

HOW RUSSIA DECIDED TO START THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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Abstract

The subject of the paper concerns Russia's decision to start a conventional war by invading the independent and sovereign Ukrainian state with regular troops on February 24th, 2022. The research question that I will address is how Putin decided in favour of a military solution to advance his foreign policy goals.

The methodology I use to address the issue consists of the following steps: (i) identify mostly in news articles the information that most likely influenced Kremlin's calculus (thus rejecting some claims that Putin is irrational or insane); (ii) briefly present the three theoretical models employed by Graham T. Allison (1971) to explain the Cuban Missile Crisis - The Rational Actor, The Organizational Process and The Governmental Politics; (iii) apply the basic unit of analysis, organizing concepts and dominant inference pattern for each of the three theoretical models in order to analyse how the balance might have been tipped in favour of a full-scale military intervention, from Russia's perspective.

The analysis contributes to a better understanding of the decision-making mechanisms that led to war, despite limitations stemming from the lack of reliable information for the time being.

Keywords:

Governmental politics; organizational process; rational actor; Russia; Ukraine; war initiation.

1. INTRODUCTION

On February 24th Vladimir Putin authorised a so-called „special military operation“, in fact a war according to the definition used by The Correlates of War Project (Small and Singer 1982 define war as a sustained combat involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1000 battle-related fatalities, later specified as 1000 battle-related fatalities within a twelve-month period), but without officially declaring it, to be conducted by Russian Armed Forces into Ukraine, a sovereign and independent state. His order came after several months of keeping over 100.000 Russian troops mobilized at the border with Ukraine, engaged in large-scale military exercises to ensure combat readiness, while also publicly denying any plans for advancing into Ukraine and blaming Kyiv and the West for the war hysteria.

The decision to openly invade Ukraine with regular troops marked not only the start of the „largest war in Europe after the Second World War“ according to president Volodymyr Zelensky (Zelensky 2022), but also a radical change in Russia’s strategy in the former socialist republics, which has been based on creating localized conflicts and freezing them. After illegally annexing Crimea in 2014, Russia has been engaged for eight years in the protracted conflict and low intensity warfare in Donbass, following its covert and by *proxy* involvement in the separatist outbreak in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

This radical change in Russia’s foreign policy and military approach, and the shock of an unexpected conventional war in Europe led some decision makers and analysts to start speculating on Putin’s mental or physical health that impacted his judgment or stating that he is in fact irrational in decisions making. The most well-known public declarations of statemen and former officials on this matter belong to: (i) former British prime-minister, Boris Johnson, who stated after Russia’s invasion that sanctions „may not be enough to deter an irrational actor and we have to accept at the moment that Vladimir Putin is possibly thinking illogically about this and doesn't see the disaster ahead“ (Faulconbridge 2022); (ii) a source close to the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who met Putin on February 7th, just a few weeks before the war broke

out, declared that „Macron had been struck by how different Putin was to the man he had met in his summer residence on the French Riviera three years ago” because of his strong emphasis on „historical revisionism”, and also „these more than five hours of talks make us realise how different the Putin of today was” (Rose 2022); (iii) Czech president, Milos Zeman, stated shortly after Russia’s invasion, in reference to Putin that „lunatics need to be isolated, and we must protect against them not only by words but by concrete measures” (Hutt 2022); (iv) US Senator Marco Rubio tweeted that „I wish I could share more, but for now I can say it’s pretty obvious to many that something is off with #Putin. He has always been a killer, but his problem now is different and significant. It would be a mistake to assume this Putin would react the same way he would have 5 years ago” (Rubio 2022); (v) former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, declared that Putin „was always calculating and cold, but this is different. He seems erratic. There is an ever-deepening, delusional rendering of history, it was always a kind of victimology about what had happened to them, but now it goes back to blaming Lenin for the foundation of Kyiv... in Ukraine” (Colton 2022).

Also, international relations analysts started questioning previous assumptions about Putin’s thinking and strategic decision-making process, suggesting a change in Putin decision-making style towards irrationality due to his alleged disconnection from reality or his alleged isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic: (i) Mark Galeotti tweeted shortly after the invasion that „My belief/hope that Putin would keep away from the brink was shaken by Monday’s Security Council meeting and his subsequent speech, but now clear he is truly divorced from reality” (Galeotti 2022); (ii) „Watching Vladimir Putin’s erratic behaviour, bloated face, unhinged televised ramblings and now nuclear gamesmanship, it may be time to revisit our assumption that the Russian president is a cold-blooded statesman taking logical, if deeply undesirable, decisions” (Taylor 2022), while also arguing that Putin might be clinically paranoid, „ In clinical psychology, the paranoid typically accuse their supposed persecutors of doing exactly what they themselves are planning. Putin implausibly accused Ukraine of massing forces on the borders of the breakaway Donbass region to carry out a “genocide” against Russian speakers, in a

distorting mirror of his own intentions" (Taylor 2022); (iii) former U.S. ambassador to Russia in 2012-2014, Michael McFaul, also tweeted that „I've watched and listened to Putin for over 30 years. He has changed. He sounds completely disconnected from reality. He sounds unhinged" (McFaul 2022).

This kind of statements do not meet the principle of falsifiability, only Putin's close circle and his healthcare provider could deliver data to support or reject these hypotheses. Scientific research, however, should be able to be independently and objectively verified, thus I reject the claims of insanity or illness as *explanans* for the decision to invade Ukraine.

Also, I should mention that „different" (as most observers - both analysts and high-level officials - of Russia's decision making describe Putin's behaviour) doesn't necessarily mean insane or irrational. It could also be the case that Putin's „different" posture stems from the intention to indicate his high resolve for the Ukraine dossier, which also include the military option or a „total war" in Clausewitz terminology, as a last resort.

Furthermore, I would like to mention that accepting the idea of Putin's insanity or irrationality entails two concerning implications, both positive and normative: (i) if analysts and researchers admit that Russia's behaviour cannot be better explained or predicted through other instruments and methods, then the consequence is that we should accept that anything can happen and there is no pattern and no possibility to anticipate decisions and events; (ii) policy-makers rethink the deterrence strategies (including the cost-inducing responses, like the sanctions) taking into account the possibility for insanity or irrationality on Russian part because „if Putin is not a rational adversary, then the policies that would deter a more-reasonable man may fail or even backfire" (Geist 2022). However, if this is not the case, changing the deterrence posture could have unintended and unwanted consequences; (iii) Putin bears no or little responsibility for his decisions and orders precisely because of his mental or physical health.

Although the subject of the current war is complex and multifaceted, I limit the scope of the analysis to answering the question that gives the title of the article – *How Russia decided to start the war against Ukraine?* To analyse how the balance might have been tipped in favour of a full-scale military intervention, from

Russia's perspective, I use the three models Graham T. Allison (1971) employed to explain the Cuban Missile Crisis - The Rational Actor, The Organizational Process and The Governmental Politics. In the following sections of the current article, I explore the context of the decision, or on what information Russia might have based its decision to invade Ukraine and then briefly present and apply different theoretical frameworks that can be employed to research the topic of concern, with the aim for the analysis to contribute to a better understanding of the decision mechanisms that led to war.

There are major limitations with the proposed research topic. At the time of writing this paper the war is still ongoing, with no clear perspective regarding the possibility for its termination in the foreseeable future.

Relevant and reliable information regarding how decisions are being made in Russia, unavailable yet, while also being uncertain when, if ever, researchers might get insights into the black box that is high-level decisional process in Russia. Furthermore, it is reasonable to consider that the public reporting on the subject can be part of the „war propaganda“ (as can common knowledge about World War II let us understand the concept, which I will not try to define here), so discerning what is true from the little available information, can also be challenging. As such, the current paper represents just a first attempt to analyse Kremlin's decision-making that led to war through three different theoretical lenses that address different sides of the same issue.

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE DECISION

In the next section, I outline the available information that most likely substantiated Russia's decision to start a war against Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, or to put it differently the context in which Putin authorised the so-called „special military operation“. For the current analysis they will represent the assumptions that I will consider to be true, in order to explore how the three theoretical frameworks can explain Russia's decision-making process to engage in a military confrontation. The identified assumptions hold true and will be kept the same for each of the three models analysed. The conclusions I reached

regarding the base of the current analysis come from different press articles and analyses on the subject and well as previous events, decisions, and behaviours of Russia, Ukraine, and the West on similar or different topics on the international arena. I argue why I consider each to be true in the sense that was considered to be favourable by Russia at the time the potential courses of action regarding Ukraine were analysed.

In hindsight some, if not all of them, seem surprising and can be considered errors in Russia's planning of the large-scale military invasion. Different international relations observers and military experts have already highlighted Russia's strategic miscalculations. For example, Anatol Lieven, a researcher on the topic of Russia at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft asserted that „It would be nice in some ways to think that this (*A/N Russia's decision making*) reflected insanity on Putin's part - but outright insanity in international affairs is, thank Heaven, rare. On the other hand, serious miscalculations based on what appeared at the time to be good evidence are rather common – though the mixture that led to Putin's serial miscalculations over Ukraine was an unusually toxic one, influenced by factors particular to the Russian-Ukrainian relationship” (Lieven 2022). Similarly, Edward Geist, a policy researcher at the RAND Corporation wrote that the „invasion appears to have been based on a completely misguided assumption that Ukrainians would welcome Russian soldiers as liberators. Even more unaccountable is how Putin seems not to have anticipated how rapidly his actions would alienate world opinion” (Geist 2022). In the next section of the paper, the term „Russia” has multiple meanings, so I use it to refer to: (i) the unitary state of Russia, as a single entity, which has its own goals, can take actions, and there are no sub-national actors/ domestic political divisions between them. This corresponds to Allison's first level of analysis - the Rational Actor; (ii) the bureaucracy with its different standard operations procedures that constitutes the Russian institutional system, which corresponds to Allison's second level of analysis - the Organizational Process; (iii) the high-level individual decision-makers inside the Russian state that influence through their own perspectives on certain matters and through bargaining the actual choices emerging at the international level. This corresponds to Allison's third level of analysis - the Governmental Politics. In

the following pages, if not specified otherwise, the term „Russia” is interchangeable also with: Moscow, Kremlin, Putin, Russian Armed Forces, Russian Security Service, Russian government. Later the meaning of the term will be limited depending on the angle of the analysis.

i. Russia assessed that its regular army could capture Kyiv in a few days, thus obtaining *via* the so-called „special military operation” a quick victory on the battlefield.

In a House Intelligence Committee hearing in March 2022, CIA director William Burns, said Putin had planned to seize control of Kyiv within two days of the start of the invasion (Karthikeyan 2022). Also, according to different media reporting, Russian Armed Forces should have captured Ukrainian capital in maximum four days of fighting (Epstein and Davis 2022). Russian documents seized by Ukrainian troops after their withdrawal from Kyiv region indicate the same narrow time frame. Despite not being able to know for sure at this moment, it is plausible Russia assessed it could secure a swift victory, considering the following:

- Russia had spent significant amounts of money and resources on modernizing its military, conducted a reform and numerous trainings and exercises in the last years, thus making its armed forces fit and ready for combat. According to the latest report of Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (da Silva et al. 2022) „Russia increases military budget in the run-up to war” (to 4.1 per cent of GDP consisting in an allocation of \$65.9 billion dollars), 2021 being the „third consecutive year of growth” in military spending. Out of the total amount dedicated to the military budget, according to SIPRI, around three-quarters (approx. 48.4 billion dollars) go to „funding for operational costs as well as arms procurement”. Russian Army has constantly been a priority for Kremlin in terms of budgetary allocations.

In 2020 the International Institute for Strategic Studies published an assessment on Russia's Military Modernisation. According to the report, „Russia's armed forces have benefited from more than a decade of investment and reform. Though significantly smaller than their Soviet predecessors, these forces are better equipped, with professional personnel increasingly prevalent. Elements are held at high readiness, and Moscow has left behind the era of mass mobilisation, where units would be rapidly brought to strength with reservists” (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2020).

Last, multiple military exercises held in Ukraine's immediate proximity and in the Black Sea Region in the past few years and especially the large-scale military mobilization started in March 2021, which in fact never ended but morphed into the invasion, most likely led to the conclusion that Russian Armed Forces are combat ready, especially in a confrontation with a lesser endowed adversary (in terms of number of personnel and modern equipment and weapons), like Ukraine.

- Russia was „not impressed” with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Judd 2022). Also, according to Kormych, „there was definitely a hypothesis that the Ukrainian Armed Forces would be reluctant to confront the Russian regular army, an assumption primarily grounded in the experience gained from the Crimean annexation and the Ilovaisk and Debaltseve operations” - *A/N in 2014* (Kormych 2022). As such, it is plausible that Russia expected for the Ukrainian military personnel, command officers and relevant local and government officials to take sides with the Russian troops. Several such cases have been so far documented in the Southern region of Kherson, bordering annexed Crimea, where Russian Armed Forces managed to obtain the most significant territorial gains on the battlefield (Mirovlev 2022, Wall 2022).

According to Ukrainian media reports, shortly after the invasion and the loss of control over Kherson, a former deputy of the Regional Council has asked the Ukrainian citizens living in Kherson region in a Facebook post to surrender to the Russian occupying troops. It is not farfetched to assume that he also supported Russia's military activity and promoted Moscow's political objectives. The Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine has opened a case against him, suspecting him of „actions aimed at forcibly changing or overthrowing the constitutional order or at seizing state power using the media”, having already documented the fact that the deputy „preached the ideology of the Russian World”, as reported by Interfax (Interfax 2022).

Also according to Ukrainian media president Zelensky stripped of their ranks two generals who „violated their oath to Ukraine”, most likely being suspected of treason - Andriy Naumov, former head of the department of internal security at Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), and Serhiy Kryvoruchko, head of the SBU in the city of Kherson, as reported by the media outlets Ukrinform and Kyiv Independent (2022). Later it has become known, according to Politico reporting, that Kryvoruchko „ordered his officers to evacuate the city before Russian troops stormed it”, while his assistant and head of the local office's Anti-Terrorist Center, „have tipped off Russian forces heading North from Crimea about the locations of Ukrainian mines and helped coordinate a flight path for the enemy's aircrafts” (Miller 2022).

- Russia deployed tens of thousands of troops without adequate supply lines (Epstein and Davis 2022). Most likely it will remain in our collective memory the satellite images of the 64 km long Russian military convoy North of Kyiv in March, heading towards the capital of the Ukrainian state with the aim to force a surrender of the entire country. Penetration so deep in an enemy territory comes with huge logistical costs and resupply

problems. According to Reuters reports, citing an anonymous U.S. defence official „Russia's military move on Kyiv has stalled as its forces struggle with basic logistics challenges, including shortages of food and fuel, with some units appearing to be gripped by low morale” (Ali and Stewart 2022).

- the Russian troops entered Ukraine in marching formations, indicating that they didn't expect meeting any resistance, while the second line of troops that followed into Ukrainian territory was composed of Rosgvardia units and the National Guard, most likely expecting to be engaged in civilian control of the occupied territories (Kormych 2022).
- Deputy Chief of Staff of the Command of the Ground Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksandr Hruzevych, declared after Russian Armed Forces withdrew from Kyiv region that „Russian soldiers brought parade uniforms with them, seeming to expect a victory in less than two days”. According to Hruzevych, the uniforms were found in abandoned Russian military vehicles in the areas around Kyiv that were retaken by the Ukrainian Army (Baker 2022).

However, the invasion of Ukraine revealed that the actual state of the Russian Armed Forces and its performance on the battlefield were worse than Kremlin most likely anticipated.

- ii. **Russia assessed that regular Ukrainian citizen expect its armed forces to „liberate” them from president Volodymyr Zelensky's rule, welcome Russian military personnel with open arms and will accept occupation authorities.**

Briefly entering the realm of thought experiments, it is plausible that Russia's conclusion could have been substantiated by: a. polls indicating discontent among Ukrainians. For example, a survey coordinated by the Social and Marketing Research Center „Socis" in June 2021, more than 60 percent of Ukrainians were not satisfied, believing that events in Ukraine are developing in the wrong

direction (Suprun 2021). A survey conducted in November 2021 revealed that only 33% of Ukrainian citizens are satisfied with president Volodymyr Zelensky's activity (Matyash 2021). Also, according to Eckel (2022), Russia commissioned public opinion polls in Ukraine in February 2022, just before the invasion, that revealed distrust for government; b. pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine, like Viktor Medvedchuk (who is also related with Putin, the godfather of Medvedchuk's youngest daughter) sending back to Moscow positive signals on attitudes towards Russia, possibly to keep the financial flow (Burdyga 2022).

According to Kupchan's assessment, Russia's aggressive posture towards Kyiv promoted the development of a national identity of the Ukrainian citizens and thus the possibility to stand united, which in turn impacted how Russian Armed Forces were met in Ukraine: „the most potent obstacle to Putin's neo-imperial adventurism is the Ukrainian people. The Maidan revolution and Russia's subsequent aggression against Ukraine in 2014 helped nurture a strong sense of solidarity among Ukrainians and deepened their determination to build a successful democracy integrated into Europe" (Kupchan 2022). The same idea can be supported by survey results. According to press releases of Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), „over the last three years before the full-scale invasion, there was a gradual decline in positive attitudes towards Russia", with 34% of Ukrainians at the beginning of February 2022 having a good attitude towards Russia. The most recent polls, conducted by KIIS and also by The Wall Street Journal-NORC, reveal significant changes: „only 2% of citizens have a good attitude towards Russia, while 92% have a bad attitude" (Hrushetsky 2022) and „an overwhelming share of Ukrainians, 89%, say it would be unacceptable to reach a peace deal with Moscow by ceding Ukrainian territory that Russian forces have seized" (Zitner 2022).

Maybe less relevant on a larger scale (compared to polls), but still proving the point, is the social media documented example of a Ukrainian woman offering sunflower seeds to a Russian soldier, suggesting him to put them in his pocket in order for the flowers to bloom when he will lay dead on the Ukrainian soil (Sicard 2022).

iii. Russia assessed that president Volodymyr Zelensky is a weak figure with no significant popular support, that will flee the country once the bombing starts.

It is safe to argue that president Volodymyr Zelensky is considered by the Kremlin to be a target, especially after the invasion, when he, the commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, became a hero that united the country and also the international audience against the Russian aggression (Time 2022). In one of his social media post early into the war, Zelensky said that „the enemy has designated me as target number one and my family is target number two" (CaucasusWarReport 2022). So, this represents an acknowledgement of the Russian side that Zelensky has a significant role in maintaining the Ukrainian resistance.

Also, Putin's attitude towards Zelensky (from previous years before the war) indicate that he disregarded the democratically elected president of Ukraine and considered him to be inferior. For example, in 2019, immediately after Zelensky's inauguration, Putin said that the new Ukrainian president may be a talented actor („to act, you need talent ...") but his role as a fictional president in a TV series does not give him the skills and experience to be a real head of state („... but to tend to state affairs you need other skills, a certain experience, knowledge"), when asked why he did not congratulate his Ukrainian counterpart (Kremlin 2019). So, it is possible that Putin's negative perception about Zelensky since before he even met the Ukrainian president, to translate also into expectations that the former comedian would not rise to the occasion, should Russian Armed Forces invaded Ukraine.

After the invasion, some observers of international politics reveal that Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich (mostly known in the West for owning Chelsea Football Club, at least until 2022), who participated as a member of the Russian delegation in the unsuccessful negotiations after the invasion, „had to disabuse Putin of his conviction that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (...) would flee the country once the invasion began” (Miller and Rubin 2022).

On the same topic it is also the already famous response Zelensky gave when turning down USA offer to be evacuated in the first days of the war: „The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride” (Braithwaite 2022).

iv. **Russia assessed that the West will not be united, will not be able to make quick decisions (also because of the first assumption of a quick military campaign, that would have meant a *fait accompli* for the West).**

I approximate the lack of reliable information regarding how an actor might respond, by considering past experiences and behaviours on the same or similar topics (assuming some sort of consistency in the responses and reactions) and priorities at the moment or how important is the issue relative to other dossiers of concern (assuming that each actor has multiple issues of interest, but only limited resources to allocate to each, in which case he must prioritize).

Regarding the first aspect, most likely Russia assessed that the West would respond similar to how it had responded before in Georgia’s case in 2008 or in Ukraine’s case in 2014. This sort of reasoning is mirrored in deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev’s statement at the last public meeting of the decision circle in Moscow before the invasion, on February 21st who said that „I remember 2008 quite well ... This experience showed that it would be difficult, but after a while (*A/N the West*) would get

tired of this situation and would themselves ask to return to the negotiations, because the Russian Federation means more to the world community than Ukraine.” (Kormych 2022).

Regarding the second aspect, according to some analysts, Putin „may have viewed the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan as a sign of weakness, and also have concluded that Biden was in a weak position politically. Angela Merkel was leaving and was eventually replaced by Scholz from the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Putin likely remembered that the last SPD chancellor was Schroder, who has many close ties with Russia and worked to make Germany dependent on Russian natural gas. Putin may have thought that NATO was weak and dispirited after four years of Trump’s insults” (Judd 2022).

Most likely each of the four assumptions shaped the decision to invade Ukraine, despite ex-post having been proven to be wrong by the evolutions on the battlefield, in Ukrainian political circle, in most Ukrainian settlements and at the international level. As Judd puts it, „we have been surprised by the abilities of the Ukrainians in blocking Russian advances. We have also been surprised by stories of Russian military incompetence. We have been surprised by the fast response of the West in imposing economic sanctions. NATO unity has exceeded our expectations. If we have been shocked by these developments, just think how surprised Putin is” (Judd 2022).

In the following three sections of the paper, I explain what the term „Russia”, that I previously left unspecified, means. In order to do so, I: (i) construct the three theoretical models – the Rational Actor, the Organizational Process and the Governmental Politics, mostly as presented by Graham T. Allison; (ii) reframe the previous data gathered from mass-media reporting and social media posts on the context of the decision to test the three theoretical models as explanations for Russia’s decision to start a war by invading Ukraine.

For the theoretical framework of the research, I use both editions of Allison’s book. The first edition of the „Essence of Decision”, based on an article Allison presented at a conference in 1968, was published in 1971. The second edition of the book was published together with Philip Zelikow in 1999, later translated in

Romanian in 2010 (the version I used). The decision to revise the first edition was determined by several reasons: (i) the increase in the historical data on the Cuban Crisis due to a number of US documents being declassified, that allowed for better testing of the hypotheses; (ii) advances in the analytical and theoretical research that represented the ground of the arguments, especially concerning the bureaucracy and organisational theory; (iii) academic and practical relevance and importance of the first edition (Allison 2010, 11-12). My choice to use both editions was motivated by the following factors: (i) the two versions of the book follow the same structure in presenting the theory, hypotheses and arguments/facts; (ii) the first edition is more suitable due to the fact that being closer in time to the events that aims to explain/ the Cuban Crisis, it is more useful at this moment to help identify the kinds of arguments that can be used today to explain Russia's decision to invade Ukraine on February 24th, 2022; (iii) the second edition is more suitable for the theoretical side of the analysis, being more extended and thorough due to the fact that the authors sought to address the criticism the first edition received.

3. MODEL I - THE RATIONAL ACTOR

3.1. Background

In the next section I introduce the main theoretical principles and instruments that are relevant for the subject of interest regarding the war initiated by Russia, by summarizing the most important characteristics of the model, as presented by Graham T. Allison (also maintaining here the same format of analysis used by the author for studying the Cuban missile crisis):

- i. Basic Unit of Analysis: „Governmental Action as Choice“. When confronted with a decision, states choose the alternative that maximizes their goals and objectives (in terms of power – in line with realist school of international relations, security – the case of neorealist school of thought, or other aspect that is considered important) (Allison 1971, 32).

ii. Organizing Concepts:

- the agent is the national state, that is considered to be a rational and unitary decision-maker, with specified goals and a consistent utility function (Allison 1971, 32). The state is anthropomorphized, as if it were a single individual (Allison 2010, 37);
- the state is reacting to a certain development on the international stage. „Action is chosen in response to the strategic problem the nation faces. Threats and opportunities (...) move the nation to act” (Allison 1971, 33);
- in a given situation, the state can identify alternative courses of action, assess the consequences for each action and pick the option that best satisfy its goals. According to Allison, „nations seek security and a range of other objectives” (Allison 1971, 33), alternative options for action are specific to the strategic problem the state is facing, „enactment of each alternative course of action will produce a series of consequences” (Allison 1971, 33), with costs and benefits impacting the objectives the state has. All things considered, then the unitary state „select the alternative whose consequences rank highest in terms of his goals and objectives” (Allison 1971, 33).

iii. Dominant Inference Pattern: the choice of a state is explained by „finding the purposive pattern within which the occurrence can be located as a value-maximizing means” (Allison 1971, 33).

So, in order to solve the puzzle of explaining states’ decisions, the analyst puts himself/ herself in the place of that state and make statements about its objectives, options for action and their consequences that „permit him (A/N or her) to distinguish among the various accounts” (Allison 1971, 35) that the he or she can creatively construct to rationalize a result by finding the objective „around which a story of value-maximizing choice can be constructed” (Allison 1971, 35).

3.2. First level of analysis

The answer I find is best suited to address through this theoretical framework (at least at this moment in time, when there are no reliable information or historical sources because the war is still ongoing) is for the following question: *How Russia decided to start a war against Ukraine?*

To deliver an answer, in the following section I model and frame the decision Russia faced prior to the invasion and analyse the circumstances that led Moscow to the conclusion that invading a sovereign country is the alternative course of action that maximizes its goals and objectives.

To analyse the decision Russia faced between a military solution (what actually happened) and a non-intervention (alternative that can be assumed to be equivalent to the continuation of its prior strategy of maintaining a frozen conflict in Donbass in order to be able to veto or control any decision Kyiv might have taken to irreversibly change its foreign policy alignment), I use decision theory instruments, thus assuming Moscow it was confronted with a parametric choice (not a strategic one – which would be closer to reality, but not particularly relevant for the research question of concern here).

In this first level of analysis, Russia can be identified with Putin. The plausibility of this assumption/ limitation is given by the fact that Russian regime is a highly personalised one and the decision-making (especially in matters of foreign affairs and war) is centralised at the highest level, that is the head of state. Utilities then can be perceived *via* Putin's lens – what are the costs and benefits that he expects in case of a military intervention *versus* maintaining the status-quo/ restraining from attacking another country? In this category can be included the analysis that aim to explain Russia solely through Putin's decision framework, thus excluding some components of the calculus that do not impact him directly – e.g. human losses in the military confrontations (especially if we hold true the assumption that it was expected a swift war, not an attrition war/ prolonged military confrontation, that in time might give rise to popular discontent). Some analysts thus far emphasize Putin's role in the war, that could

also explain their search for arguments like his insanity or illness (Galeotti 2022, Taylor 2022). In the next section of the paper what I call „Russia“, can also be equated with „Putin“, the head of state representing the state/ unit of analysis in the first theoretical model – the Rational Actor.

		RUSSIA	
		Attack	Not attack
UKRAINE	Weak type	Utility Russia receives if it attacks Ukraine, given that Kyiv is a weak type - $U_{RU}(A U_{AWT})$ → Easy victory for Russia with low costs for intervention 4	Utility Russia receives if it doesn't attack Ukraine, given that Kyiv is a weak type - $U_{RU}(NA U_{AWT})$ → Loss of control over Ukraine (low costs for intervention) 1
	Strong type	Utility Russia receives if it attacks Ukraine, given that Kyiv is a strong type - $U_{RU}(A U_{AST})$ → Only partial territorial gains with high costs for intervention 3	Utility Russia receives if it doesn't attack Ukraine, given that Kyiv is a strong type - $U_{RU}(NA U_{AST})$ → Loss of control over Ukraine (high costs for intervention) 2

I model the situation as if there are only two parties to the war – Russia (the initiator/ attacker – the decision-maker or the party that had to make a choice – given my narrow research question) and Ukraine (the defender – not a proper actor for the limited purposes of this paper, its characteristics are to be defined by nature in terms of costs for Russia). As I have presented elsewhere (Crisis Communication and Conflict Resolution Conference, 7-8 April 2022), despite its indirect involvement through economic sanctions against Russia and humanitarian and military support for Ukraine, thus having the possibility to influence the sides' costs and benefits, the West will not be considered a part of

the war. Similarly, other actors, like Belarus, that is supporting Russian Armed Forces' war effort, for example by allowing on its soil Russian troops, equipment, and missile systems that are used in attacks and strikes against Ukraine, thus acting as a force multiplier, can also be considered to enable certain actions that would otherwise be impossible for Moscow. However, neither Minsk will be considered a distinct part of the war.

I maintain the four (substantiated) assumptions I have made in the previous section on the context of the decision regarding the assessments most likely substantiated Russia's decision: its regular army could capture Kyiv in a few days, most regular Ukrainian citizens expect Russian armed forces with open arms, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is a weak figure, and the West will not be united on imposing costs on Moscow for an invasion.

Also, for the context of Russia's decision to start a war is relevant Russia's objective regarding Ukraine. I assess a good approximation is that Russia aims to control Ukraine – maximal objective is for Kyiv to re-enter Moscow's sphere of influence (like in the former soviet times), or at least block Kyiv's perspective to decide upon its foreign policy alignment that would present the risk to get closer to the EU and NATO. My conclusion on how important the issue is for Moscow, is based on Putin's article „On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” disseminated on Kremlin's official website on July 12th, 2021, in which he claims that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation, thus denying Ukraine's right to exist as an independent state.

Lastly, for the urgency of a decision in that particular moment in time in February 2022, I assume also that Russia assessed that there is an imminent risk that Ukraine might enter an irreversible path towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. *De jure*, Kyiv was years away from a formal decision on its accession into Western political and military structures. However, *de facto*, the Ukrainian side has repeatedly stated in the last years its foreign affairs objectives and has taken steps to move away from its high dependency on Russia past. For example, former president Petro Poroshenko has signed in February 2019 a constitutional amendment committing the country to becoming a member of NATO and the EU. Also, in the last years Kyiv adopted decisions to limit the Russian influence in Ukraine, for example, just to name a few: obtained the

autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Ukraine in January 2019, regulated broadcasting in Russian language in May 2017 by reducing the quotas of allowed usage of Russian language in mass media, passed a new language law in April 2019 that grants special status to the Ukrainian language and makes it mandatory for public sector workers (Polityuk, 2019). It is safe to assess that Moscow was most likely dissatisfied with Kyiv's intentions and actions to diminish the Russian influence in Ukraine, given Kremlin's goals and objectives. As such, it is also safe to conclude that most likely Russia was worried that in time, Ukraine was going to distance itself even further from their common past, maybe up to a point when the reversal of this process becomes impossible.

The decision matrix above represents a formalized choice from Russia's perspective for either starting a war, or not attacking. The environment in which the decision takes place is characterized – through a gross simplification that does not alter the possible reasoning process that Russia went through – by the type of response that the invasion would trigger. Here it is represented by „weak type Ukraine” and „strong type Ukraine”. This is not a proper decision that Kyiv is strategically making, but instead I assume it to be, strictly in this theoretical model, a given characteristic of Ukraine translating into costs for Russia in case of intervention. It is determined by several factors, for example:

- i. Ukrainian military capabilities for defensive purposes, able to repel an attack from the Russian Armed Forces consist of:
 - the hardware component (equipment, ammunition, technology etc. that are physically employed on the battlefield);
 - the human resources (trained military personnel able to use efficiently and effectively the military hardware component);
 - the overall resilience of the institutions with prerogatives on national security issues (more difficult to quantify, the general idea regards individuals working on certain strategic positions to promote just the national interest of the state).

A highly capable, endowed and coordinated Ukrainian Army would inflict serious costs and, similarly, a poorly equipped and trained Ukrainian Armed Forces or populated with personnel that receives

incentives from Russia to defect or act against Ukrainian state interest, would impose minimal costs;

- ii. regular Ukrainians' attitude towards Russia and the Russian Army, despite not having military training or being armed is also impacting the costs for war. A local population that is sympathetic towards Russia and it perceives it as a liberator, or at least is apolitical or unwilling and uninterested to get involved in how (or by whom) the local community is ruled, would facilitate Russian advance into the territory. To put it shortly and intuitively, it is easier for the armed forces to advance in friendly territory. On the other hand, a population that, despite maybe being disappointed with the democratically elected authorities, it still recognizes them as the legitimate ones, protests the occupation authorities thus risking its physical security, disrupt behind the front supply lines of the enemy, support Ukrainian resistance and sometimes even possibly kill enemy soldiers, significantly raise the cost for an intervention. Also, it makes it harder for an invading army to obtain further territorial gains.
- iii. a leader or a head of state who is also the commander in chief of the army of the state under attack (in our case Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky) who is unpopular, weak, or even there is a chance for him to flee the country, would significantly decrease the costs for a Russian military intervention. This might happen due to a dissolution of power, also with the possibility that his successor would not have the legitimacy needed for the state to continue to function. There would most likely be consequences for how united the civilian population remain. Weak institutions and a disunited population make it easier for an invading army to be victorious. Conversely, a strong, charismatic leader with regular public appearances from his normal office sends incentives first to the armed forces to maintain the resistance and not defect or lay down the arms, and second send signals to the civilian population that the state is still functional and works for the common good to defend the country and it represents a motivation for them to

maintain the loyalty. In this case, the costs for an enemy's intervention would be higher.

- iv. allies and the (anticipated) way they (are expected to) react to the war can influence the cost for an invasion and the calculus before an attack. Allies that have to go through a lengthy process of deliberation to first reach a conclusion on what is actually happening and second go through another decisional process to decide upon the level of support to send for the defending state, decrease the costs for the attacker. This is happening due to the fact that the longer it takes for the allies to reach a decision (and the longer it takes to consolidate the defence posture of the invaded state), the higher the chance the attacking state reaches its goals. On the other hand, if an attacked state has strong allies that coordinate to immediately support it, the costs in losses and failed objectives for the attacker increase (depending on the nature and level of support offered).

The way in which each of the previous four aspects vary, influence the cost for war and possibly the decision to intervene militarily.

Given the assumed Russian objectives of gaining control over Ukraine's decision making the four outcomes presented in the matrix can be ordered as follows (from Russia's perspective) – with the best of my ability and understanding of the issue:

$$U_{RU}(A | UA_{WT}) > U_{RU}(A | UA_{ST}) > U_{RU}(NA | UA_{ST}) > U_{RU}(NA | UA_{WT})$$

$U_{RU}(A | UA_{WT})$ – the utility Russia receives if it attacks Ukraine when Kyiv is a weak type.

$U_{RU}(A | UA_{ST})$ – the utility Russia receives if it attacks Ukraine when Kyiv is a strong type.

$U_{RU}(NA | UA_{ST})$ – the utility Russia receives if it doesn't attack Ukraine when Kyiv is a strong type.

$U_{RU}(NA | UA_{WT})$ – the utility Russia receives if it doesn't attack Ukraine when Kyiv is a weak type.

Given Russia's objectives regarding Ukraine and the fact that Moscow assessed its power over Kyiv will be lost if it doesn't do something to block it from moving closer to the West (thus risking a European and Euro-Atlantic path for Ukraine) then the option not to attack would lead to a loss of control over Ukraine. The worst scenario for Russia is losing Ukraine, which would have happened if it didn't start a war to secure its objective. The utilities for non-intervention are thus the lowest, regardless of the actual costs of war, however the worst possible scenario for Russia would be not to attack if Kyiv was a weak type (because it would have obtained a victory with relatively small costs for intervention). Similarly, the utilities for intervention are higher, regardless of the actual costs of war, however the best possible scenario for Moscow would be to attack Ukraine if Kyiv was assessed to be a weak type, for the same reasons as before – lower costs compared to the situation in which Ukraine is assessed to be a strong type, that can inflict serious losses to an invading army.

Given the assumptions on the context of the decision to start the war, Russia assessed – to use the terms of the model – Ukraine is a weak type. So, the decision between attacking and holding back becomes straightforward with Moscow having to choose between an easy victory for the Russian Armed Forces *vs.* loss of control over Ukraine when there are low costs for a military intervention. The utility for the first expected outcome is significantly higher than the utility for the second possible anticipated result.

Even if the ordering of the preferences would be slightly different (a second plausible possibility): $U_{RU}(A | UA_{WT}) > U_{RU}(NA | UA_{ST}) > U_{RU}(A | UA_{ST}) > U_{RU}(NA | UA_{WT})$, which means that if Russia assesses Ukraine to be a strong type, would choose not to attack, and only if Kyiv is a weak type Russia orders an intervention, the outcome remains the same.

In conclusion, what led to Russia starting a war is the motive to regain control over Kyiv, considering also the perceived urgency to act (necessary but not sufficient condition), but also the context and the information that substantiated the calculus on the costs for intervention, being decisive the conclusion that Ukraine is a weak type, and a war would inflict only minor costs on a very short period of time. Most likely, Russia substantiated the calculus on the assessment that: (i) Russian Armed Forces are superior to Ukraine's and thus could capture

Kyiv in a few days through a swift victory on the battlefield (that would present Ukraine and the international community with a *fait accompli*); (ii) regular Ukrainian citizens would welcome Russian troops as „liberators” and would not oppose occupation authorities/ make matter more difficult in the occupied territories; (iii) president Zelensky would not be able to become a war leader that keeps Ukrainian united; (iv) the West is not able to make quick decisions and present a unified retaliatory response against Russia (through economic sanctions and support for Ukraine). Maybe later information on the subject will show otherwise.

4. MODEL II - THE ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS

4.1. Background

In the next section I introduce the main theoretical principles and instruments for the second level of analysis, by summarizing the most important characteristics of the model, also, as were presented by Graham T. Allison to maintain consistency:

- i. Basic Unit of Analysis: „Governmental Action as Organizational Output” (Allison 1971, 78). According to Allison, there can be three ways in which what happens between states or the result of their interactions can be considered outputs of different organizations that are part of the state: „actual occurrences are organizational outputs” (Allison 1971, 78) due to the fact that high level decisions activate certain routines already existent; current routines influence the available alternatives for decision-makers when they have to make any choice (by increasing or decreasing the number of options for courses of action); organizational outputs also frame each decision a leader is confronted with.

Relevant for the analysis that will follow is the fact that „outputs raise the problem, provide the information, and take the initial steps

that colour the face of the issue that is turned to the leader" (Allison 1971, 79). In other words, action or decision is substantiated by the information and how it's framed, courses of available action and actual capabilities for action.

ii. Organizing Concepts:

- the agent is not a monolithic state, „but rather a constellation of loosely allied organizations on top of which government leader sits" (Allison 1971, 80);
- multiple organizations deal with the same issue, but with its different aspects, depending on each organization's prerogatives, responsibilities, area of expertise and organizational culture (Allison 2010, 147);
- decision is an organizational output determined by existing routines based on: constraints defining acceptable performance stemming from expectations and demands other organizations have, constitutional authority, demands from different stakeholders and bargaining inside the organization; sequential attention to goals; standard operating procedures that are simple enough conventions to allow coordination; uncertainty avoidance by arranging a negotiated environment for interactions with other entities; problem-directed search when certain issues do not fit the standard procedures; organizational learning and change in response to nonstandard problems; central coordination and control that accounts for coordinating between decentralized organizations; decisions of government leaders on „what organizations will play out which programs where" (Allison 1971, 80-87).

iii. Dominant Inference Pattern: actions performed today influence what actions will be taken the next day, the two being only marginally different and, also, an explanation for a decision means indicating those organizational routines and procedures that led to specific outputs encompassing the evolutions of concern (Allison 1971, 87-88).

4.2. Second level of analysis

The answer I find is best suited to address through the second theoretical framework on governmental action as organizational output is for the following question: *How Russia reached the conclusion that Ukraine is a weak type?* As I concluded in the previous section on the first level of analysis, if Russia assessed invading Ukraine would impose only minor costs, then attacking was leading to a significantly higher payoff than not invading, thus making relevant the organizational process that gave green light for the military intervention.

To tackle the answer, first I identify the organizations that are relevant for producing the information that substantiated the decision to start the war; second, I explore the incentives structure in the Russian political and governmental system and last, I conclude with an explanation on why information was distorted and present a relevant example documented from mass media reports in the aftermath of the failure of Russia's initial plans.

Compared to the previous level of analysis, that was heavily based on theory, the governmental action as organizational output framework is more reliant on accurate information (which are lacking at the moment). This is only a first attempt at analysing the war through this lens.

Previously I identified that the decision to invade Ukraine was substantiated by four sources of costs for Russian Armed Forces: its regular army could capture Kyiv in a couple of days, most Ukrainian civilians expect Russian troops with open arms, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is a weak leader, and the West will not be united on imposing sanctions and other types of costs on Moscow for an invasion. The organizations that are part of the production process of this type of information are the Ministry of Defence and Russian intelligence agencies, as they are engaged in an „active and aggressive campaign in support of the Kremlin's wider geopolitical agenda” (Galeotti 2016). This is also consistent with the phenomena described by the term „militocracy”, that was introduced by Kryshtanovskaya and White (2003) to illustrate the growing power of the military and intelligence agencies' personnel (or siloviki), especially after Putin came to power. Similarly, other authors analyse the

„resurgence of the cult of state security” (Fedor 2011, 7) in post-Soviet times, especially during Putin’s term in office.

According to Galeotti, there are four main agencies within Russia’s intelligence community (not representing the whole siloviki camp), three of them with prerogatives on information collection: **i.** Federal Security Service, the most powerful service or the „first among equals” (Illarionov 2009), its main official prerogatives include internal affairs, but it has also extended its role with „external activities” (Galeotti 2016). It has historical ties with Putin due to his past as a KGB operative, but also because its current director, Aleksander Bortnykov, and the former head of the service, Nikolay Patrushev, are personally close to the president (Galeotti 2016, Belton 2022, Sternthal 2022, Koffler 2022); **ii.** Foreign Intelligence Service’s prerogatives include activities abroad and it has a predilection for „long-term, deep-cover spy rings, inherited from the KGB, and often of questionable cost-effectiveness” (Galeotti, 2016); **iii.** The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation is characterised by an „aggressive and risk-taking culture” (Galeotti, 2016) with its scope of action including „substantial electronic, satellite, and battlefield reconnaissance capabilities, and Spetsnaz (special forces)” (Galeotti, 2016); **iv.** The Federal Protection Service has the formal role to protect key government figures and locations. According to Galeotti, the security Putin created is „powerful, feral, multi-headed, and obedient hydra”, but aggressive agencies are „dangerously counterproductive” when they are not well managed.

The activity of the agencies responsible for the information that substantiated the decision to start the war is characterised by overlapping prerogatives regarding information gathering, combined with increased competition between agencies (Galeotti 2016, Yakovlev 2021), that can lead to certain sub-optimal organisational behaviours like:

- i.** focusing on internal competition for resources to prove the agency’s role and its added value, instead of the officially assigned tasks.

In Baumol’s (1990, 13) words, this is an example of destructive options for rent usage by the agencies. The author gave as an example the struggle among different groups over rent sources that

cause a decline in the overall rent volume or military aggression aimed at obtaining new sources of rent. Similarly, Bremmer (2007, 87) writes that given the spoils available for the siloviki, „it is hardly surprising that there have been conflicts”, but most of the disputes play out far away from the public eye.

The blurring of prerogatives' boundaries promotes „turf wars”, over exposure, funding, business opportunities for officers, and „sometimes outright survival” (Galeotti 2016). Extrapolating, this also creates the incentives from the bottom to the top individuals to embellish reports on the agencies' results, which lead to the possibility of overestimating their actual capacities and capabilities.

- ii. delivering information to satisfy what the head of the state (in the particular case of a personalised system like the one in Russia) expects to receive. „More often, the competition is less visible and bloody and is fought through attempts to outperform and embarrass rivals and acquire the information that will most please the powers that be” (Galeotti 2016).

Samuel Greene considers that Putin is surrounded by people who are afraid to tell the truth if it might create any discomfort, thus distorting the reality the Russian president knows „he's not the first autocrat who gets very bad advice” (King 2022). Kormych consider that Putin is surrounded by a „narrow circle of subordinates who tend to supply the boss only with such information as he wants to hear” (Kormych 2022).

Similarly, according to Galeotti, due to how the system is structured and the incentives it gives, „intelligence chiefs cannot do their job properly - delivering the facts without concern for the consequences. Rather, they must shape and sugarcoat to suit the president (...) or risk marginalization and dismissal” (Galeotti 2016). So, the agencies try to support Putin's assumptions and „play to his fantasies” (Galeotti 2016) rather than pass accurate information.

To justify the assessment, the author presents the rise of the Federal Security Service that delivers information on foreign policy dossiers,

that is not considered to be one of its strengths, as the primary reason Putin frames the way he does future data from other agencies and could also be considered the source of conspiracy theories that support state policy (for example, that Ukraine has laboratories where it develops biological weapons).

More recently but along the same lines, Roman Anin wrote an opinion column about how Putin decided to go to war (2022), citing a former member of a special forces unit inside the Federal Security Service, who said (anonymously) that the agency was „making things up, misinterpreting, and sometimes fantasizing, and the leadership was happy to believe it. For example, they wrote that the regions of Ukraine did not have any real connection with the Kyiv government, and it would take only a nudge to make those regions 'run' toward Russia” (Anin 2022).

- iii. allocating resources for agencies' tasks inefficiently due to redundancy of the overlapping prerogatives. Galeotti mentions two cases relevant for the inefficiency matter, Russian agents being assigned to „uncover” some think-tanks' agendas (Harnden and Walk 2010) or straight up to gather data from open sources (official case USA vs. Evgeny Buryakov 2015).

Also, according to Kormych, the first days of war exposed high levels of corruption negatively impacting Russian Armed Forces' performance in areas like maintenance chains and significant shortfalls in „everything from logistics to psychological preparedness”. This is not necessarily surprising, because incentives for corruption and inefficiency carries over also to mishandling and misappropriation of the defence budget (Kormych 2022).

The previous effects are plausible explanations for how Russia reached the conclusion that Ukraine is a weak type (and, also how Russia's military capabilities were overestimated). If the head of the state expects certain information and the share of benefits agencies receive for their services is influenced by how the president assesses their activities, then it is plausible to say (with a high degree of confidence) that those organizations could in fact

cherry-pick the data to be sent in order to suit the expectations of the beneficiaries. In case they deliver the truth (as they might if previously incentives were non-existent), most likely first they would be perceived as inefficient, and second, their role in the state apparatus might be downgraded.

In his opinion column, Anin cited under anonymity three Federal Security Service officers and former employees explaining that „even if serious information came in, they (N/A Federal Security Service) preferred to put it in a safe and forget it”; „you have to report what the leadership wants to hear, otherwise you won't get promoted. What's more, there could be problems”; „let's say contradictory information comes through the two lines. The supervisor calls the people in charge and (...) everyone understands how to correct it - just the way the boss thinks. No one will insist on his own opinion” (Anin 2022). I have no way to check how the Federal Security Service procedures actually work, but these statements validate the theory and are consistent with the type of incentives present inside the Russian state apparatus.

I end this section with the (unclear) case of Sergey Beseda, as it was portrayed in mass-media. Beseda is or was (uncertain at the moment) the head of the Fifth Directorate of the Federal Security Service, responsible for the information that was reported to Putin on the situation in Ukraine prior to the invasion, at the time the decision to attack or not was assessed and for cultivating the pro-Kremlin opposition in Kyiv. According to Anin (2022), the Fifth Directorate is the only division that was founded by Putin when he was director of the FSB. In 1998 Putin established a division with the aim of spying in the former Soviet Union, which became the means to keep former Soviet countries under Russian influence.

Multiple mass-media sources announced that following the failure of the initial plans for the war, that Beseda was sent to the notorious Lefortovo prison in Moscow, which has had a terrible reputation since the Stalin purges or that he was placed under house arrest in March (Agentura 2022). It has been suggested that he is responsible for the information that substantiated the decision to start the war, but also for the failure to spend the allocated funding towards making levers in Ukraine, that should have made the Russian Armed Forces' advancement in the field much easier (Soldatov 2022).

Later, Anin (2022) reached out to anonymous individuals from the agency, that confirmed the following aspects regarding Beseda's case: his main informants on Ukraine were „fugitive officials, security officials, and businessmen from Viktor Yanukovich's team“, and until the day of the invasion „the key figure among them was Vladimir Sivkovich, a former KGB military counterintelligence officer who served in Potsdam, Germany, during the Soviet era. Sivkovich has held high positions in Ukrainian government agencies. He served as deputy secretary of the National Security and Defence Council from 2010 to 2014“ (Anin 2022). They offered information that Beseda needed to hear and then pass to Putin in order to „justify their existence and to use the budgets they supposedly spent on *agents*“ (Anin 2022). They also, figuratively speaking, lived in pre-2014 Ukraine, without an understanding on how the country and its population have changed since.

5. MODEL III - THE GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS

5.1. Background

In the next section I summarize the main theoretical principles and instruments for the last level of analysis, maintaining the structure proposed by Allison:

- i. Basic Unit of Analysis: „Governmental Action as Political Resultant“ (Allison 1971, 162). The decision regarding how to act/ respond in a certain situation is the resultant of a bargaining process among different intranational actors, which leads to a compromise between stakeholders depending on their vision on the topic of concern and their relative influence.
- ii. Organizing Concepts for this framework represent answer to four questions identified by Allison:
 - *Who plays?* Or in other words „whose interests and actions have an important effect on the government's decisions and actions“ (Allison 1971, 164). So, the actors are individual players in

certain positions in the state apparatus that are, for the current subject, designated to take action on national security matters. „Positions define what players both may and must do” (Allison 1971, 165). Each individual that contributes with an input on a national security decision taken through a bargaining process, has a range of possible options to act within a range defined by its position.

- *What determines each player's stand?* The way each player is positioning on a certain matter under scrutiny stem from his: perceptions, goals and interests (including personal interests and the way in which he perceives even the generally accepted interests to be best followed, or the ways in which a certain goal should be reached), stakes (a multitude on different dossiers or layers of the same problem, that can sometimes overlap) and deadlines that force key-players to act. What is relevant for the current analysis is the fact that „crises necessitate decisions and actions” (Allison 1971, 168).
 - *What determines each player's relative influence?* According to Allison (1971, 168-169), the impact of each of the players on the final decision is influenced by three aspects: bargaining advantages - which stems from formal authority, control over resources needed to implement decisions; skill in negotiations - expertise to frame the issue, how persuasive the player is and charisma; other players' perception on the first two characteristics.
 - *How does the game combine players' stands influence and moves to yield governmental decisions and actions?* Or what are the rules that define the game the actors play and how permissive - in relation to some strategies like bluffing, informal coalitions, deceit, threat, or restrictive - how close the actors stick to formal rules, like Constitution, they are (Allison 1971, 168).
- iii. Dominant Inference Pattern: actions are the resultant of a bargaining process between individuals within the government. So, according

to Allison a decision is explained by identifying the players, their positions and preferences and the „pulling and hauling” (Allison 1971, 173), while also not neglecting the tensions and misunderstandings in the bargaining process.

5.2. Third level of analysis

The answer I find is best suited to address through the third and last theoretical framework on governmental action as political resultant is for the following question: *How the decision circle in the Kremlin decided to order the invasion of Ukraine?* In the first two models, I analysed and concluded that based on available information, Russia assessed that starting a war is the decision that leads to an outcome that maximizes expected utility, and that given the incentive structure of the Russian system, the agencies that have prerogatives of collecting information relevant for substantiating a decision, have provided embellished data. This leaves us to how exactly high-level Russian individuals ended up deciding to start the war.

To address the issue, first I briefly present how centralized the decision-making process is, second I identify the most important individuals inside the power circle in Moscow and present their stance on Ukraine dossier (as depicted from literature and expressed public positions), and lastly analyse how the possible resultant of their presumed bargaining is the alternative represented by the war. According to the literature on how decision-making works in a non-transparent system like Russia, multiple authors (Galeotti 2016, Bremmer 2007, Kormyich 2022) agree that a very limited circle of individuals actually make choices, and that ruling is monopolized by Putin (who has the final word and veto power over any decision) and a few of his close confidants. Galeotti considers that many institutions that have prerogatives in foreign and security policy making „have become nothing more than executive agencies where policies are announced and applied, not discussed, and decided. Instead, decisions are made informally by Putin and his confidants and cronies” (Galeotti 2016). If so, for the last part of the analysis on how Russia decided to start the war, it becomes

relevant the circle of personal relations around Putin, not necessarily how the institutional system officially works, according to the Constitution and other normative provisions.

In the previous section I introduced the concept of siloviki (that I have used as a collection of organizations), but they are not a (collection of) unitary or homogenous actors, not even a „collection of equals” (Bremmer 2007, 86). For this level of analysis, I consider them as distinct individuals. Bremmer considers that „there is a hierarchy among its members” and the structure of the siloviki „is best described as a series of concentric circles”. This means that there are very few individuals close to Putin (in the inner circle), and as we move from the centre, the outer circles are populated by more individuals. The distribution of power among the concentric circles mimics the same dynamics with more policy influence, and control over resources and institutions being held disproportionately by the individuals close to Putin. The siloviki that are closest to the centre of the system enjoy the strongest relationships with Putin and with one another, communicate often, and have the most influence in state affairs. The siloviki that are part of the outer circles, don’t have direct access to core members or decision-making and to Putin. (Bremmer 2007, 86).

Given this brief background, who is part of the inner most circle of power, besides Putin? Lacking clear data on decision-making circle, the next best thing might be to gather what the experts on Kremlin issues have published or stated in mass-media articles. As head of state and commander in chief the responsibility lies with Putin, but he has also relied on limited entourage, consisting of siloviki. It is rather safe to say that his close confidants are part of the Security Council that met few days before the invasion. However, not all of them contributed to Putin’s decision to start a war. According to numerous mass-media reports, Putin diminished even further the number of people who consulted with or talked to face-to-face during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anin 2022). An anonymous Kremlin official, interviewed by Anin, said that during the pandemic Putin „saw no more than five people” (Anin 2022). „During the pandemic Putin’s public appearances were held from his house outside of Moscow, in Novo-Ogaryovo. (...) Rumours has it that it was installed a special disinfection tunnel for visitors and anyone who wanted to see Putin in person,

had to self-isolate for 14 days before the meeting. (...) Due to these speculations, opposition figure, Alexey Navalny (at the moment in jail after also being poisoned with nerve-agent novichok in August 2020) has started to refer to Putin as the „old man in the bunker" (Anin 2022).

Most experts that are easier to access *via* mass-media articles (Andrei Soldatov, Mark Galeotti, Ben Noble, Nikolai Petrov) consider that three officials are most important inside Putin's circle of close contacts: Sergey Shoigu (minister of defence), Valeri Gherasimov (Chief of Staff) and Nikolai Patrushev (Secretary of the Security Council of Russia).

As arguments why they are considered to be close confidantes of Putin, mass-media and experts refer to examples as: their involvement in the 2014 campaign to annex Crimea; hunting and fishing trips Shoigu and Putin take together; long standing loyalty of Patrushev, who served with Putin in the former KGB since the 1970s in St. Petersburg and replaced him as head of Federal Security Service; the three are the masterminds behind several strategic and programmatic documents, as an indicator of their influence over the decision-making in Moscow, for example Patrushev is considered to be behind the new National Security Strategy (more aggressive stance towards the West); also, Patrushev „always held a particular sway over Putin" (Belton 2022).

Also, it is safe to say that other Russian public figures, despite officially holding high positions in the state apparatus, do not also hold power or decision-making privileges. One example is Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs. According to Ukraine's minister of foreign affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, who has met his Russian counterpart in March for negotiations on a possible cease-fire agreement and has left the discussion „empty-handed and frustrated" (Sherwin 2022), „there are other decision-makers for this matter (N/A ceasefire) in Russia". Kuleba has implicitly communicated that Lavrov was out of the decision-circle in Moscow on matters of the war.

The fact that the decision was held secret in a tight circle is also indicated by the fact that Russian media outlets, including the ones that are connected to Kremlin, were surprised by Putin's discourse early February 24th, despite they usually receive indications on how to report on different subjects (Roman Dobrokhotov cited in Sherwin 2022).

Narrowing the decision circle, where does everybody stand? Putin's stance on Ukraine is best illustrated in his article „On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, that I've touched upon briefly. In short, he does not recognize the right to exist for the Ukrainian state, so in this context, it is reasonable to say that Putin leaned towards a military option, rather than a continuation of the previous strategy of maintaining the frozen conflict in Donbass.

Regarding the three siloviki involved in the decision-making process, there is unanimity among Western authors and observers regarding the fact that all of them are rather „hawkish”. According to Adam Casey „The future of Ukraine may hinge on a man ensconced in a bubble that both feeds his aggression and shields him from its consequences” (Adam E Casey, cited in Prince 2022).

Studying their public positioning regarding Ukraine and the war, it can be concluded that all three of the siloviki exponents closest to Putin also favoured a military invasion rather than other more moderate options – because there are no moderate nuances in their public discourses and interventions. For example:

- i. Sergey Shoigu – „parroted the Putin line of demilitarising Ukraine and protecting Russia from the West's so-called military threat” (Risen 2022); he is involved in disseminating conspiracies meant to mobilize society against foreign threats and justify stricter control over Russians' private and political life (Stanovaya 2020), one recent example being that he stated in December 2021 that „American mercenaries” were moving an „unknown chemical compound” into Donbass (Prince 2022), in hindsight most likely preparing the Russian public for the necessity of war;
- ii. Nikolai Patrushev – „is the most hawkish hawk, thinking the West has been out to get Russia for years” (Ben Noble, cited in Risen 2022); according to Catherine Belton, he is considered an ideologist trying to restore Russia's power and prestige at the international level, a „security man who very, very much sees the world through a cold war lens” (Catherine Belton in Gideon Rachman 2022); he is also involved in disseminating conspiracies on how Russia is a victim besieged by the West, his stance towards the West being deeply critical. For example, in a recent interview, Patrushev accused the

West of an „unprecedented food crisis“ (N/A because of the war, Ukraine is no longer able to safely export grains) - „tens of millions of people in Africa or in the Middle East will turn out to be on the brink of starvation - because of the West“ (Egorov 2022). He also accused the West of organising a coup in Ukraine back in 2014 and of supporting the „neo-nazis“ in power in Kyiv (Egorov 2022). Maybe even more ridiculous, Patrushev talks about a „criminal community who fled Ukraine“ and „who is now engaged in wide spreading the sale of orphans taken out of Ukraine“ (Egorov 2022), while the West „has already revived the shadow market for the purchase of human organs from the socially vulnerable segments of the Ukrainian population for clandestine transplant operations for European patients“ (Egorov 2022). Mark Galeotti considers Patrushev to be dangerous because of his „paranoid conspiracy-driven mindset“ (Galeotti 2020).

- iii. Valeri Gherasimov – was involved in creating the pretext for invasion, blaming Kyiv and the West for escalating an otherwise normal mobilization of over 100.000 Russian troops at the border with Ukraine, saying that „supplies of helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and aircraft are pushing the Ukrainian authorities to take drastic and dangerous steps“ (Sherzad and Alexandrov 2022); was one of the masterminds of the Gherasimov Doctrine, that represents an articulation of Russia’s modern warfare strategy (despite relying on soviet methods and tactics), a form of total war that places politics and war within the same spectrum of activities, emphasizing non-military tactics (McKew 2017), that were already being used before the war against both Ukraine and the West.

Theoretically, the four positions of Putin and his closest siloviki could be illustrated as points on an axis from maintaining the status-quo (frozen conflict in Donbass) to total war (including the usage of weapons of mass destruction). At the time of writing this paper I assess there are not enough reliable information that can allow an analysis of the nuances in their positions at the moment the decision was made. However, it seems to lack a divergence of

opinions inside the decision-making circle in Moscow, all of them moving towards a more aggressive stance out of status-quo and into the range of options for invading Ukraine/ starting a war. The resultant of their „negotiations“ (seems that there were no proper negotiations that the public is aware), given their aggressive and hawkish postures, is therefore starting a war.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The article started from the idea that trying to understand something that for our 21st century minds is seriously difficult to grasp – starting a conventional war, invading a sovereign and independent country, and disrupting and changing for ever the lives of over 40 million people in Europe – is a more useful endeavour, at least compared to attempts at explaining Russia’s decision through Putin’s physical or mental health issues.

However, Russian decision-making process is a black box and there is no indication that could be otherwise in the short to medium term. Also, at the time of writing this article the war is still ongoing, making even harder to identify reliable information on the subject. As such, in order to answer the question *How Russia Decided to Start the War against Ukraine?*, I have turned to theory, specifically to the three theoretical models used by Graham T. Allison to analyse the Cuban missile crisis: The Rational Actor, The Organizational Process and The Governmental Politics.

I started the analysis with identifying the context of the decision, or what information probably substantiated Russia’s decision to start a war by making the military intervention alternative less costly and high-success rate move. The first lever of analysis, based on the Rational Actor Model, shows us that in the calculus on the costs for intervention has been decisive Russia’s conclusion that Ukraine is a weak type, and a war would inflict only minor costs on a very short period of time, so the benefits outweigh the costs. The second level of analysis, grounded on the Organizational Process, shows us that the agencies that provided the information that substantiated the decision has incentives to distort the reality to fit Putin’s worldview and also to embezzle money

dedicated to intelligence gathering and influence operations. The third level of analysis, based on the Governmental Politics Model, indicates that Putin surrounded himself with like-minded hawkish individuals with radical views on Ukraine and the West, which led to a skewed resultant in favour of a military intervention in Ukraine (the alternative that all siloviki in the immediate circle of power supported).

There is still a lot to research and uncover on the topic. Each theoretical model only points to certain characteristics of the situation as being definitory for answering the question how the decision to start the war was made. I end with the hope that this analysis will be just a first attempt at understanding how we ended up living in times of war we were used just to read about in books or hear from our grandparents in distant times in the past. I consider that accurately understanding the mechanisms that leads to war is the first step at preventing and deterring future military aggression (even if war is a constant of history, as Durant teaches us).

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