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# Trauma and belief systems; an operational code analysis of Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and the downing of flight MH17

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## Abstract

What is the impact of a crisis on the belief systems of leaders? We know from a substantial body of research that the beliefs of leaders impact their decision making processes. These beliefs are generally assumed to be stable, which makes them a reliable tool for explaining decision making behavior. There is, however, some limited evidence that suggests that when crises are experienced by leaders as a traumatic event, their beliefs can be affected. This article studies the potential impact of crisis-induced trauma on leaders' belief systems by measuring the operational codes of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte before and after the shooting down of flight MH17 in 2014 in Ukraine. We use quantitative content analysis of written texts such as the speeches by Rutte. Our aim is to contribute to the crisis management literature that focuses on individual leadership and crises by finding out whether Rutte's operational code changed significantly after the downing of flight MH17. We conclude that there were two significant changes in Rutte's belief system, but these cannot be attributed to the effects of the traumatic event only. Therefore we offer an alternative explanation that combines the traumatic event hypothesis with the crisis-learning hypothesis.

## KEYWORD

aviation crisis, leadership, trauma

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the impact of crisis-induced trauma on the beliefs of political leaders regarding the nature of the political world? We know from a substantial body of research that the beliefs of leaders impact their (foreign policy) decision making processes (see, e.g., M. G. Hermann, 1980, 2005; Jervis, 1976; Schafer & Walker, 2006a; Winter, 2011). In the foreign policy literature, it is generally assumed that these beliefs are stable. This assumption is based on the cognitive consistency thesis, which states that people prefer to adapt new information to their pre-existing beliefs rather than accepting dissonant new information that dictates a change in their beliefs (Holsti, 1967; Jervis, 1976, 118). This generally unconscious assumed adaptation underpins the assumption that beliefs are stable, and the subsequent understanding that beliefs are thus a reliable predictor of decision making behavior.

But do these beliefs also remain stable during a crisis, when the stakes are high, the information incomplete, and uncertainty rules? The logic of the cognitive consistency thesis suggests that a crisis will reinforce the beliefs of leaders. Within the crisis management literature, a similar expectation is postulated; the threat-rigidity thesis holds that in a crisis individuals and organizations react by relying on habitual behavior and a rigid holding onto existing beliefs (Muurlink et al., 2012; Plotnick et al., 2009; Staw et al., 1981). Based on these two compatible theses, it seems plausible to argue that leaders' beliefs remain stable during a crisis, which would make their beliefs a reliable tool for explaining decision making processes during crises.

The crisis-learning hypothesis, however, suggests that the impact of a crisis can elevate stress levels of decision makers in such a way that it forces them to change the way they view not only the crisis, but also their beliefs (Stern, 1997, 73). A crisis can be experienced as a traumatic event and subsequently change the beliefs leaders hold about their political environment, their adversaries, and their own capacities to deal with the crisis (Boin et al., 2017, 135; Stern, 1997, 73–75). Even more, the suggestion is made that one of the necessary conditions to be able to learn from a crisis, is the alteration of beliefs due to the crisis (Boin et al., 2017, 138). Comparatively, within the foreign policy analysis literature, there is limited evidence that suggests that beliefs can change during a crisis. If a crisis is experienced by leaders as a traumatic event, its impact might change leaders' beliefs rather than reinforce them (Feng, 2005; Renshon, 2008; Walker et al., 1998).

If it is true that beliefs are not as stable as assumed by the cognitive consistency thesis, but can alter due to the traumatic experience of a crisis, there might be ramifications for leaders' decision making behavior during and after a crisis. As many studies use leaders' beliefs as an independent variable to explain decision making behavior of leaders, we argue that our research question, whether a crisis can have an altering impact on leaders' beliefs, is an important empirical question. This article thus studies leaders' beliefs as a dependent variable and investigates the potential (and potentially lasting) impact of crisis-induced trauma on leaders' belief systems.

To find an answer to this question, we use the downing of flight MH17 in 2014 in Ukraine—which took the lives of almost 300 people, including 196 Dutch citizens—as a most likely case study to investigate the impact of this crisis-induced traumatic event on the belief system of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. For the purpose of this investigation, we use Operational Code Analysis (OCA) to study Rutte's beliefs. OCA is one of the dominant actor-centric approaches to foreign policy that analyzes a specific subset of beliefs (the “operational code”) that leaders hold about the political world and their role and position within this political world. The operational code focuses on the conflictual and cooperative nature of foreign policy decision making, which makes

it particularly suited to explain foreign policy behavior from an actor-centric perspective (see, e.g., Dyson & Parent, 2018; Schafer & Walker, 2006a, 2006b; Walker et al., 2018). Using OCA is thus well suited for our analysis, as the downing of MH17 was especially relevant for Dutch foreign policy. Moreover, recent publications show that crisis-induced traumatic events can significantly change the operational codes of leaders (Malici, 2006; Renshon, 2008; Walker & Schafer, 2000; Walker et al., 1998), which makes this case study even more relevant.

## THE ROLE OF BELIEFS IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

Decision makers interpret international and domestic developments. The interpretation is filtered through the lens of their beliefs, which subsequently might result in different perceptions of a similar development among different decision makers (Jervis, 1976). From an actor-centric perspective of foreign policy analysis, decision makers' perceptions codetermine the outcome of foreign policy. It is repeatedly argued that in times of fundamental changes and systematic uncertainty, the role of individual decision makers becomes more important (Byman & Pollack, 2001; Greenstein, 1992; Hagan, 2001; M.G. Hermann, 2015; Kaarbo, 2019). There is a large body of literature that argues that the beliefs of individual leaders influence foreign policy (see e.g., Feng, 2006; M.G. Hermann, 1980, 1986, 2005; Jervis, 1976; Lazarevska et al., 2006; Malici, 2006; Malici & Walker, 2016; Robison, 2006; Schafer & Walker, 2001, 2006a, 2006b; Schafer et al., 2002; Walker, 1977, 1983, 1995, 2003, 2011; Walker & Schafer, 2000, 2007; Walker et al., 1998, 2003, 2011, 2018; Winter, 1987, 2003, 2005, 2011). Therefore, understanding and explaining how these beliefs play a role within the decision making processes is of great importance.

In this article, we focus on OCA as the leading theory on beliefs. OCA started as a research program in the 1950s to get a better understanding of the beliefs of the Soviet Union's Politburo, and its possible impact on the conflictual relationship with the US government (Leites, 1951). Since then, OCA has been used for explanatory and even predictive applications (Dyson & Parent, 2018; Walker et al., 2018; Yang, Keller, & Molnar, 2018). As a specific subset of beliefs, operational codes are generally used to study foreign policy behavior and international relations. OCA presupposes that the beliefs of decision makers are important explanatory factors for foreign policymaking (Steinbrunner, 2002; Walker et al., 2003) because they filter the information about the world and tell decision makers what they should "hold to be true" (Renshon, 2008, 828).

OCA categorizes ten beliefs that all focus in particular on the conflictual or cooperative nature of politics and political relationships. It distinguishes between philosophical beliefs and instrumental beliefs (see Table 1). The philosophical beliefs cover an individual's fundamental ideas about the political world and thereby offer a specific and personal context from which an individual will make decisions. Instrumental beliefs are beliefs leaders hold about their tactics and strategies to achieve political objectives, which can thus offer insights about the beliefs leaders hold about their own capacity to influence the world around them.

Knowing the operational code of political leaders enables us to better understand their foreign policy choices. There is a large body of literature that uses operational codes as independent variables for studying foreign policy decision making. For example, OCA was used for understanding the foreign policy decision making of Dean Acheson (McClellan, 1971), Henry Kissinger (Walker, 1977), John Foster Dulles (Holsti, 1970), Woodrow Wilson (Walker, 1995), Daniel Arap Moi (Adar, 2000), Vladimir Putin

**TABLE 1** Operational code

Philosophical beliefs	
P1	What is the essential nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's political opponents?
P2	What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and/or the other?
P3	Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
P4	How much control or mastery can one have over historical development? What is one's role in moving and shaping history in the desired direction?
P5	What is the role of chance in human affairs and in historical development?
Instrumental beliefs	
I1	What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
I2	How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
I3	How are the risks of political actions calculated, controlled, and accepted?
I4	What is the best timing of action to advance one's interest?
I5	What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

Note: Renshon (2008, 825).

(Dyson, 2001; Dyson & Parent, 2018), Mao Zedong (Feng, 2005), Tony Blair (Schafer & Walker, 2001), Margaret Thatcher (Crichlow, 2006), George W. Bush (Robison, 2006), Bill Clinton (Schafer et al., 2002), and Xi Jinping (Feng & He, 2017; He & Feng, 2013). The OCA literature not only studies individual cases, but also offers comparative analyses of decision makers. For example, Schafer and Walker (2006b) made a comparison of the beliefs of US President Bill Clinton and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Walker and Schafer (2007) did the same for US Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. What all these studies have in common is that they focus on the importance of the operational code for the choices leaders make in their foreign policy approach.

## STABILITY OF THE OPERATIONAL CODE

Although beliefs are generally assumed to be quite stable, in the OCA literature this assumption is debated as well (Feng, 2005; Renshon, 2008; Robison, 2006; Schafer & Walker, 2006a; Walker & Schafer, 2000; Walker et al., 1998). Given the role attributed to beliefs in explaining foreign policy, it is important to know how stable operational codes actually are, whether they can change due to external circumstances, and, if they can, if these changes can be generalized. If we want to use OCA to explain (or even predict) foreign policy behavior, we need to make sure that we can rely on this approach. Several hypotheses have been posed to argue that operational codes can be impacted by experiences and events and therefore are subject to change. These include role change (becoming a foreign policy leader; Feng, 2009; Holsti, 1970; Renshon, 2008), the gathering of experience on the job— also referred to as “learning in office” (Renshon, 2008; Schafer & Crichlow, 2000), and the impact of traumatic events (Malici, 2006; Renshon, 2008; Robison, 2006).

The focus of this article lies in the latter possible reason for the change, exogenous shocks, also called traumatic events (see e.g., Renshon, 2008). There is some empirical evidence that traumatic events have an impact on the operational code. Malici and Malici (2005) attempted to pinpoint the effect of an exogenous shock in the form of a structural change in the political environment over time by studying the operational codes of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. They hypothesized that the end of the Cold War affected their operational codes and compared the operational codes of both leaders in the 1980s with their operational codes in the early 1990s. However, they did not find significant changes in the operational code of Kim Il Sung, and only a very modest change in the belief of Fidel Castro that an individual has control over historical developments (P-4). These results led Malici and Malici to reject their hypothesis and argue that, contrary to the assumption, structural changes in the political environment do not really affect leaders' beliefs (Malici & Malici, 2005, 406).

This argument, however, was rebutted by several empirical studies that investigated the change in operational codes after traumatic events. One example is a study that shows the change in the beliefs of US President Jimmy Carter after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Walker et al. (1998) showed how Carter's beliefs about the nature of the political universe (P-1) changed significantly from a cooperative view towards a more conflictual view after the invasion. Moreover, his belief in the possibility to realize his fundamental political values and aspirations (P-2) decreased significantly due to this event. Another example is the change in some of Lyndon Johnson's philosophical beliefs during the war in Vietnam. Walker and Schafer (2000, 537) investigated two subsequent phases and showed how Johnson's beliefs about the Vietnam war changed and affected the decisions he made, which led to an escalation. During the Vietnam war, his belief in the control he could hold over the situation decreased (P-4) and his belief that chance was leading outcomes (P-5) increased significantly. Moreover, also Johnson's instrumental belief that taking risks is valid decreased significantly. The results show that Johnson became more risk-averse in this period of time (Walker & Schafer, 2000, 537). The third example is the impact of one of the largest contemporary exogenous shocks in the Western hemisphere for many; the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Renshon (2008) studied the impact of 9/11 on the operational code of George W. Bush and evidenced a significant change in Bush's first three philosophical beliefs: Bush started to see the political universe from a more pessimistic viewpoint (P-2), to perceive it as less harmonious (P-1) and much less predictable (P-3). Finally, it is important to mention that traumatic events seem to impact not only leaders in liberal democratic political systems. Feng (2005) presented evidence that the Korean War (1950–1953) had a significant impact on the philosophical beliefs of Mao Zedong. All five of these beliefs changed into a more pessimistic and conflictual perspective of political life in international relations.

Taken altogether, these studies indicate that changes in the operational code can occur due to traumatic events. A similar conclusion can be found in the crisis management literature. On the one hand, the literature argues that a crisis will prone leaders to become more rigid about their core beliefs and limit themselves to the absorption of information in an attempt to deal with the crisis at hand; this is known as the threat rigidity thesis (Staw et al., 1981, 502; Stern, 1997, 77–78). But on the other hand, it is argued that the severe stress of a crisis situation will force leaders to alter their beliefs. The crisis situation is experienced as trauma, which will subsequently affect their perspective of the political world and their adversaries (Stern, 1997, 74).

The empirical results of studies that investigated the impact of trauma on operational codes show that the philosophical beliefs of leaders in particular seem vulnerable to change during times of crisis (Renshon, 2008). The trauma of 9/11 only

created a significant change in Bush's first three philosophical beliefs. This finding is in line with what the crisis-learning hypothesis argues: in order for leaders to learn from a crisis, core beliefs need to be altered (Boin et al., 2017, 128). The philosophical beliefs, after all, color the lenses through which they see the world, and thus also "the other." To "put the crisis to good use" (Boin et al., 2017, 132) and learn from it for future experiences, it is necessary that core beliefs change. In other words, crises encourage decision makers to be open to change rather than digging themselves in their habitual understanding of crisis situations.

The previous OCA studies showed that only (some of the) philosophical beliefs of leaders changed due to a traumatic event and that this change was not extended to the instrumental beliefs, which deal explicitly with the belief in leaders' own capacities to deal with situations. The crisis-learning hypothesis suggests that also the instrumental beliefs change because crisis-learning also involves changed beliefs about a leader's own capacities to influence the world around him or her (Stern, 1997, 74). But the threat-rigidity thesis counters this expectation. When in the middle of a crisis, the ultimate moment to learn from the situation and to adapt beliefs and behavior, leaders tend to dig into their old beliefs, due to the stress of the moment. Boin et al. (2017, 134–135, 138) argue that in order for a leader to be able to reform policies in the aftermath of a crisis, their beliefs have to change. But that simply doesn't happen with every leader. Boin et al. (2017, 131–132) posit that there are specific necessary conditions, such as, for example, the willingness to be accountable for the crisis despite the political pressure to play the blame game, to allow such a crisis to adapt strategies and tactics. And whether leaders are apt to do so depends highly on their personal characteristics, their experience, and their interpretation of a crisis (Beer et al., 2004). Given that until date we lack empirical evidence that the instrumental beliefs of leaders change due to crisis-induced trauma, we, therefore, expect that the instrumental beliefs will not change.

Based on the studies above, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *There will be a significant change in the operational code of a political leader due to a traumatic event, in particular in the philosophical beliefs.*

One of the questions that immediately arises is to what extent a traumatic event can remain to be of influence on beliefs, if there is any, also after the crisis has subsided. In the first instance, it seems very likely that an exogenous shock, especially when such an event is experienced as traumatic, can influence the beliefs of a leader. However, whereas it can be assumed that a change in the operational code due to role change will be a permanent shift, in the case of a traumatic event it can be argued that after some time, when the immediate crisis is over, the dust has settled and the fear is gone, the beliefs of a leader will change back to what they were before the crisis causing the exogenous shock. This was argued by M.G. Hermann (2005, 208) in regard to a different, but similar, way to study leaders; Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA). Hermann argued that due to the stress leaders experience during crises, they can respond differently as compared with in a normal (non-crisis) situation. In other words, if Hermann is right, a possible change in the operational code after a traumatic event might be temporal and limited to the time of crisis and directly thereafter. If that is the case, we can expect that after some time the operational code will return to the beliefs which the leader held before the crisis. This has hardly been researched. To the best of our knowledge, only Renshon (2008) studied whether George W. Bush showed a permanent change in his operational code by measuring his operational code at the end of his second term and comparing it with the operational code immediately after 9/11. The results showed that there were no significant changes in the philosophical beliefs, and we can thus assume

that the changes in the operational code that occur due to a traumatic event are permanent. This would mean that Hermann's suggestion that temporary stress causes temporary changes in leadership traits, would not find support for the operational code. Based on these insights we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H2:** *If a significant shift in a leader's operational code occurs due to a traumatic event, this shift will be lasting.*

## CONCEPTS

### Change in beliefs

OCA offers for every belief a conceptual continuum that spans between conflictual/pessimist on the one end and cooperative/optimist on the other end. Depending on where a leader stands before the traumatic event enters, a change would indicate a significant shift towards the other pole. In other words, if a leader is quite optimistic about the achievement of goals and a shift occurs towards more optimism, this would mean a reinforcement of this belief. If the change would be in the other direction, that is, lowering the optimism, that would be a change in direction and thus a significant change. In the latter case, it would involve a change in the core meaning of the belief as defined by Swinkels (2020).

### Traumatic event

A traumatic event or exogenous shock has, albeit used in several OCA studies, hardly been conceptualized. C.F. Hermann (1990) refers to an exogenous shock as a dramatic international event with an instant impact on and visibility to the receiver. It is a shock or event that is impossible to be ignored by decision makers and one that asks for a reaction. Renshon (2008), for example, relied on the obviousness of 9/11 as a traumatic event. Although that is hardly debatable; there are other events that might be less clear cut, but that could still count as a traumatic event. Also, a traumatic event for one decision maker, might not be a traumatic event for another. The concept is further blurred by the practice to use exogenous shock as a synonym for the traumatic event. In this article, we use the term traumatic event because the adjective "traumatic" explains better the impact that a crisis has on an individual decision maker. That being said, a traumatic event needs to be further conceptualized in order to make it a useful concept in OCA.

A traumatic event in a medical context refers to a psychic trauma, which is "a psychologically upsetting experience that produces an emotional or mental disorder or otherwise has lasting negative effects on a person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior" (Medical Dictionary, 2019). Trauma literally means "damage" and that makes a traumatic event a harmful experience leading to a psychological disorder. However, although that meaning makes sense in a medical setting, a trauma within a political context does not necessarily involve psychological damage of the political actor(s) involved. Therefore, it makes sense to distinguish a psychological trauma from a political trauma. Although still psychologically upsetting, a political trauma is less personal than a psychological trauma and is, therefore, more distant to the decision maker's psychological state of mind. It does not (necessarily) touch the psychological characteristics of a person, but his (more distant) beliefs about the political world. Also, the more psychologically distant nature of a political trauma means that the change is not necessarily lasting (even though we hypothesize it is).



Therefore, for the purpose of our study, we define a traumatic event in the context of OCA as a psychologically upsetting political event that causes an emotional or mental *change* or otherwise has an impact on a person's (decision maker's) thoughts, feelings, and/or behavior. Based on the literature discussed above, we assume that mental change can be identified in the operational code.

## METHOD

### Case selection

In order to qualify as "traumatic," a political event must lead to a clear psychologically upsetting experience. We use the crisis of the downing of flight MH17 as a most likely case study to test if there occurred a change in the operational code of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. MH17 was a flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur which was shot down over Ukraine on July 17, 2014 and ended 298 lives, including those of 196 Dutch citizens. The event got worldwide media coverage and was generally perceived as a shocking event. Particularly so, because it involved a civilian flight that was shot down by one of the parties to an armed conflict. The Netherlands holds Russia accountable for shooting down the airplane because although Ukrainian separatists were accused of actually launching the attack, it involved a Russian surface to air missile system (i.e., a BUK missile system). The event was a shock to the Dutch public in the sense that it suddenly brought the war in Ukraine closer to home (Kuipers et al., 2020, 132). The downing of MH17 also counts as an exogenous shock in the understanding of C.F. Hermann (1990); it had instant impact and visibility. Moreover, it led to a foreign policy change because it was the start of (tougher) EU sanctions against Russia. There are also clear indications that the MH17 case was a political trauma for Rutte as well. This is important because even if an event is considered to be traumatic in general, it must be a personal shock as well in order to qualify as a traumatic event from the perspective of OCA. In his address to the UN General Assembly on 27 September 2018, Rutte referred to the event as a very impactful event: "It remains an open wound for my country, and for all grieving nations who had nationals on board" (Rijksoverheid, 2018). Moreover, on an earlier occasion, Rutte made clear in an in-depth interview for Dutch television that MH17 was the most terrible event in his career so far (VPRO, 2016). With these clear indications, the question is whether this traumatic event led to a changed operational code. Or did Rutte's operational code remain stable in spite of the traumatic nature of this event? Although flight MH17 had nine other nationalities on board, we decided to focus on the Dutch Prime Minister only because most travelers had the Dutch nationality. That makes it a most likely case to test the traumatic event hypothesis.

### Measuring the operational code

One of the reasons why OCA has not been used frequently since George (1969, 1979) reconceptualized Leites' work, was the time-consuming, subjective, and sometimes un-systematic nature of the qualitative content analysis to measure the OCA. In 1998, Walker, Schafer, and Young developed the Verbs in Context System (VICS), a quantitative content analysis system that retrieves and analyzes operational code beliefs based on attributions from written sources, such as speeches, interviews, and other public statements. In brief (for a more thorough discussion of VICS, see Walker et al. (1998, 2003), the VICS method analyzes the used verbs within the context these verbs are used. It does so by coding the

verbs, based on an analysis of the other words in the sentence. It first codes for each utterance (which is a sentence with a verb in it) and establishes if the verb is transitive (referring to a direct object) or intransitive (non-referential). Second, if the verb is transitive, it is coded for direction: is it conflictual (–) or cooperative (+)? Third, VICS then codes the intensity: does the utterance indicate “deeds” or “words”? “Deeds” are verbs that indicate the actual use of power, for instance, the word “attack.” “Words” indicate the *threat* of using power, for instance, the verb “warn.” Lastly, VICS codes the attribution of the verbs: whether these are referring to themselves (which indicates that the belief is instrumental) or to the other (which indicates the belief is philosophical). If verbs do not fit any category or show to have no political context, they are coded as neutral. VICS calculates, based on these four dimensions, the scores for the philosophical and instrumental beliefs as indices. The indices for the first and second philosophical and instrumental beliefs score between –1 (very conflictual/pessimistic) and +1 (very harmonious/optimistic), the indices for all other beliefs range between 0 (very pessimistic) and +1 (very optimistic). To measure Rutte's operational code, we use the online software program Profiler Plus (version 5.8.4.) provided by Social Science Automation Inc, which offers the “Operational Code” scheme based on VICS for its calculations (Levine & Young, 2014).

## Data selection

Following the recommendation of Dille (2000), we only used prepared remarks, namely public speeches, to measure Rutte's operational code. Dille found that the use of spontaneous and prepared remarks generated variance in operational codes of leaders, and recommended that these different types of remarks should not be used together for the operational code. Dille, however, also argued that as long as leaders are involved in the writing of the speeches these can be used as sources of leaders' operational codes (Dille, 2000, 583). From Rutte, it is known that he is actively involved in preparing his speeches and interviews (NRC, 2019). Moreover, his down-to-earth lingo is clearly recognizable and as such often referred to as “Ruttiaans” in Dutch (free translation: Ruttonian speech; Trouw, 2018). All in all, it seems likely that Rutte is substantially involved in the writing of his speeches.

For our data selection, we obtained all speeches from the official site of the Dutch government: [www.government.nl](http://www.government.nl). We used only those speeches that were originally written in English with the purpose to be expressed in that language. In other words: we did not use speeches translated from Dutch to English. For the selection of our speeches, we relied on the criteria as set by Schafer and Walker (2006a). First, the speech must have a focus on foreign policy. As Walker et al. (2003) found that an operational code is domain-specific, each speech has to cover at least for a larger part a foreign policy issue. Moreover, topics covered in the speeches have to refer to different aspects of foreign policy to ensure a general operational code. Also, each speech has to meet the minimal requirement of 1500 words, and/or at least 20 coded verbs (Schafer & Walker, 2006a, 44). Lastly, Schafer and Walker's recommend randomly collecting at least 10 speeches (or all speeches within a specific time period), and if that would turn out to be impossible, to aggregate speeches to create one data-point (Schafer & Walker, 2006a, 44).

## Measuring change

We selected three timeframes for our data selection (see Table 2). Timeframe one denotes the period from Rutte's first speech in English (September 11, 2011) until the day

**TABLE 2** Selected timeframes

Timeframe		Starting	Ending	#speeches	#words
1	Before downing MH-17	September 11, 2011	July 16, 2014	21	18,801
2	After downing MH-17	July 17, 2014	July 16, 2016	24	19,618
3	Control timeframe	March 28, 2017	February 13, 2019	10	25,763

before the downing of the MH17 (July 16, 2014). Timeframe two denotes the period from the day of the downing (July 17, 2014) until 2 years after (July 16, 2016). We wanted a period of time between timeframe two and timeframe three to make sure that we would be able to detect a possible shift. Pragmatically, we took the last day in our data collection (February 13, 2019) as the endpoint of timeframe three, and then searched back in time until we found at least 10 foreign policy speeches that met all criteria. This turned out to be March 28, 2017 which became the beginning of timeframe three.

For the period from September 11, 2011 to February 13, 2019, we found in total 132 English speeches of Rutte. However, not all speeches were foreign policy-related. For every timeframe, we first selected all foreign policy speeches and checked if these met the criteria. As Rutte's speeches are relatively short, in particular during his first years in office, this selection did not lead to the required 10 speeches with a minimum of 1500 words and/or 20 coded verbs for timeframes one and two. Thus, we aggregated two or more speeches on the same topic that were held on the same day, one day before, or one day after into one data-point. For instance, we combined the two speeches Rutte held in New York at the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations General Assembly, on September 24, 2014 and September 26, 2014, respectively. In total, we used 21 speeches in total to create 10 data-points for timeframe one. For timeframe two, we used 24 speeches to create 14 data-points. For timeframe three, while tracing back in time from February 13, 2019, we found 10 speeches that fulfilled all criteria and thus leading to 10 data points. All in all, we have thus collected for every timeframe the entire population of English spoken speeches about foreign policy that fulfilled the criteria for the VICS analysis.

The analysis of a possible change in Rutte's operational code after the traumatic event of the downing of the MH-17 is based on an analysis of variance (ANOVA). As explained above, we were looking for a change in beliefs, and in a different direction. We operationalized change as a significant change in a belief towards the other pole of the continuum. Due to the small sample size, we used a significance threshold of 10% (Gigerenzer et al., 2004) and, moreover, the more robust Welch *F*-test instead of Levene's test (Delacre et al., 2018). We used two planned contrasts. The first contrast measured if there was a significant change after the traumatic event. The second measured if a possible change in timeframe two showed to be stable or not. We did so by analyzing the difference between timeframes one and three to discover whether or not the operational code of Rutte during timeframe three was significantly different than during timeframe one. The results of our analysis are captured in Table 3 and are discussed below.

## RESULTS

### Rutte's operational code (timeframe one)

Rutte's operational code before the traumatic event shows a leader who sees the political universe as harmonious as he scores 0.65 on his P-1 belief (which ranges

**TABLE 3** Impact of traumatic events on Mark Rutte's operational codes

Compared to	Timeframe 1 (n = 10) -	Timeframe 2 (n = 14) Timeframe 1	Timeframe 3 (n = 10) Timeframe 1
<b>P1</b> Nature Political Universe	0.65	<b>0.45</b> (-1.89)*	<b>0.53</b> (-1.69)*
<b>P2</b> Realization Political Values	0.39	0.30 (-1.30)	<b>0.27</b> (-2.41)**
<b>P3</b> Predictability Political Future	0.17	0.18 (0.40)	0.18 (0.19)
<b>P4</b> Control Historical Development	0.36	0.40 (0.69)	0.29 (-1.33)
<b>P5</b> Role of Chance	0.94	0.92 (-0.75)	0.94 (0.47)
<b>I1</b> Strategic Approach to Goals	0.78	0.63 (-1.09)	0.52 (-1.56)
<b>I2</b> Tactical Pursuit of Goals	0.39	0.29 (-1.02)	<b>0.20</b> (-2.21)**
<b>I3</b> Risk Orientation	0.37	0.41 (0.35)	0.46 (0.80)
<b>I4a</b> <i>Timing of action:</i> Cooperation/Conflict	0.22	0.33 (0.93)	0.43 (1.51)
<b>I4b</b> <i>Timing of action:</i> Words/Deeds	0.60	0.37 (-1.84)	0.38 (-1.60)
<b>I5a</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Reward	0.07	0.07 (-0.02)	0.10 (0.38)
<b>I5b</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Promise	0.01	0.01 (-0.23)	0.01 (0.40)
<b>I5c</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Appeal/Support	0.03	<b>0.11</b> (2.44)**	<b>0.11</b> (2.73)**
<b>I5d</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Oppose/Resist	0.59	0.58 (-0.14)	0.65 (0.66)
<b>I5e</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Threaten	0.06	0.08 (0.90)	<b>0.02</b> (-1.74)*
<b>I5f</b> <i>Utility means:</i> Punish	0.25	0.16 (-1.47)	<b>0.11</b> (-2.54)**

Note: Data in bold denote significant results. Values in parentheses are *t* values of planned contrasts based on Welch's *F*-test.

\* $p \leq 0.10$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

between -1 and 1). He is quite optimistic about his ability to realize his political values (P-2 = 0.39). He also believes that the role of chance in human affairs is high (P-5 = 0.94), that the political future is very unpredictable (P-3 = 0.17), and that his ability to control history within the boundaries posited by others and structures is limited (P-4 = 0.36). These scores match rather well with the more general political profile of Rutte as a pragmatic politician who is able to forge coalitions with political adversaries and is able to use opportunities to his benefit.

His instrumental beliefs, which indicate what a leader believes about how to best achieve his objectives, show that Rutte is a leader who is highly cooperative ( $I-1 = 0.78$ ) in his strategies. When it comes to the tactics to follow through on his strategies, he is still cooperative, but much less so than his strategies would imply ( $I-2 = 0.39$ ). He does like to take some risks, although his risk-proneness is low ( $I-3 = 0.37$ ). And although Rutte shows to be highly flexible when it comes to the timing of using either cooperative or conflictual verbs ( $I-4b = 0.60$ ), his actual timing of action in this regard is much lower in flexibility ( $I-4a = 0.22$ ). In other words, based on the first four instrumental beliefs, we see a leader who shows to be willing to actively participate in international relations, however, in following through with concrete action he is more reluctant and careful. When we look at  $I-5$ , the belief about the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interest, we can see that during timeframe one Rutte had a strong belief in the usefulness of opposing and resisting others to achieve his goals. This stands in stark contrast with his weak belief in more cooperative means such as rewarding, promising, or appealing, and with his weak belief in coercive means such as the use of threat or punishment.

### Change in Rutte's operational code (timeframe two)

When we look at Rutte's operational code after the traumatic event (timeframe two) two significant changes are visible. Just like the shift Bush made after 9/11, and Carter after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Rutte's  $P-1$  belief changed significantly ( $t(18.8) = -1.88$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) in a reversed direction. He saw the political universe as "harmonious" before the downing of MH17 ( $P-1_{\text{timeframe1}} = 0.65$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ), but that belief decreased significantly ( $P-1_{\text{timeframe2}} = 0.45$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ). Rutte came to view the world as significantly less harmonious in comparison with the time before the crisis.

The other significant change was in the means Rutte believes are necessary to achieve his goals. More, in particular, the shift occurred in  $I-5_{\text{appeal}}$  which measures the extent to which an individual thinks his or her interests are advanced by asking support from others. As discussed above, before the crisis Rutte did not believe in appealing to others ( $I-5_{\text{appeal-timeframe1}} = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.04$ ), but after the MH17 crisis, he increasingly ( $t(16.9) = 2.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) started to believe in appealing to others ( $I-5_{\text{appeal-timeframe2}} = 0.11$ ,  $SD = 0.11$ ), which means a significant shift in this instrumental belief.

### Lasting change? (timeframe three)

As we found a statistically significant change in two of Rutte's beliefs ( $P-1$  and  $I-5$ ), the question is now whether or not this change persisted over time. Did Rutte's belief system change lastingly due to the trauma experienced by the MH17 crisis, or was this change temporarily, and did the beliefs return to "normal" when the balance was reestablished? To answer this question, we used the results of the ANOVA and compared Rutte's operational code in timeframe one with timeframe three.

Rutte's belief in the harmonious nature of the political universe ( $P-1$ ) diminished in timeframe two and changed again in timeframe three ( $P-1_{\text{timeframe3}} = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ). Rutte started to view the political universe again as more harmonious, however, not as harmonious as before the MH17 crisis. And although this change was significant ( $t(17.8) = -1.69$ ,  $p \leq 0.10$ ) when we compare this belief between timeframe one and timeframe two, the actual value of the  $P-1$  belief in timeframe three remains closer to the value of the  $P-1$  belief in timeframe two. We thus conclude that the change in  $P-1$

due to a traumatic event was strong enough to argue that the crisis had a lasting effect on this belief. Looking at the instrumental belief that significantly changed, ( $I-5_{\text{appeal}}$ ), after the traumatic event, we see that this belief remained stable in timeframe three. The score is even exactly the same as in timeframe two, and also the comparison between the ( $I-5_{\text{appeal}}$ ) scores of timeframe three and the ( $I-5_{\text{appeal}}$ ) scores of timeframe one shows that the change in this belief due to the traumatic event persisted ( $t(12.1) = 2.73, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 3 points to significant changes in other philosophical and instrumental beliefs between timeframe one and timeframe three as well. These beliefs were not altered directly after the traumatic event, but they did overtime. Rutte's belief in his ability to realize his political values (P-2) decreased significantly ( $t(17.4) = -2.41, p < 0.05$ ) in timeframe three (P-2 = 0.27, SD = 0.13) in comparison to timeframe one (P-2 = 0.39, SD = 0.11). This means that Rutte became more pessimistic over time in regard to this belief, however not demonstrably due to the traumatic event. Some instrumental beliefs also changed. Rutte's belief in his tactical pursuit of goals (I-2) decreased significantly ( $t(15.7) = -2.21, p < 0.05$ ) between timeframe one (I-2 = 0.39, SD = 0.23) and timeframe three (I-2 = 0.20, SD = 0.15). Another change was seen in  $I-5_{\text{threaten}}$  which decreased significantly ( $t(11.7) = -1.74, p \leq 0.1$ ) when comparing timeframe one ( $I-5_{\text{threaten}} = 0.06, SD = 0.06$ ) with timeframe three ( $I-5_{\text{threaten}} = 0.02, SD = 0.03$ ). The last change was a significant decrease ( $t(16.3) = -2.54, p < 0.01$ ) in Rutte's belief in his utility to punish when compared in timeframe one ( $I-5_{\text{punish}} = 0.25, SD = 0.14$ ) and timeframe three ( $I-5_{\text{punish}} = 0.11, SD = 0.10$ ). In other words, these changes in Rutte's instrumental beliefs show that over time, he started to believe less strongly in his tactics, and moreover less strongly in the utility of threats and punishment than before. As these changes occurred in timeframe three and not in timeframe two it is not possible to directly link them to the MH17 crisis. It might after all be very well an effect of the crisis, but an effect which took more time to unfold. This possible belated effect of MH17 cannot be seen in isolation, but should be considered within the context of other experiences Rutte had between the downing of MH17 and the end of timeframe three. Concretely, we, therefore, argue that the change in instrumental beliefs in timeframe three is probably best understood as a result of crisis-learning, in which the MH17 crisis and the aftermath of that crisis forms an intrinsic and important part.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to investigate the potential impact of crisis-induced trauma on a leader's belief system. There are contradicting hypotheses about what a crisis can induce; enforcing existing beliefs versus a change of these beliefs. We focused on the possible impact of the MH17 crisis on the beliefs of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. We did not only investigate whether he changed his beliefs, but also whether these changes persisted. We found two significant changes as a result of the traumatic event. The first change is a significant decrease in Rutte's belief that the nature of the political universe is harmonious (P-1). Interestingly, this corresponds with the result that Renshon (2008) found in his OCA of Bush. Moreover, this change did only bounce back a little bit in timeframe three and thus remained at a significantly decreased level. The second change is a significant increase in Rutte's use of appeal to others for support ( $I-5_{\text{appeal}}$ ) and this change also remained at its adapted level. In both cases, the traumatic event was of significant and enduring impact.

From an alternative perspective, it can be argued that not much change occurred at all right after the crisis; most of Rutte's beliefs remained stable. From that angle, the

rigidity thesis gets at least some support. There was change over time, however. When we tested for significant differences between timeframe one and timeframe three with the aim to investigate whether the changes after the traumatic event solidified, this analysis revealed changes in other beliefs, changes that did not directly occur after the traumatic event, but only later. These results seem to lend support to the notion that leaders have learned from the crisis. Within the crisis management literature, this is the so-called 'crisis-learning hypothesis' which argues that the occurrence of a crisis can be the trigger for leaders to alter beliefs, in particular about their own role and capacities. From an OCA angle, we could also argue that the so-called "learning-in-office" hypothesis finds support, which argues that leaders build up experience during their time in office, which subsequently leads to altered beliefs (Renshon, 2008, 833; Schafer & Crichlow, 2000, 562).

There are at least two relevant similarities between the results of the OCA "learning in office" studies and ours. First, for Rutte, the (P-2) belief in his ability to realize political values decreased, just like what happened with Clinton as the result of learning in office (Schafer & Crichlow, 2000). It seems that for both leaders the reality of leading a country made them realize that their influence is more limited than they thought. Bush did not show such a change. On the contrary; his belief in the role of chance (P-5) decreased, which indicates that his time in office did the opposite and made him believe that he has more control than he believed before (Renshon, 2008). Consequently, the changes in the philosophical beliefs due to learning in office are unlikely to be generalizable.

Second, just like Bush, Rutte's views on the utility of threats changed significantly. Over time, both leaders started to use threats less, which might be an indication that experiencing more time in office, including the experience of a traumatic event, can alter the belief that threat is a useful instrument. If this is a generalizable pattern is impossible to say on the basis of an analysis of two leaders only (for Clinton, this particular belief was not measured in the study of Schafer & Crichlow).

All in all, the similarities do indicate that learning, whether that is called learning in office or learning from crisis, which seems to denote the same principle when it comes to the impact of a crisis-induced traumatic event, is of influence on the belief systems of leaders. The results are intriguing enough to argue that more research on the potential impact of traumatic events on operational codes should be done. The most intriguing part is that within the limited studies available about the impact of crisis-induced trauma, similar patterns are visible among leaders of different institutional settings. Rutte, being the prime minister of a parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system relies on different institutional powers and settings than the US presidents of the earlier studies. The fact that both showed some similar outcomes indicates that a generalizable impact might be expected from severe crises and the subsequent trauma that comes with it. We would therefore recommend replicating this study for other cases, within varying institutional settings, to see if our suggestion about the impact of the crisis will hold also for other leaders.

## CONCLUSION

With this study, we tested the validity of OCA as an independent variable. If we would find evidence that OCA can produce stable operational codes, it would bode for the validity of this approach. So, what have we learned about the stability of the operational code and thus its use?

First of all, crisis-induced traumatic events seem to be of effect on the operational codes of leaders. They change beliefs and these changes remain. Not all beliefs are

changed though, most remain the same, which lends support for the threat-rigidity thesis. But where a change in beliefs occurs, we do find similarities with other leaders that experienced crisis-induced threat. These latter results thus suggest that we can expect leaders to start to see the world as less harmonious than they did before. Moreover, the fact that such a change is measured several years after the traumatic event indicates that such a change in beliefs is permanent. This finding lends support to the crisis-learning hypothesis, which suggests that crises can permanently alter the beliefs of leaders. The overall picture that this study sketches is that the threat-rigidity thesis and the crisis-learning hypothesis both find support, which implies that these hypotheses do not mutually exclude each other but can rather find support at the same time. Not all beliefs are open to change, most are stable or reinforced when severe crises happen. However, some beliefs do change, we now know that in particular, the first two philosophical beliefs are prone to change and not just for Rutte. These beliefs deal with the way leaders experience the nature of the political world (P-1) and the role they can play in it to realize political goals (p-2). It might be worthwhile to investigate this in further detail: why aren't these beliefs reinforced, why are these beliefs not rigid under threat like most of the other beliefs? And why are these changes permanent over time, what are the lessons learned?

Of course, the learning in office hypothesis, coming from the OCA literature might be applicable as well. The crisis might have induced learning, but so might have other experiences. It is impossible to control for the difference between crisis-learning and learning-in-office, especially because crisis-learning might have constituted the learning-in-office for the bigger part. It might be very well possible that the stabilization of the new beliefs indicates rather an overall learning process by leaders than only that single-peaked moment in time. So, we caution to take also this possibility into account and recommend to study this aspect of the OCA more in-depth in the next studies.

Lastly, what do the results of this study imply for OCA? Does this knowledge about the instability of beliefs render the OCA useless for explanation and possibly prediction? We argue it is not. We now know that changes can occur, and this just means that the period of time that is used for OCA should be selected with care. If a leader has never experienced any traumatic political events, it seems that his or her operational code can be used. If there was such a traumatic event, however, it would be prudent to select the data with consideration for the possible effects. Second, the same goes for the crisis-learning hypothesis. When leaders have experienced a severe crisis that might have induced trauma, it would be prudent to select more recent data to determine the operational code in order to control for the potential impact of the crisis.

For all these reasons, we argue that OCA as an actor-centric approach to foreign policy remains valid and useful. However, we recommend including two more criteria to the parameters for data selection when using OCA for explaining a leader's foreign policy at a given moment in time. These are, (1) to check for traumatic events during the years in office, and if these are available, to select data only from after that period, and (2) to be aware of the years in office, and select data from a period that reflects the period in which we can assume leaders to have learned in office. How long this period should be, remains an empirical question. Our analysis shows that for Rutte, the changes only occurred after six years in office. We suggest more research should be done to figure out how much time needs to pass before enough experience is gathered.

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