasingly has blamed ideological enemies, at home and abroad.

Regarding foreign policy, as a former KGB officer, Putin unsurprisingly viewed the United States with suspicion, but was receptive initially to cooperation. As acting president, he even suggested Russia might join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the first years of his presidency, Putin also supported close cooperation with the European Union (EU). After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States, Putin reached out to President George W. Bush, offering solidarity and assistance against a common enemy.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq created a new rift with the United States. More profoundly, “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine marked a more significant turning point in Putin’s thinking about the United States, as the Russian leader blamed the Bush administration for fostering regime change in both countries. Championing sovereignty became a central tenant of

Putinism. At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin lamented, “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. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?”73 By 2014, Putin’s anti-American language was even more strident: “A unilateral diktat and imposing one’s own models produces the opposite result. Instead of settling conflicts it leads to their escalation, instead of sovereign and stable states we see the growing spread of chaos, and instead of democracy there is support for . . . open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.”74 According to Putin’s theory of American foreign policy, U.S. presidents frequently violate national sovereignty and undermine regimes that they dislike, be it the Soviet Union in 1991, Serbia in 2000, Iraq in 2003, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and again in 2013–14, the Middle East in 2011, or Russia in 2011–12.75

Putin has sought to mobilize other heads of state and populist movements in an effort to impede this alleged American imperialism.76 He now seeks to liberate Europeans from the U.S.-controlled NATO, and to weaken the EU.77 Under the guise of championing sovereignty, Putin has defended autocracy abroad and rejected Western democracy promotion.

A related component of Putin’s worldview that developed over time is illiberal conservativism. Putin has sought to support foreign actors who share not only his notion of sovereignty, but also his orthodox, illiberal values.78

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76. In the framework of Haas, ideological distance grew between Putin and Western leaders over time, which in turn fueled Putin’s perception of threats from the West. See Haas, The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989, pp. 211–212.


78. Vladimir Putin, “Gathering in Honor of the 10th Anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church
In 2014, he commented, “So-called conservative values are acquiring a new significance . . . Viktor Orban in Hungary, the success of the conservative forces in the latest election there, the success of Marine Le Pen . . . the growth of such trends in other countries is obvious . . . [and] associated with the desire to strengthen national sovereignty.”79 For Putin, traditional values are central to Russian identity: “Without the values embedded in Christianity people will inevitably lose their human dignity,” and therefore, “we consider it natural and right to defend these values.”80 Increasingly unapologetic in his militancy, Putin has expressed a particular disdain for homosexuality, and he has linked what he calls “deviant” sexual behavior directly to political decay.81

Early in his presidency, Putin focused on restoring, in his view, sovereignty and conservative values within Russia. His lieutenants called it a campaign of “sovereign democracy” against domestic opposition leaders, NGOs, private-sector critics, and grassroots movements supported by foreigners. More recently, in the last decade, Putin has sought to export his ideas. Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov remarked that Putinism is “an ideology of the future” with “significant export potential; there is already demand on it and on some of its components; its experience is already being examined and adopted; both people in power and opposition groups in many countries imitate it.”82

Around the world, not just in Russia, Putin has declared, “The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population.”83 Putin conceptualizes a competition between liberalism and his brand of conservative values—a contest that takes place both between states and within them.84 Despite a rhetorical commitment to sover-
Putin promotes his ideas inside targeted countries and has won over believers even within democratic countries allied to the United States. Marine Le Pen’s view is illustrative of many now: “The model that is defended by Vladimir Putin is radically different to that of Mr. Obama. . . . The model of that is defended by Vladimir Putin, which is one of reasoned protectionism, looking after the interests of his own country, defending his identity, is one that I like.” In almost every European country, as well as the United States, there exists a political movement that leans more toward illiberal Putinism than toward Western liberalism.

The scope of Putin’s investment in propagating his ideas underscores the ideological nature of his foreign policy. You do not devote resources to propaganda instruments unless you are seeking to propagate ideas. Putin’s efforts to spread conservative, autocratic ideas, his focus on cultivating ideological allies within states, and most dramatically, his willingness to intervene in sovereign states demonstrate his commitment to his illiberal ideas. When deciding to intervene in Ukraine, Syria, and the United States, Putin was not motivated solely by state survival or expanding power. Nor did his interventions produce outcomes that necessarily advanced material security or economic interests. Incomplete information about the costs and benefits of these actions also cannot be blamed; Putin knew the potential costs and proceeded anyway. His ideologically motivated policies produced significant costs to the Russian state that could have been avoided by a different Russian leader motivated by different ideas.


87. Realism is both a theory and an ideology. In arguing that realism is a prescriptive theory that leaders should follow to be successful, however, realist scholars are undermining one of the major hypotheses about realism as a theory—that leaders and their ideas or anything within the black box of the unitary state do not matter. On offensive realism not just an explanatory theory, but also a prescriptive theory for how a state ought to behave, see John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p. 11.
RUSSIAN AUTOCRACY AS AN ENABLER OF PUTIN AND PUTINISM

A rich academic literature has identified a causal role for regime type in determining the behavior of states in the international system. The Soviet/Russia case provides ample evidence that change in regime type has contributed to changes in foreign policy. For most of the twentieth century, a communist party ruled the Soviet Union as a stable form of dictatorship. During this period, notwithstanding a brief interregnum from 1941 to 1945, the Soviet state maintained an antagonistic relationship with the world’s most powerful democracy. While power mattered, differences in regime type were a defining component of this Cold War competition.

Change in regime type—first under Gorbachev and then during Yeltsin’s presidency—helped change Moscow’s foreign policy. As the Soviet Union and then an independent Russia became increasingly democratic, Kremlin leaders and their domestic allies sought greater cooperation with democratic countries and deeper integration into the liberal world order. In response, democratic countries changed their policies from containment to engagement with Moscow. At the peak of this cooperative era, President Bill Clinton


89. On different forms of autocracy and their durability, see Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).


echoed the democratic peace theory in believing that a democratic Russia would make conflict between Russia and the West obsolete. Russian weakness created the permissive conditions for some U.S.-led actions in the 1990s—NATO expansion or the bombing of Serbia—that most likely would not have been undertaken in the presence of a powerful Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the degree and speed of the West’s embrace of a democratizing Soviet Union and then Russia during this period cannot be explained solely by changes in the balance of power.

The return to Russian autocracy correlates closely with escalating tensions between Russia and the West. Because Russian autocracy deepened in parallel with Putin’s rise and his KGB comrades, it is difficult to untangle the independent casual role of individuals versus political institutions. During this time period, Russia’s political institutions should not be understood as a completely independent factor, but rather as outcomes of Putin and his ideas as well. History, culture, interest groups, or societal preferences did not compel Russia to become an autocracy in the twenty-first century; Putin and Putinism did.

The more consolidated Russian autocratic institutions became, the more influence Putin wielded individually on foreign policy. Early in his presidency, Putin was more constrained. For instance, major private Russian companies with international interests exercised more influence on Russian foreign policy in the early 2000s than they do today. By the time Putin chose to take the risk-


94. On the relationship between power and ideas during this period, including on NATO expansion and the Serbian war, see Goldgeier and McFaul, Power and Purpose.


96. One might even conceptualize Putin, Putinism, and Russian autocracy as simply three expressions of a single variable—Putin’s leadership.

iest of decisions regarding interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and the United States, the Russian system had become much more autocratic. Putin did not act alone; although difficult to trace, domestic politics, interest group lobbying, and bureaucratic competition occur in autocracies, too. By the time of the decision to invade Ukraine, those closest to the Russian president—the siloviki or hard-liners primarily from the intelligence services—had been empowered, while more liberal individuals and interest groups were marginalized.98 Time in office also mattered; Putin listened less to advisors in 2014 than in 2000.

To summarize, the arguments advanced in this article about the influence of Putin and Putinism on Russian international behavior suggest several ex ante predictions about Russian reaction to international events that contrast with structural theories of international relations or other domestic-level explanations. First, Putin and his ideas have an independent causal impact on the conduct of Russian foreign policy. His foreign policy is determined not by the global balance of power, Russian historical legacies, or bureaucratic politics. Evidence that Putin is behaving like (1) any leader of any great power, (2) Russian rulers in the past, or (3) a constrained agent of the KGB or oligarchs would undermine the argument advanced in this article. Second, Putin and Putinism compel Russia to look for allies and enemies not just among states, as realist theories contend, but within them. Who rules other states, what ideas these leaders embrace, and what political institutions shape their behavior matter for advocates of Putinism. Evidence showing Russian indifference to the internal organization of states or the ideological orientation of their leaders would weaken the theoretical claims of this article. Third, a Russia ruled by Putin and Putinism will embrace ideological leaders and movements committed to illiberal values at home and abroad. Examples of Russian foreign policy that promote liberal democracy or strengthen liberal institutionalism would undermine the analytic claims advanced in this article. Fourth, because the United States remains the most powerful liberal state in the international system, a theory assigning a causal role to Putin and Putinism predicts tension between these two countries. This theory also suggests how U.S.-Russian relations could improve in the future—a change in leaders in either country with ideological views more consistent with the other leader; that is, a Russian leader more committed to liberalism and democracy, or a U.S. leader who em-

braces illiberal, orthodox, anti-multilateral values. Cooperation between the United States and Russia without a change in leadership or regime type in Russia also would undermine the theoretical claims advanced in this article.

To assess how Putin and his ideas, enabled by autocracy, have influenced Russian foreign policy, this article examines three recent case studies of Russian intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states: Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, and the United States in 2016.

**Putin’s Decision to Intervene in Ukraine in 2014**

The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine represented a serious setback for Putin’s foreign policy goals. During the 2004 presidential election in Ukraine, Putin invested heavily in his preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovych. After a falsified vote sparked mass mobilization and a new election that the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko won, Ukraine pivoted toward greater democratic governance and closer relations the West. Because Putin believes that Ukrainians and Russians are “fundamentally a single people,” Slavs practicing democracy and looking West rather than adhering to Putin’s system of government and looking East was unacceptable. Although Russian organizations and media devoted substantial resources to influencing Ukrainian voters, Putin blamed the West and the United States for meddling in Ukrainian internal affairs.

Rather than basing his policies on an assessment of Ukrainian state power or the balance of power between Russia and Ukraine, Putin took a keen interest in Ukrainian domestic politics and institutions. He redoubled support for Yanukovych as a presidential candidate in 2010 and this time succeeded. Initially, President Yanukovych pivoted toward Russia; Ukraine’s power

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99. The argument advanced in this article is that individuals, ideas, and institutions influence the behavior of all states, not just Russia. Space constraints, however, do not permit an analysis of how these factors may have influenced U.S. policy toward Russia in the cases discussed. This article traces how Putin and his ideas shaped his perceptions of U.S. actions, but does not evaluate whether these perceptions were accurate or normatively just.


and regime type remained relatively constant, but this change in leadership produced a dramatic shift in Ukrainian foreign policy. Discussions of NATO membership were replaced by negotiations over accession to Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a top Putin priority. Ukraine’s membership into this multilateral organization was central for its success because Russian exporters and investors wanted improved access to tens of millions of Ukrainian consumers.

Later in his term, Yanukovych began to flirt with the idea of closer ties to the EU, and started negotiations over an Association Agreement with Brussels in parallel to deliberations over EEU membership with Moscow. Putin rejected the notion that Ukraine could join both organizations. One of his economic advisers bluntly threatened, “Ukrainian authorities make a huge mistake if they think that the Russian reaction will become neutral in a few years from now.” To sweeten the deal for joining his club, Putin offered Ukraine an additional $15 billion. Yanukovych acquiesced. Despite plans for a signing ceremony, Yanukovych ultimately postponed initialing the EU Association Agreement. For a moment, it appeared that Putin had won. At the time, Russian officials most certainly thought so.

In 2013, Ukraine was a democracy, however weak and fragmented. This regime type allowed Ukrainian citizens to express an alternative point of view to Yanukovych’s foreign policy, and express they did in the form of giant crowds in Kyiv’s main square. After months of confrontation and negotiation between the government and the protestors, the standoff turned violent. European diplomats tried to negotiate a compromise agreement and appeared to have achieved success on February 21, 2014. Hours later, however, Yanukovych fled Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament impeached their de-

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parted president, and in May 2014, Ukrainians elected a new pro-Western president, Petro Poroshenko.

Ukrainian domestic politics triggered Putin’s decision to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine. Putin labeled the fall of the Yanukovych regime a “coup d’état . . . something that we cannot accept. Such a growth of extreme nationalism is inadmissible.”110 Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity could have been construed as a threat to Russian national security interests.111 Some Russians speculated that Poroshenko and his allies might abrogate the extended lease for Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol, home to its Black Sea Fleet.112 Kremlin-controlled media outlets worried about state-sponsored violence against ethnic Russians in Ukraine.113 Putin expressed fear that Ukrainian revolutionaries, if successful, would push Ukraine to join NATO.114 These potential security threats, however, were hypothetical; none occurred before Putin invaded Ukraine.

Moreover, it is unclear that annexation and military intervention was the most efficient or effective strategy at the time for defending Russian national security interests regarding Ukraine. In response to the Orange Revolution in 2004, Russia did not invade Ukraine or annex Ukrainian territory, despite having the capabilities to do.115 That decision not to invade produced tangible positive results for Moscow. Russia maintained its naval base in Crimea in accordance with the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet, which was extended with the Kharkiv Pact until 2042. Ukraine did not join NATO. Ethnic Russians were not slaughtered. Only a few years after the alleged democratic breakthrough in 2004, the new Ukrainian regime failed to consolidate liberal democracy. Russian influence grew in Ukraine, and six

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114. “Putin ne mog pozvolit’ Krymu stat’ chast’yu NATO” [Putin could not allow for Crimea to become part of Ukraine], July 4, 2014.

115. In other words, we have a real world “experiment” to compare the impact on Russian national interests of nonintervention versus intervention.
years later, Ukrainians voted into office a pro-Russian president. In 2014,Putin could have pursued a similar strategy with possibly similar results.

This time, however, Putin chose a different strategy: to strike back at the alleged Nazi-friendly coup plotters, in his view supported by the United States. Putin first ordered Russian troops to seize Crimea. When that military operation unfolded relatively peacefully and easily, he intervened in eastern Ukraine, supplying weapons, financial assistance, and soldiers to secessionist movements in the Donbass. He even hinted that Russia might try to seize Novorossiya, a large chunk of Ukrainian territory stretching all the way to Odessa. Today, Russia still occupies Crimea, while a military stalemate in eastern Ukraine endures at a terrible cost: roughly 14,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly two million people.

In deciding to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine, Putin was motivated by a particular set of ideological beliefs distinct from realpolitik calculations. He perceived the new government in Kyiv as an ideological foe. Before Yanukovych fled, Putin never articulated a rationale for why Crimea should belong to Russia. On the contrary, in 2008, Putin stated: “Crimea is not a disputed territory. . . . Russia has long recognized the borders of modern-day Ukraine.” New rationalizations came after annexation. Even ministry of defense preparations seemed thin, and “many details that at first seem to indicate careful Russian preparation actually point to the absence of any long-held plan.” Almost no one in Russia or in the West—neither realists nor historical institutionalists—predicted this military intervention.

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116. As Andrew Wilson wrote, “Revolutions always disappoint; but few have disappointed more comprehensively than Ukraine’s once-famous ‘Orange Revolution’ of 2004.” There was no reason to think that the Revolution of Dignity would have fared any better, and many reasons to believe, because of the constitutional irregularities in 2014 were greater than in 2004, that it might have provided greater opportunities for Putin had he not invaded. See Wilson, Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 38.
121. Treisman, “Why Putin Took Crimea.”
Domestic events inside Ukraine, not a change in the global balance of power, shaped Putin’s decisionmaking. Without the Revolution of Dignity, there would have been no Russian annexation or support for separatists. Had those who came to power in Kyiv in 2014 expressed ideological affinity with Putin, Russia would not have annexed Crimea or sparked a war in eastern Ukraine. Putin’s unique response was shaped by his particular obsession with alleged U.S. hegemonic liberalism and fear of democracy on Russia’s border practiced by people with a shared culture and history. If Slavs succeeded in consolidating democracy in Ukraine, Putin’s theory about the Slavic need for a strong, autocratic ruler with orthodox conservative values would be weakened. A different leader in the Kremlin, animated by different ideas, could have reacted differently. It is hard to imagine, for instance, that the liberal-minded Boris Nemtsov—Yeltsin’s chosen heir apparent in 1997 before his pivot to Putin—would have invaded Ukraine in response to these domestic developments. As an opposition figure, Nemtsov supported the Revolution of Dignity and denounced Putin’s intervention. Most likely, Gorbachev and Yeltsin also would have pursued alternative strategies.

Putin’s intervention boosted his domestic popularity, temporarily. It is hard to make the case, however, that intervening in Ukraine has strengthened Russia’s long-term national interests or power in the international system. The West imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on numerous Russian individuals and companies. Starting in the third quarter of 2014, the Russian economy contracted for nine consecutive quarters. Estimates suggest that sanctions were responsible for 1.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) contraction in 2014, and as much as 2–2.5 percent for several years af-

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123. On Yeltsin’s plan, see Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Nemtsov: A Film by Vladimir Kara-Murza,” YouTube video, 1:06:15, Institute of Modern Russia, February 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vE3ybT9KTA.
125. By March 2020, his popularity has settled back to preinvasion levels. See “Putin’s Approval Rating” (Moscow: Levada Center), accessed on April 10, 2020, https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/.
128. “Russian Economy Shrinks 2% As Sanctions Bite—Medvedev,” BBC News, April 21, 2015,
ter Russia’s intervention.129 Hardest hit were Russian companies and banks seeking to raise capital on international markets. Morgan Stanley left Russia altogether.130 In turn, according to economist Sergei Guriev, “Russia’s inability to borrow has led to a dramatic depreciation of the ruble and a fall in real incomes and wages.”131 Following years of stability, capital outflows accelerated, jumping from $61 billion in 2013 to $151.5 billion in 2014, and foreign direct investment slowed.132 Future investment plans were canceled, including most dramatically ExxonMobil’s suspension of joint projects with Rosneft, at one time estimated to eventually be worth $500 billion. Other potential investments that did not occur are harder to estimate—it is hard to measure non-events—but Western investors and companies operating in Russia have stated that uncertainty about future sanctions has squelched interest in attracting new investors.133

Putin’s intervention in Ukraine also triggered new spending and deployments within NATO. In June 2014, President Obama announced the European Reassurance Initiative, a multibillion-dollar project to increase the United States’ military presence in Europe, which the Trump administration expanded.134 In subsequent summits, NATO has taken significant steps to en-

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hance deterrence, including at the 2014 Wales summit, a pledge to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense, and at the 2016 Warsaw summit, the decision to deploy new battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. None of these Western actions serve Russian national interests.

Western economic, political, and military assistance to Ukraine also expanded significantly, including new lethal assistance approved by the Trump administration. In 2020, U.S. military assistance to Ukraine totaled roughly $1.5 billion. In 2014, the Group of Eight became the Group of Seven once again after Russia was ousted. The costs of integrating Crimea are estimated to be $3 billion annually. Putin’s intervention also undermined one of his most important foreign policy objectives—a successful EEU. Without Ukrainian consumers, benefits to Russia have decreased considerably. The absence of Crimean and Donbass voters from Ukrainian elections has shifted the country in a decidedly pro-European, anti-Russian direction. In 2010, Yanukovych won as a result of major support from these regions, but a politician with his pro-Russian orientation is unlikely ever to achieve a similar result. In April 2019, pro-Western President Volodymyr Zelenskyy won in a landslide over the pro-Russian candidate. His first foreign visit was to Brussels, not Moscow.

Putin did not advance Russian security, power, or economic and political interests by invading Ukraine. Just the opposite. But because Putin believed he was advancing his ideological agenda against ideological foes in Ukraine and the West, he was prepared to risk a great amount.

**Putin’s Decision to Intervene in Syria in 2015**

Like the Orange Revolution in 2004, the Arab Spring in 2011 horrified Putin. Behind these uprisings, Putin again saw a sinister U.S. hand. Most of the popular uprisings took place in countries more closely aligned to the United
States. A zero-sum, Machiavellian thinker might have calculated that these events damaged U.S. interests and therefore benefited Russia. Putin, however, did not frame these uprisings in such realpolitik terms. His reaction was shaped not purely by rational national interests or structural factors in the international system, but in part by specific ideas about external threats emerging from within these countries in the Middle East.

Initially, Moscow did little in response to the Arab Spring. Even in Syria, Russian leaders limited their involvement to engaging in international diplomacy and providing marginal military assistance to the Bashar al-Assad regime. A large-scale military intervention was not Putin’s original plan. Only when conditions inside Syria changed in favor of Putin’s ideological foes did Russia’s strategy also shift toward direct military intervention in 2015 to prevent Assad’s downfall and what Putin perceived as Western-backed regime change.

The positive implications for Russian national interests of military intervention in Syria were not obvious at the time. Russia generally has desired greater influence in the Middle East. To achieve that end, defending Assad was not an obvious move, given that most countries in the Arab League opposed the Syrian leader at the time. Prior to 2015, Moscow’s more limited support for Damascus had elicited negative reactions in terms of business partnerships, protests in front of Russian embassies, and souring public opinion about Russia in several Arab countries. The benefits of intervention for Russia’s foreign policy interests emerged only much later and would have been difficult to predict in 2015. Putin was not thinking only about security or economic interests, however, when calculating the costs and benefits of military intervention in Syria. Ideological concerns also shaped his thinking.

As already discussed, well before 2011, Putin had developed a theory about U.S. leaders’ proclivities to overthrow regimes that they disliked. In his view, the revolutionary movements in the Middle East threatened autocratic regimes, a fear that grew after massive demonstrations erupted against his own government in December 2011. When domestic threats developed against Assad, Putin had a menu of policy options, such as working with the United Nations Security Council to broker a peaceful settlement between the regime.

140. Ibid.
and the Syrian opposition, an outcome that most certainly would have pre-
served Russia’s naval base in Syria as well as economic ties. Active Russian di-
plomacy to secure a peace settlement in Syria also would have enhanced
Russia’s image as a great power, not just in the Middle East but also around
the world. Instead, Putin chose the riskiest option: military intervention in a
civil war. Putin’s unique operational code—his particular theory about inter-
national politics—framed his thinking about the uprisings and shaped Russian
actions in the region, including most dramatically in Syria.143

Putin’s analysis and subsequent policy responses to Syria were shaped pri-
marily by domestic events inside Syria and perceived U.S. involvement in
these events. His explanation of the U.S intervention in Libya shaped his per-
ceptions of U.S. intentions in Syria, which eventually compelled him to inter-
vene militarily. A different Russian leader with a different set of beliefs about
both domestic politics in the Middle East and the nature of U.S. power might
have acted differently.

THE LIBYA PRELUDE
When the Arab Spring reached Libya in 2011, popular mobilization turned vio-
lent quickly. Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi pivoted almost immediatel-
y to authorizing violent suppression and promised to annihilate civilians in the
rebel stronghold city of Benghazi.144

After a divisive policy debate within his administration, President Obama
concurred with British and French counterparts that the international commu-
nity had to try to prevent genocide in Benghazi. Obama, however, was pre-
pared to use force only if the Security Council—namely, Russia—approved.145
In a radical departure from long-standing Soviet and Russian positions,
President Medvedev surprised the world and instructed Russia’s UN ambas-
sador to abstain from voting on United Nations Security Council resolutions

143. On the idea of cognitive beliefs bounding but not determining leaders’ decisions, see Alexan-
der L. George, The “Operational Code”: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and
Decision-making, Memorandum RM-5427-PR (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, September
RM5427.pdf.
144. Maria Golovnina and Patrick Worsnip, “UN Approves Military Force; Gaddafi Threatens Re-
110318.
145. On this internal debate, see Samantha Power, The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir (New
York: Dey Street, 2019); Susan Rice, Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For
(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019); and Derek Chollet, The Long Game: How Obama Defied Wash-
ington and Redefined America’s Role in the World (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).
1970 and 1973, thereby authorizing external actors to intervene militarily in Libya.146

Putin, then prime minister, had a different conception of Russian national interests in Libya. In a shocking first, Putin made his disagreement with Medvedev public, calling the Security Council resolution “flawed and inadequate,”147 and lambasting the mission as “a medieval appeal for a crusade.”148 Seeing continuity with previous U.S. interventions, Putin explained, “And now, it’s Libya’s turn—under the pretext of protecting civilians.”149 He concluded, “By using air power in the name of humanitarian support, a number of countries did away with the Libyan regime. The revolting slaughter of Muammar Qaddafi . . . was the embodiment of these actions.”150

In another unprecedented turn of events in this Russian domestic drama, Medvedev publicly rebutted Putin, stating that “Russia did not exercise [the veto power] for one reason: I do not consider this resolution to be wrong. Moreover, I believe that this resolution generally reflects our understanding of what is going on in Libya.”151 Medvedev blamed Gaddaфи, explaining that “everything that is happening in Libya is a result of the Libyan leadership’s absolutely intolerable behavior and the crimes that they have committed.”152 He specifically rejected Putin’s analytic framing, arguing, “It is inadmissible to say anything that could lead to a clash of civilizations, talk of ‘crusades’ and so on. This is unacceptable.”153 Medvedev believed that the “reset” with the United States was more important than trying to save the Libyan leader.154 Putin held a different view. Two leaders from the same country were analyzing threats and defining national interests in radically different ways. Russia’s power and regime type remained constant, but the change in leadership produced differ-

151. Ibid.
153. Ibid.
154. The differences between Medvedev and Putin regarding bilateral relations with the United States are explored in detail in McFaul, From Cold War to Hot Peace.
ent Russian responses to Libya in the spring of 2011. Had Putin been president at the time, it is hard to imagine that Russia would have abstained on the same Security Council resolutions. Leaders matter.

INTERVENING TO PRESERVE AUTOCRACY IN SYRIA
In response to the tragic civil war in Syria, the international community tried to intervene again, though in this case with diplomacy. In a series of conferences and negotiations, the international community pursued a peace agreement to be followed by a negotiated transition to a coalition government. The Obama administration hoped that an interim government could be constituted with representatives from both the Assad government and the opposition, even if Assad himself had to “step aside.” The administration assessed that the opposition would never join a transitional government that kept Assad in power, but it did not press for a fundamental change in the Syrian state or institutions. Peace—not regime change—was the goal. Furthermore, the administration argued that the longer Assad stayed in power, the more violent the war would become.

Put in embraced a different theory. He believed that the only way to restore peace and stability was by keeping Assad in power by all means necessary. Achieving this objective might require an escalation of violence, but those were costs worth bearing. Above all else, Putin wanted to prevent alleged regime change orchestrated by the United States. He assessed that the Syrian opposition held beliefs antithetical to Russian national interests (as defined by him). Eventually, the Obama administration did arm the rebels, but argued that this assistance aimed only to create a stalemate on the battlefield, a necessary condition for a negotiated power-sharing agreement. After Assad used chemical weapons in the summer of 2013 against Syrian citizens and Obama considered using force to uphold the international norm against the use of such weapons, Putin again framed the U.S. military threat as a case of regime change: “It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States.”

suggested that another U.S. war for regime change was irrational, arguing, “Is it in America’s long-term interest? I doubt it.” Kremlin-controlled media similarly described the United States’ strategy as “controlled chaos” in service of its ideological aims. In contrast to Medvedev’s decision on Libya, Putin instructed Russia’s UN ambassador to block every Security Council resolution that even hinted at authorizing the use of force against the Assad regime, obstruction that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described as “despicable.” Russia initially participated in diplomatic efforts, led by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to negotiate an end to the civil war. Episodically, especially for a brief moment in Geneva in June 2012, it looked like the United States and Russia might work together to craft a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war. But after Annan released the Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué, which articulated a road map for ending the war and negotiating a “Syrian-led” political transition, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Secretary of State Clinton read out the results of their negotiations in Geneva in almost antithetical terms. Clinton described the road map as a “a blueprint for Assad’s departure.” Lavrov berated Clinton’s interpretation, warning, “There are no prior conditions to the transfer process and no attempt to exclude any group.” The United States still sought change in the head of the Syrian regime, and that was unacceptable for Putin. These confrontational dynamics contin-

159. Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia.”
ued throughout subsequent negotiations, “settling into,” as Clinton recalls, “a running argument between me and Lavrov.” 167

After Obama’s reelection, Secretary of State John Kerry tried to reinvigorate the negotiations. 168 While visiting Moscow in May 2013, Kerry never stated explicitly that Assad must go, but affirmed, “We believe that full implementation of the Geneva communiqué calls for a transition governing body . . . formed by mutual consent with the support of the international community and enjoying full executive authority . . . to run and manage the government.” 169 The Syrian opposition would never agree to Assad remaining in power, so “mutual consent” meant there could be no deal without Assad stepping aside. Lavrov confirmed Russia’s prior position. 170 This fundamental disagreement was never reconciled.

After Assad ordered the use of chemical weapons against innocent civilians in 2013, Putin did work with Obama for their surrender, and nearly 98 percent of Syria’s declared stockpile was destroyed by 2014. 171 Still, Putin was never ready to engage in an attempt to remove his fellow autocrat from power.

As predicted by the Obama administration, Syria’s sustained civil war with Assad in power weakened moderate opposition groups, strengthened violent extremists, and attracted foreign terrorists. 172 In 2014, anti-Assad forces achieved several victories in western Syria. In eastern Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) established a caliphate, further weakening Assad’s grip on power. By the fall of 2015, therefore, Putin decided to intervene to save Assad. In a move rubberstamped by the Russian parliament, he launched Russia’s largest military operation in the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia provided air power to facilitate ground operations conducted by the Syrian army, Iranian paramilitary groups sponsored by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Hezbollah.

Putin and his proxies limited their operations to western Syria, leaving the

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172. McFaul, From Cold War to Hot Peace, p. 344.
fight against ISIL to the United States and its coalition partners. In 2014, the United States finally did intervene in Syria, not to overthrow Assad, but to destroy ISIL. Operation Inherent Resolve continued under President Trump until the ISIL capital of Raqqa fell, and the caliphate collapsed.173 In October 2019, U.S. special forces killed ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Trump then ordered the withdrawal of American forces (though some now still remain in the country) and abandoned the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces; Russia and Turkey moved in to fill the military vacuum.

In retrospect, Putin’s decision to intervene in Syria seems partially successful.174 So far, Putin has achieved his main goal—the preservation of Assad and his regime. At the time, however, this move was both risky and unprecedented, so much so that few even predicted the intervention.175 The last time Moscow intervened in foreign country to prop up an autocratic ideological ally fighting a civil war—Afghanistan in 1979—ended in complete disaster: a miscalculation so big that it helped to unravel the Soviet Union itself, with some predicting a similar fate regarding the Syrian intervention.176 Unlike Ukraine, Putin’s war in Syria was unpopular; the government-controlled press deliberately limited reporting on the intervention.177 Putin did not make realist arguments for his decision, such as preserving access to the naval base in Tartus or securing vital natural resources, of which Syria provides few. Instead, his rationale focused on domestic politics within Syria and the defense of Syrian sovereignty against imperial powers and global terrorism (framed by


174. Whether Assad will assume complete control over a peaceful Syria is hard to predict, as Putin may become embroiled in a protracted military fight against a decentralized insurgency.

175. Angela Stent wrote at the time, “Once again, Washington has been caught off-guard, just as it was in March 2014, when Russian annexed Crimea and began supporting pro-Russian separatists fighting Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine.” Stent, “Putin’s Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia’s Intervention,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 1 (January/February 2016), p. 106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946630. Rational actions should be easier to predict than irrational acts, yet few observers predicted any of these three cases discussed in this article.


Putin as supported by the United States. As Putin explained at the United Nations just days before the intervention, “Instead of learning from other people’s mistakes, some prefer to repeat them and continue to export revolutions, only now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions. . . . Instead of bringing about reforms, aggressive intervention rashly destroyed government institutions and the local way of life.”178 Putin justified Russia’s military intervention as a campaign against terrorists, supported by external actors seeking to overthrow the legitimate Syrian government.179 Putin’s particular set of cognitive beliefs for interpreting the civil war compelled him to perceive all Syrians opposing Assad as ideological enemies and terrorists. Because the United States supported these groups, Putin designated them as Russia’s enemies.180 Even while fighting ISIL in the east, the United States was allegedly supporting terrorists in the west. Putin drew parallels between U.S. regime change efforts in Ukraine and in the Middle East.181

Disaggregating Putin’s ideational motivations from other objectives in this case is more difficult than the other two interventions examined in this article, and made even more complex because of Russia’s perceived victory. In retrospect, Putin’s decision to intervene seems rational, because he achieved his objective of backing Assad and allegedly generated tangible benefits for Russian power in the Middle East.182 At the time of Russia’s intervention, however, many observers perceived the decision as reckless and costly. As Obama himself asked reportedly, “What is it that Russia thinks it gains if it gets a country that has been completely destroyed as an ally, that it now has to perpetually spend billions of dollars to prop up?”183 Aside from Iran, Russian relations with other countries in the region were strained. Russian society did not support intervention. The genius of Putin’s decision was assigned only years later; some argue that it is still too early to judge the result.184

The argument advanced in this article, however, is not that Putin and his

182. The sense of contingency in a historical moment is lost once the outcome is known. Putin’s intervention seemed more reckless in 2015 than it did five years later, when the outcome to the civil war became understood. See Jack S. Levy, “Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis,” Security Studies, Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 2015), p. 384, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602.
184. Henry Meyer and Ilya Arkhipov, ‘Putin Has a Syria ‘Headache’ and the Kremlin’s Blaming
ideas are always counter to realist or liberal claims about state behavior. More modestly, the hypothesis is that Putin as a leader and Putinism as an analytic framework played an identifiable causal role in the Russian decision to intervene in Syria. Putin’s disdain for regime change and his support for autocrats compelled him to intervene militarily. Putin had other options to realize Russia’s more traditional, realist objectives in Syria. For instance, he could have supported a political transition that removed Assad but preserved the old regime, thereby maintaining access to Russia’s naval base and avoiding a disruption of weapons sales. The Obama administration would have supported such an outcome. After regime change in Serbia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004, Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and Armenia in 2018, Putin managed to maintain basic Russian security and economic interests. The new Syrian generals empowered by a negotiated transition would likely have remained loyal to Moscow. Conversely, the fall of Assad, the emergence of a failed state, and the deepening of a civil war on the borders of countries allied with the United States also could have served Russian interests in the region, by entangling the United States into an unwinnable civil war, with a potential for conflict with a NATO ally, Turkey. Instead, Putin has inherited all of these problems.

Putin was not compelled to intervene; he had other options. He also was not motivated solely by security interests, balance of power calculations, or Russian historical traditions regarding the Middle East. Recognizing himself as the leader of the pro-sovereignty, anti-multilateral world, Putin opposed allowing another ally to fall at the hands of his ideological foe. What happened inside Syria mattered to Putin, as did what kind of leader and regime governed. A different Russian leader—Gorbachev, Yeltsin, or even Medvedev—would have behaved differently. That a Russia with the same power capabilities, the same regime, but a different president reacted so differently to the Libyan and Syrian civil wars underscores the crucial role that leaders and their ideas play in the formulation of foreign policy.

**Putin’s Decision to Intervene in the United States in 2016**

Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin saw their U.S. counterparts as ideological partners in pursuing domestic economic and political reform. Gorbachev rarely blamed the United States for Soviet economic or political problems, including the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin embraced with vigor, at least rhetorically,
ideas of democracy and capitalism, believing that the United States was helping to consolidate a new regime that he sought to build. During the 1990s, Yeltsin’s government welcomed U.S. advisers in almost every facet of economic and political reform. U.S. advisers even had offices in some of Russia’s most important government ministries and agencies.

Putin, however, believed that the United States played an active role in destroying the Soviet Union. Whereas Yeltsin welcomed U.S. involvement in Russian domestic reforms, Putin saw a sinister hand trying to weaken Russia. His fears grew in the wake of so-called color revolutions in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and the Arab Spring in 2011. Before Russia’s parliamentary election in December 2011, Putin warned, “Some representatives of some foreign states are gathering those to whom they are paying money . . . carrying out instruction sessions with them and preparing them to do the relevant work . . . in order to influence, ultimately, the election campaign process in our country.” At the time, the U.S. Agency for International Development did provide financial assistance to Golos, a Russian NGO dedicated to promoting free and fair elections that uncovered numerous irregularities in the December vote. But in Putin’s view, the United States was funding Golos to undermine the integrity of the election and his own legitimacy. When Secretary of State Clinton weighed in, advocating for investigation into the election’s conduct, Putin lambasted her alleged interference in Russia’s internal affairs and called the statement a “signal” to opposition leaders to organize protests. As former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns recalled, “Clinton’s criticism would rank high in his [Putin’s] litany—and generate a personal animus that led directly to his meddling against her candidacy in the 2016 presidential elections.”

To marginalize these protestors, Putin and his surrogates framed this domestic confrontation as a struggle between his patriotic base and U.S.-funded traitors. Kremlin-controlled media asserted that the United States was funding demonstrators to foment revolution and drew comparisons to the Arab Spring. Putin assessed, “We are required to protect our sovereignty. . . . We will have to think about strengthening the law and holding more responsible those who carry out the task of a foreign government to influence internal political processes.” Throughout this era of increased political repression, Putin’s government placed new constraints on media organizations, NGOs, and foreign foundations.

For Putin, the 2016 U.S. presidential election was an opportunity for payback. Putin, his intelligence officers, and his surrogates went on the offensive against candidate Clinton and against the U.S. democratic system more generally. As the Mueller report summarized, “The Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion.”

The Kremlin deployed multiple means to interfere in the domestic affairs of the United States in 2016. The theft and publication of electronic property—doxing—was most impactful. Russian agents from the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) stole hundreds of thousands of emails and documents from the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Clinton campaign, and then facilitated their widespread publication through fictitious online personas and third-party websites such as WikiLeaks.

194. Elder, “Vladimir Putin Accuses Hillary Clinton of Encouraging Russian Protests.”
197. The Special Counsel Office charged twelve GRU officers for crimes arising from the hacking of these computers, principally with conspiring to commit computer intrusions, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§1030 and 371.
The Kremlin also directed broadcast, print, and social media campaigns to exacerbate polarization in American society. Through traditional broadcasting, RT and Sputnik produced anti-Clinton, pro-Trump content, which was circulated on multiple platforms.\textsuperscript{198} To increase the disruptive effect of this content, the Kremlin-loyal IRA purchased political advertisements, amplified digital messages through fake accounts and bots, and staged political rallies inside the United States.\textsuperscript{199} Facebook uncovered 470 IRA-controlled accounts responsible for 80,000 posts between January 2015 and August 2017, reaching an estimated 126 million individuals, and approximately 170 IRA-controlled Instagram accounts that posted 120,000 pieces of content.\textsuperscript{200} Twitter identified more than 3,800 IRA-controlled accounts that interacted with approximately 1.4 million individuals.\textsuperscript{201}

Furthermore, Kremlin surrogates reached out directly to the Trump campaign. In June 2016, Donald Trump Jr., campaign chairman Paul Manafort, and senior campaign adviser Jared Kushner met a visiting delegation headed by the Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, who promised to provide dirt on presidential candidate Clinton and who had coordinated talking points with senior officials in the Russian government.\textsuperscript{202} Russian officials and intermediaries continued to hold meetings with senior Trump advisers throughout the campaign and transition period.\textsuperscript{203}

Finally, Kremlin-affiliated cyber agents directly probed the United States’
electoral infrastructure. In June 2017, senior officials from the Department of Homeland Security testified that election-related networks in twenty-one states were potentially targeted by Russian actors. In 2019, the Senate Intelligence Committee published two reports that confirmed Russian targeting of systems in all fifty states. Putin decided not to disrupt the voting process on Election Day. That they were prepared to do so nevertheless underscores the audacity of this intervention.

The central aim of Putin’s intervention was clear—help Trump. He himself said as much in July 2018: “Yes. I wanted him to win.” Putin supported Trump personally because of a perception of shared values and interests. Ideologically, Trump and Putin embraced many common illiberal beliefs. Candidate Trump espoused many foreign policy positions that served Russian national interests (as defined by Putin). On the campaign trail, Trump pledged to look into recognizing Crimea as part of Russia and lifting sanctions on Russian companies and individuals. He criticized NATO, said little about democracy and human rights, and praised Putin without equivocation. Clinton espoused opposite views on all of these issues. Putin’s interventions also aimed more generally to disrupt and undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. election, as well as amplify divisions between opposing political forces in American society.

205. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1; and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2.
Even on Election Day, few predicted a Trump victory. After extensive efforts to undermine and discredit her, Putin thus faced the prospect of a Clinton presidency. That Putin went ahead with an unprecedented, risky intervention anyway underscores his commitment to ideological convictions, rather than more narrowly defined Russian security or economic interests.

Whether Russian actions did help Trump appreciably is unknown. Tracing the impact of Putin’s intervention in the United States in 2016 is much more difficult than measuring the impact of his interventions in Ukraine in 2014 or Syria in 2015. Polling data in October 2016 suggest that the Russian operation may have helped to undermine Clinton’s reputation. But in the vast sea of variables influencing voter preferences, precisely measuring the independent causal influence of Russia’s efforts during the 2016 U.S. presidential election is impossible. This uncertainty about causation only underscores the boldness and riskiness of Putin’s decision to intervene in the world’s most powerful country.

Even though Putin’s preferred candidate won, the blowback in American society to Putin’s violation of U.S. sovereignty was substantial. In 2017, the U.S. Congress passed the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The Trump administration sanctioned numerous Russian oligarchs, companies, government officials, and a state-owned weapons trading company and its subsidiary in 2018. In addition, negative reactions both inside the Trump administration and within American society overall have
limited Trump’s ability to deliver on campaign promises favorable to Putin. In some issue areas, such as lethal assistance to Ukraine, the Trump administration has been tougher on Russia than the Obama administration. Although Trump may have benefited Putin by serving as a disruptive force in American society and international politics, the tangible, realpolitik payoffs of this intervention are unclear.

Because Putin was motivated in part by ideological objectives rather than material or security interests, he may have a different assessment of the costs and benefits of his intervention. His passionate disdain of Clinton likely influenced his decisionmaking. As Clinton assessed, “Our relationship has been sour for a long time.” Putin sought an ideological soulmate for promoting nationalist, conservative ideas, similar to his friends, Orbán, Le Pen, and Farage. Trump has praised these same European leaders and directly, publicly, and consistently expressed his admiration for Putin as well. The short-term costs of Russia’s intervention therefore might be outweighed by the long-term ideological gains of having a kindred spirit in the White House if Trump wins reelection.

Conclusion

The power of individual countries and the balance of power between them remain central determinants of state behavior in the international system. Theories of international relations must begin with power. Assessments of capabilities cannot explain all state behavior, however. To understand a subset of outcomes in international politics, individuals, ideas, and institutions must be added to the analysis.

When seeking to explain the riskiest Russian behavior in the world today—intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries—Vladimir Putin, his ideas, and the political institutions empowering him must be factored into the equation. Because autocracy in contemporary Russia was caused in part by Putin and his ideas, isolating the independent causal effect of regime type

from Putin and Putinism is difficult. But whether individuals, ideas, and institutions are considered three expressions of one variable or three independent factors, Putin, his ideas, and Russia’s autocratic system of government, shaped in large measure by him, have produced a distinct, identifiable impact on Russian foreign policy. In all three cases discussed in this article, Putin’s ideas about illiberalism, orthodoxy, sovereignty, and the West shaped his decision-making in unique ways. A different Russian leader with different ideas governing in a different regime could have—and probably would have—behaved differently. For example, a Russian leader animated by either realist or liberal ideas about international relations would have made different decisions regarding intervention in Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, or the United States in 2016. In fact, different Russian leaders embracing different ideas did make different decisions—Gorbachev did not annex the territory of a sovereign neighbor; Medvedev supported the international intervention to save lives in Libya; and Yeltsin never tried to influence U.S. elections.

Ideological motivations do not animate every Russian foreign policy action in the world today. Russia pursues security and economic interests in parallel to ideological aims. Sometimes these multiple objectives complement each other. At other times, they clash. Risky and costly actions—the annexation of Crimea, military intervention in Syria, and interference in the U.S. 2016 presidential election—can only be fully explained by accounting for the causal influence of one leader, his ideas, and his political institutions.