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Hooked on a Feeling: Russia's Annexation of Crimea Through the Lens of Emotion

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This article tests the plausibility of an affect-centered framework for foreign policy analysis, using the 2014 annexation of Crimea as an illustrative case. It identifies questions left open by prevailing accounts based on international relations theory and shows how a supplementary conceptual lens can improve existing explanations. The affective perspective suggests that the Russian president deemed intervention in Ukraine without alternative. Otherwise, Russia would have surrendered any claim to relevance in European security. More saliently, the ouster of Yanukovych, as a possible precedent for Russia, frightened Putin and increased his resolve to take action. Also, contrary to the interpretation of the annexation as an improvised reaction to a political crisis, evidence suggests that the Russian elite welcomed the opportunity to break free from uncomfortable partnership dynamics with the West.

KEY WORDS: affect and emotion, foreign policy analysis, international relations theory, rationality, Russia, status

In terms of its execution, success, and the degree to which it was premeditated, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea appears in stark contrast to its attack on the whole of Ukraine in 2022. Aside from the brutality of Russian forces, it is also the rhetoric used by Vladimir Putin—characterized by bitterness and contempt—to legitimize the operation and deny Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state that has startled global audiences. Although only few experts predicted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, long-time students of Russian foreign policy are less surprised by what appears to be the culmination of a process of alienation between Russia and the Western world over Ukraine. While the current war was, above all, the choice of Vladimir Putin, large parts of the political elite have supported a kind of thinking that puts blame for failings of Russian foreign policy on the United States and its European allies and viewed a strong state as the only way to ensure Russian security and status in the long run. The choices made by the Russian president in 2013–14 played a crucial part in the evolution of this thinking, which this article attempts to highlight, by looking at foreign policy through the lens of affect and emotion.

Although overshadowed by current events, it remains important to try and offer a comprehensive explanation for what happened in 2014. First, we should not allow a creeping normalization of Russia's 2014 fait accompli due to its more egregious current military campaign.

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Annexing Crimea, in violation of international law, caused a sea change in Russian-Western relations and posed the greatest challenge to the European security architecture since the end of the Cold War (until now). Since that time, Russia has contested Western interpretations of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that have served as the bedrock foundation of the international system. The events of early 2014 also continue to be an important test case for international relations (IR) theory and area studies. Much like most analysts failed to foresee its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's annexation of Crimea largely blindsided both IR generalists and long-time observers of Russia's role in international politics. Finally, going forward, the status of Crimea will continue to be a major issue in any negotiations between Russia and Ukraine and a key determinant of the future Russian-Western relationship.

The argument proceeds as follows: The first section presents my understanding of affect and emotion, defining key terms and concepts, and how distinct affective responses were applied as analytical tools. For theoretical underpinnings, the article primarily relies on Richard Lazarus' cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotions, as well as Jonathan Turner's evolutionary-psychological work. Using these concepts, the article seeks to identify representations of affective meaning in the source material—statements by senior Russian officials and associated foreign policy discourse. It does so by putting the affective perspective in the context of prevailing IR theoretical narratives surrounding the political crisis in Ukraine in 2013–14 and culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea. The objective is to highlight their respective strengths and weaknesses and to identify open questions and methodological limitations that can be meaningfully complemented by the application of affective phenomena.

Affect and Emotion in Foreign Policy Analysis

Affect and emotion present us with phenomena that have been comprehensively studied across psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. In contrast to more elusive accounts premised on the individual motivation of foreign policymakers, emotions have the advantage of being, in principle, generalizable and readily observable in social interaction. Recent advances in the life sciences have enabled new ways of conceptualizing human experience and behavior and contributed to an "affective turn" in the social sciences. While giving us a more comprehensive understanding of affect and emotion, it has not necessarily made these phenomena easier to apply to analytical ends.

Perhaps most importantly, the work of Antonio Damasio (1994) illustrates that affect and cognition are closely intertwined. While a conventional understanding of decision-making suggested that emotion needed to be "overcome" to pursue one's rational interests, Damasio showed that the process of attributing information with affective valence is a prerequisite for rational thought and decision-making. Or, as Collins (1993) put it, emotions are the "common denominator of rational choice" (p. 9). Other research has shown that when experiences and cognitive beliefs concerning risks diverge, "emotional reactions often drive behaviour" (Loewenstein et al., 2001, p. 267; Mercer, 2010). While that suggests emotion plays a bigger and more complex role in decision-making than we used to think, it does not mean decisions are always "made on a whim." At a minimum, it suggests that the traditional dichotomy between rational choice and "emotionality," whereby the term is used to denote "irrationality," is no longer tenable.

Just as there cannot be rational thought without affect, the converse relationship is equally true: Only when individuals have become cognizant of objects and events in their environment and history can they form experiences about these (Turner, 2007; 2009, p. 342). In fact, the generation of an affective response requires a focal point, or "concern." The

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subjective importance of concerns is more variable than preferences or interests. According to Hall and Ross (2015), concerns are "loci of affective investment" (p. 854), such as one's family or nation, the hierarchy of which changes and that may evoke a variety of different emotions depending on the situation. Concerns may thus manifest themselves in a more concrete form. Specific policy goals, for example, are often indicative of underlying concerns, such as physical safety or social standing.

Affect is an umbrella term, encompassing emotions, dispositions, feelings, or moods. Moods, for example, are more diffuse affective states that generally last longer and are perceived to be less intense (Fox, 2008). All of these terms refer to ways in which embodied mental processes and the felt dimensions of human experience influence thought and behavior (Hall & Ross, 2015, p. 848). In the pertinent literature, the term "emotion" is typically reserved for an affective experience that has a distinct cognitive profile and a socially recognizable expression such as the so-called *primary emotions*: anger, fear, happiness, and sadness. Their physical manifestations are universal across cultures and societies, although there continues to be debate about differences as the expression of emotions is partly socially learned. Outside of affective neuroscience and adjacent fields, affect and emotion are commonly used interchangeably. This article primarily uses the term affect, using emotion only when referring to a specific affective response such as anger or fear.

Conceptually, this article draws on a view summarized as "appraisal theories" of emotion, first formulated by Richard Lazarus (1991). Appraisal refers to the process of constructing emotional meaning within the relationship of the individual and their environment. Each emotion is defined by a unique relational meaning, summarizing personal harms and benefits residing in the specific "person-environment relationship." Following appraisal theory, the article primarily conceives of the process of *appraisal*—representing the main mechanisms through which the lived experience of leaders and elites is shaped by affect—and the kinds of *action tendencies* that particular appraisal patterns promote among policymakers.

Appraisal theories, like most modern conceptualizations of affect and emotion, emphasizes their predictive function. Damasio (1994), for example, thought of emotion as a somatic marker that "forces attention on the negative outcome to which a given action may lead and functions as an automated alarm signal, which says: Beware of danger ahead if you choose the option that leads to this outcome" (p. 173). As evolved hominids, we have learned from previous experience when it might be advantageous to feel a certain way—anxious, terrified, angry, or enraged—or when it might be better to involve cognition to "cope" with our feelings and produce a different affective response more suitable for the situation. Some of our experiences, Lazarus (1991) suggests, "are essentially anticipatory, whereas others are reactions to the outcomes of an adaptationally relevant encounter" (p. 52).

While appraisal colors *how* individuals think, action tendencies shape not only *what* they think but also what they wish to happen next. Action tendencies form the conceptual link between cognitive-affective appraisal and a motivational, or physiological, response. Generally, action tendencies consist of standard response patterns that evolved through natural selection. These are often characterized as an automatic, nondeliberate, or even primitive urge towards action. Because such urges—most notoriously, to fight, flee, or attack—are often incompatible with social norms, action tendencies are balanced by coping mechanisms. These draw on the assessment of different "coping options"—"what is possible, likely to be effective in the specific context, and compatible with social and personal standards of conduct" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 114)—in an effort to (re-)introduce the desired affective state.

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Using a combination of process-tracing methods and discourse analysis with a focus on affective expression, I have identified displays of affect and emotion in foreign policy discourse, that is, particularly statements by the Russian president and other officials, as well as associated discourses in the Russian media and specialized publications on foreign and security policy. Primary source material consists of official foreign policy doctrine, press releases, transcripts of speeches and interviews, and, to the extent available, officials' self-reports. It has been accessed through governmental websites, online newspapers, and databases. Further evidence is provided by meticulous analysis of the factual account—apparent changes in officials' assessments, risk-taking behavior, or patterns of justification. Following the typology of case studies introduced by Harry Eckstein (1992, pp. 148–149), we might think of the application of an affective perspective as a "plausibility probe." The intention behind this kind of research design is to gauge whether a case, or certain aspects of the case, can be explained satisfactorily—to establish whether a "theoretical construct is worth considering at all."

Accordingly, the argument presented in this article is not that rationalist or constructivist models have failed to explain the gradual downturn in Russian-Western relations or Russia's decision to annex Crimea. In fact, in some instance, psychology and affective science corroborates the assumptions made by other theories. The primary objective is to demonstrate the usefulness of emotion as a supplementary lens on foreign policy, connecting capabilities, ideas, state power, and the individual political operative (as represented in the neoclassical realist literature, e.g., Zakaria, 1998).

A central question in any application of affective dynamics to foreign policy analysis (FPA) concerns *intentionality*. How might we distinguish between the deliberate, instrumental display of emotions and their spontaneous, unintentional expression? And can we take official statements and their affective undertones at face value? Only spontaneous affective displays, it is assumed, would be useful in making inferences as to actors' "true" motivations and yield insights into their decision-making process. Significant episodes like Putin's display of anger and disdain for U.S. foreign policy at the Munich Security Conference, in particular, raise questions about the deliberate intent of such performances.

The field of IR has paid particular attention to this distinction. One of the best-established frameworks is presented in Todd Hall's Emotional Diplomacy (2015), in which he presents the display of emotions as "coordinated state-level behaviour that explicitly and officially projects the image of a particular emotional response toward other states" (p. 16). Emotions, in that view, are intentional, result from a collaborative process, and are displayed by state officials in a strategic effort to shape the other side's perception.

While Hall's framework largely retains a rational choice logic, he notes that emotions may be either "emotional labour" (Hochschild, 1983) or subjective experience, and in many cases, both. Even if their display is neither intentional nor a collective effort, emotions still perform an essential communicative function, aimed at influencing others' perception and behavior. The theoretical framework presented in this article does not preclude the use of affective displays for strategic purposes but merely aims to put the focus on the experiential aspects of certain emotions.

Especially when variants of "anger" are expressed, the experience and a desire to communicate it go hand in hand. One reason is that "angry" reactions indicate that a vital concern or strongly felt position has been impacted. In those cases, there is often little distinction between private feeling and publicly expressed sentiment. Even when an emotion is expressed for strategic purposes initially, it is often a short distance to its being embodied and felt. As Mastny (1996)

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observed in connection to his studies of formerly classified Soviet archival materials: perhaps the greatest surprise was that "there was no surprise; the thinking of the insiders conformed substantially to what Moscow was publicly saying. Some of the most secret documents could have been published in Pravda without anybody's noticing" (p. 9). Similarly, Tuomas Forsberg (2014, p. 324) suggests that while "a gap between private and public thinking may exist, it should not be exaggerated a priori."

The analytical lens of affect is thought to be particularly applicable to an authoritarian case like modern Russia. The centralization of foreign policymaking under Vladimir Putin has left the "transmission belt" between individual motivation and state behavior operating with little domestic interference. The president's choices are rarely challenged, either because those around him dread the consequences of disagreement or because they have been selected (or self-selected) on the basis of congruence with the overall vision of the leadership. The homogeneity of the ingroup has further favored the emergence of a shared affective disposition towards Europe and the United States that has become decidedly more combative over the course of Putin's reign.

Linguistic and sociological research, indicating that Russian culture and language, in a comparative perspective, are highly "emotionally expressive" (Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 395), also suggests that this case may be amenable to an affect-centric approach. This statement should not be conflated with a popular bias in the literature, particularly during the Cold War, which makes sweeping assumptions about Russian foreign policy in the style of thinly veiled orientalism. As Trenin and Lo (2005) have described it, these examples appear to proceed from "an implicit assumption that Russian policy-makers behave inherently less rationally than their foreign counterparts, being driven not so much by concrete national interests as by highly subjective and even personal impulses" (p. 8). Although, interestingly, certain Russian officials might counter:

> Of course, we are less pragmatic, less calculating than representatives of other peoples, and we have bigger hearts. Maybe this is a reflection of the grandeur of our country and its boundless expanses. Our people have a more generous spirit. (Putin, 2014a)

By presenting a scientifically grounded perspective that is contrasted to other theoretically informed analyses, this article also hopes to move beyond more popular attempts at "Putinology." Contrary to what has been referred to as psychological profiling or "psychohistory" (Loewenberg, 1988), the approach presented here does not rely to the same extent on conjectural evidence derived from a person's past. When referring to the decision-making of Vladimir Putin, this perspective envisions less of, for example, "Putin the conniving ex-KGB agent," but a generic authoritarian leader who has been in power for many years—one who is subject to some of the same rational and irrational thought patterns and action tendencies that everyone else is.

Background

Since the Orange Revolution of 2004–05, arguments over prices, transit fees, and outstanding debt repeatedly led Russia to halt gas deliveries to Ukraine. More broadly, the color revolutions—and fear of the "export" of revolutionary ideas to Russia (e.g., Karpovich & Manoylo, 2015; Ponomareva, 2012)—had brought a change in how it approached other CIS member states. Irrespective of whether a "friend" or "foe" was in power, Moscow appeared

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increasingly wary of Western influence. Where the Kremlin had previously rewarded defense cooperation with economic benefits, for example, it now used its market power to put pressure on governments in Ukraine, the Caucasus, or Central Asia and extract higher rents in the process. Tensions with Ukraine were alleviated with the election of pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych in early 2010. On April 21, Presidents Yanukovych and Medvedev signed the Kharkiv Pact, extending Russia's lease on its Black Sea base in Sevastopol until 2042 in exchange for a 30% discount on gas. Moscow's next economic objective was the establishment of a free trade area, the Eurasian Customs Union, which at the time was comprised of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Throughout the following years, it continued to use gas prices to coerce Kiev to join in.

By the end of 2013, amidst a severe recession, the Ukrainian government was faced with a fundamental decision between Putin's trade union and an association agreement offered by the European Union, which would integrate Ukraine more closely into European political and economic institutions. U.S. officials like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Senator John McCain were most concerned by the Eurasian Union project and characterized it pejoratively as "re-Sovietization" or an idea from Tsarist times (Clover, 2012; Tsygankov, 2016, p. 244). Access to the European market was an attractive prospect but would also commit Yanukovych to improving his country's human rights record, taking anticorruption measures, and acquitting political rivals. Moscow did its part to emphasize that the two paths were mutually exclusive.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Yanukovych chose Moscow and issued an order stating that Ukraine would suspend preparations to join the EU association agreement while it intended to renew an "active dialogue" with Moscow in the economic sphere. The announcement was followed by an outcry of the opposition and public protests on a scale not seen since the Orange Revolution, concentrated around Kiev's main square. Over the months that followed, clashes between protestors and the police turned increasingly violent.

When street fighting resulted in the death of close to 100 protestors and 13 security forces between February 18 and 20, Yanukovych signed a compromise deal with opposition leaders that set a date for new elections in November. Protestors rejected the brokered agreement, demanding the president's immediate resignation. On February 21, Yanukovych fled the capital—events which Russian officials have since referred to as a Western-sponsored coup d'état. Still a month later, Putin would maintain that Yanukovych remained the legitimate president of Ukraine, as his ouster had been illegitimate (Putin, 2014b).

Russia then began to reinforce its troops already stationed in Crimea. On February 27, Russian soldiers wearing disguises and without insignia—started appearing in front of government buildings. Only in mid-April, when Putin suggested they had come to the aid of Crimean self-defense forces, would Russian officials admit their deployment (Putin, 2014a). On March 16, a disputed referendum resulted in 97% of Crimean inhabitants supporting the integration of the peninsula into the Russian Federation. Holding a press conference with representatives of the "Crimean Republic," Putin asserted that something needed to be done to protect ethnic Russians living in Ukraine from the "rampage of Nazi, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces," who "resorted to terror, murder, and riots," and now "set the tone in Ukraine" (Putin, 2014c).

The 2014 Ukraine Crisis According to Major IR Theories

Foreign policy, according to structural realists, is a function of the distribution of material power in the international system, driven by systemic pressures and incentives and intended to

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maintain the state's security. Russia's material power base had appreciated significantly since 1999 alongside oil prices. According to several quantitative metrics of measuring power, Russia appeared to be steadily gaining on the United States and its European allies between 1999 and 2016 (Saradzhyan & Abdullaev, 2021).

Its improved power position partly underpins John Mearsheimer's (2014) oft-cited argument that Russia had to react to efforts to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold and eventually expand a hostile military alliance up to its doorstep. American and European leaders had ignored the facts of "realpolitik" and stumbled into a crisis of their own making. In a similar way, Bock et al. (2015) apply balance-of-threat theory to the case of Ukraine and find that Western policymakers failed to see how their actions could be seen as a threat to Russian interests; and Alexander Korolev (2018) views Russia's actions in Ukraine as part of a broader "hard balancing response" (p. 889) to U.S. hegemony.

While in many ways a model example of structural realism, the 2014 case of Ukraine is also illustrative of some shortcomings of structural realism. Some of them have to do with the theory's parsimony—zeroing in on a narrow set of variables at the level of the international system. By some analysts, parsimony might have been taken as an absolution of the necessity to engage with the historical, social, ideational, and personal idiosyncrasies of the case. Additional deficiencies include rationalist or cognitivist biases, an innate determinism, or essentializing tendencies. For the case at hand, realists have offered contradictory—and at times internally inconsistent—explanations for the observed outcome: assertive Russian policy action, culminating in its annexation of Crimea. With this turn of events in mind, some have suggested that Russia acted out of a position of strength (Saradzhyan, 2016). Others suggested that Russia was weak and trying to secure its power position while it still could (Krickovic, 2017). Because of this internal contradiction, arguments based on power differentials, of which structural realists have provided some of the more prominent examples, are "nearly tautological and unfalsifiable," as Götz and MacFarlane (2019, p. 718) observe.[1]

The security dimension of the agreement prompted John Mearsheimer, for example, to interpret it as "a backdoor to NATO membership" (McFaul et al., 2014). Because of its focus on power and group interest and its disregard for justificatory rhetoric, realism is quite suited to hypothesize about the "true" concerns involved. However, there are few conceptual tools in structural realism and rationalist frameworks in general to account for subjective differences in hierarchies of concerns or preferences. As a consequence, when crisis erupts, structural-realist analysis frequently appears to twist and bend to match the outcome.

Analysis assuming a "liberal"[2] perspective typically takes domestic politics as its point of departure. Assertive foreign policy, in that reading, results from authoritarian tendencies in Russian politics and elites' aversion to democratization and popular movements backed by the West (Ambrosio, 2009). For former U.S. ambassador and political scientist Michael McFaul, it seems clear that "Russian foreign policy did not grow more aggressive in response to US policies; it changed as a result of Russian internal political dynamics" (McFaul et al., 2014, p. 169). McFaul traces the Ukraine crisis back to mass protests in the aftermath of the fraudulent 2011 parliamentary elections—the first open challenge to the Putin regime. Accusations of the United

[1]As Neil MacFarlane pointed out to me, the contradictory nature of assessments of Russia's power position tends to resolve itself if one considers the possibility of Russia operating from a strong position regionally and from a weak position in the international system as a whole.

[2]I am aware of the ambiguity of the term "liberalism" in common parlance but also in the political science literature. For a summary of what liberalism denotes in the context of IR theory and foreign policy analysis, see Doyle (2012).

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States of fomenting a color revolution in Russia itself ushered in a permanent shift towards more nationalist, combative rhetoric. For Putin, framing the United States and Europe as adversaries had, at the very least, some welcome side effects pertaining to his domestic rule. Krastev and Holmes (2014), for example, suggest that Putin has leveraged the Ukraine crisis to distract from domestic weaknesses, crush resistance, and, as an added benefit, "make a divided Europe look impotent in its moral outrage."

This kind of foreign policy analysis occasionally falls prey to oversimplification, applying templates from Western strategic thought to the Russian context without accounting for its idiosyncrasies. More nuanced liberal accounts will also point out the interconnections between the domestic and international spheres as causes of change and continuity in foreign policy. Allen Lynch (2016), for example, "blames" Russia's assertive turn both on domestic politics and Western policies towards Russia—more precisely on the interaction between the two. Authoritarian and interventionist patterns had been established already under Yeltsin and consolidated as an "arbitrary personalist regime" under Putin with a "strong imperial imprint" (p. 101). Similarly, Andrew Wilson (2014, p. 67) lists a challenge to the authoritarian economic and political system established in Ukraine and Russia after the Cold War and Putin's need to consolidate his domestic rule as two of the main reasons for intervention in Ukraine.

While liberal analyses generally do not withhold criticism of Vladimir Putin and point out the corruption, cronyism, or kleptocracy he has established, they do not agree that a change of power in the Kremlin would be a panacea. Galeotti (2019, Chap. 1), for example, describes the Russian system of government as an "adhocracy," run by a group of Putin loyalists "constantly trying to second-guess and please the boss." Despite this top-centered system, Putin is "just one guy," as the title of Galeotti's penultimate chapter reads. Put differently, in accounts informed by liberal theory (or those emphasizing the dynamics of domestic politics), established structures tend to be more durable than individual actors' immediate influence on governance.

Liberal or domestic politics-centered accounts are not entirely convincing in their argumentation that aversion to color revolutions, also referred to as the "democratic-spill over thesis," is driving Russian foreign policy. The Russian opposition at the time was dominated not by avid liberals "pushing for Western-style democracy" but nationalists, as Götz and MacFarlane note (2019, p. 719).[3]

Constructivist analyses root the crisis in the nature of interactions between Europe, the United States, Russia, and Ukraine, rather than attempting to pinpoint singular causes or blame any one side. They add an important analytical layer by mapping out the ideational and discursive space that acts as a permissive environment for the intervention to unfold. Studying discourse on Russian national identity until 2014, Hopf (2016) suggests that changes in discursive patterns made the annexation of Crimea "thinkable," "natural," and "possible." He also points out that Russia could have annexed Crimea anytime in the last 25 years. The reason it happened when it did was "contingent circumstances" and an "unfortunate concatenation of events." This illustrates one of the shortcomings of constructivist explanations in that they can point to necessary but usually not to sufficient causes of an event.

Another strand of constructivist research relies on identity that is defined along ethnic lines or a form of "bio-politics." The argument is that Putin felt called upon to protect the rights and heritage of Russian "compatriots" in the region (Casula, 2014). A similar notion is reflected

[3]For an exhaustive treatment of the deficiencies of the democratic spill-over thesis, see Tansey (2016).

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in Gerard Toal's conceptualization of "affective geopolitics" which takes account of ways in which biology, experience, and affect are mixed into human culture (Toal, 2017; see also Connolly, 2002, p. 75). In general, constructivist explanations of Russian foreign policy, and its intervention in Ukraine more specifically, face the following challenges: while they are uniquely suited to establish the ideational space within which policy is made, they have a hard time modeling agency. Much of constructivist analysis is staked on discursive patterns without specifying what, or who, causes these patterns to change and for what reasons.

The literature on *status concerns* cannot be clearly allocated to any one of the major paradigms identified above, although it is frequently associated with the constructivist school. A core tenet of these accounts, Russia pursues a strategy of "social competition" as a response to a perceived slight. Recent history included several humiliations: Western allegations of fraud in the 2011 Russian legislative elections, support for the resulting opposition protests, and—particularly alarming to members of the Russian elite already wary of the consequences of democratization—the use of air power to dispose of the Libyan regime in March 2011.

Social identity theory suggests that some of the same factors that characterized these earlier episodes in Russian-Western relations can be identified in the prelude to the Ukraine crisis—leading Russia to adopt a strategy of social competition: the EU's offer of an association agreement as an unambiguous counterpart to Russia's Eurasian Economic Union; the West's acquiescence to the removal of the Ukrainian president in the absence of articles of impeachment and the hasty embrace of the new cabinet; repeated appearances of high-ranking American politicians in front of protestors in Kiev; or the alleged involvement of Western intelligence services and NGOs in the Euromaidan movement. Putin and Russian elites got the impression that Western parties were taking liberties to determine Ukraine's political future while denying Russia a similar role. A leaked phone conversation between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, for example, created the impression that two American officials were handpicking cabinet members for the new Ukrainian government (Marcus, 2014).

The concept of status adds an important layer to an analysis of the Ukraine crisis, as pointed out by Forsberg et al. (2014, p. 267) in the introduction to a special issue on Russian status concerns. While it cannot provide a full explanation in and of itself, status makes many aspects of Russian behavior more understandable: First, status accentuates the importance of Ukrainian politics as a determinant of Russia's role as the regional hegemon. According to Welch Larson and Shevchenko (2019, p. 233), the status of a great power comes with an expectation that smaller neighboring states will defer to it, which the great power frequently exploits to gain material benefits. Forsberg et al. further suggest that "anger about the West and its perceived ignorance over Russia's social status" (Forsberg et al., 2014, p. 267) can explain the sources of Russia's "resentfulness vis-à-vis the West" and why it was trying to create new "rules of the game" (Forsberg et al., 2014, p. 267). The concept also highlighted how the Russian leadership came to view the use of military force in Ukraine (in 2014) as a "necessity" rather than a high-stakes gamble (Forsberg et al., 2014, p. 267).

Crimea and Rationality

There are two possible trajectories leading Vladimir Putin to decide to take control of Crimea and incorporate it into the Russian Federation: First, annexation plans had been prepared well in advance and the unrest surrounding the 2013–14 "Revolution of Dignity" provided a welcome pretext to act. Second, the decision was an impulsive one, "hastily conceived" as a response

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to the ouster of Yanukovych (Treisman, 2016). These are not mutually exclusive. Plans for a military operation in Crimea were almost definitely available, which is also supported by how smoothly the operation was conducted. The timing, however, was likely the result of a combination of factors—crucially, this article argues, Putin's perception of accelerating revolutionary momentum in Kiev. The sequence of events matters when it comes to situating the annexation of Crimea within the larger picture of Russia's evolving foreign policy towards neighboring states. As Allison (2014) writes, "whether we judge these actions to have been impulsive or calculated, tactical or strategic, exceptional or the harbinger of more serious transgressions to come" (p. 1256), reflects our understanding of Russian motivations for intervention and what will determine its foreign policy going forward.

An equally important aspect of contextualizing the annexation of Crimea is who was involved in the decision and what influence they wielded. Different sources have suggested that the decision was taken quite quickly on February 25 or 26 by a group of KGB veterans: Putin's chief of staff Sergei B. Ivanov, Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai P. Patrushev, and the director of the Federal Security Service Aleksandr V. Bortnikov (Myers, 2014). It is likely that Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu was also present (Forsberg & Pursiainen, 2017, p. 226). Ivanov later suggested that economic advisors were not part of the process because of the urgency of the decision (Khamrayev, 2014).

What is striking about the way in which Putin personally recollected the meeting is how the topic of Crimea did not come up until the very end, almost as a side note. After discussing general security aspects pertaining to the situation in Ukraine and as the men were parting, "I said to my colleagues: we must start working on returning Crimea to Russia" (Agence France-Presse, 2015). Given the strategic and symbolic significance of Crimea and the existence of military plans for safeguarding the Sevastopol base, it appears unlikely that these men (and other close associates of Putin) had not pondered scenarios involving the takeover of Crimea in private conversations prior to February 25.

In a speech on March 18 welcoming Crimea and Sevastopol as two new subjects of the Russian Federation, Putin styled himself as a protector of Crimean sovereignty: "our Western partners have stepped over the line, behaved crudely, irresponsibly and unprofessionally.… Without Russian sovereignty over Crimea, both Russia and Ukraine can lose it" (Putin, 2014c). Same as six years prior with respect to Georgia, Russian justifications of coming actions in Ukraine were primarily couched in legal language. By framing the change of power in Kiev as an "unconstitutional coup," Russian officials sought to introduce the notion that the rules of the game of regional security had changed and Russia now had the right, if not the moral obligation, to intervene (e.g., Churkin, 2014; Lavrov, 2014a, 2014b).

Much of theory-driven analysis of the Crimean operation has revolved around the issue of *rationality*. As I argued elsewhere, concerning realist interpretations of Russia's current war, we ought to be careful not to muddle different concepts of rationality (Edinger, 2022, pp. 10–11). Determinations of rationality depend on perspective and timeframe. Are we taking the perspective of Putin, that is, taking his ends for granted, or questioning the rationality of his objectives themselves? And are we judging the rationality of Putin's decision based on the information he had at the time or his capacity to adapt his behavior based on new information?

Explanatory frameworks assuming rational choice generally suggest that leaders and their advisors carefully weigh different options against the costs and risks involved. Potential consequences of Putin's 2014 Crimean venture included a full-scale war with a recently modernized Ukrainian army, possibly supplied with additional NATO weaponry; Western

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sanctions targeting the Russian economy as a whole (eroding public support for the government) as well as select individuals (testing the loyalty of Putin's associates); and a strong nationalist backlash in Ukraine, cementing its European orientation and forestalling Russia's ability to hold any influence over Ukrainian politics in the future. Among the more predictable variables was the price tag: Integrating Crimea into the Russian Federation would require investments of several billion dollars every year. It was also not clear whether Moscow would gain much in terms of tangible influence over the peninsula than it already had even when it was part of Ukraine.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the complexity of such calculations, input factors are often broken down into simpler categories. Granted, simplification is the main task of theory. The reduction of the output to a simple binary—rational or irrational—may be problematic, however. To give one example from an overall instructive and well-supported analysis by Galeotti and Bowen (2014, p. 17): "[T]he annexation of Crimea," he writes, "by any rational calculation, did not make sense.… The Russian Black Sea Fleet's position in the Crimean seaport of Sevastopol was secure until 2042." It is uncertain whether the existence of a lease on Crimean naval facilities suffices to determine the rationality of intervention. Leaving aside the "unknowns" like the nature of a Western response or the scale of economic repercussions, we must ask whether it would have been any more rational for Putin to assume the Sevastopol base was "safe" no matter what. It stands to reason that the Russian leader doubted whether the Kharkiv pact would be worth much if Ukraine became associated with the EU, or, further down the road, a member of NATO.[4]

The case of Crimea presents a telling example of a common fallacy of rationalist frameworks: the assumption that actors have preferences that are complete, transitive, and reflexive and that can be, at least theoretically, retraced by the analyst. When the stakes are as high as they were in the spring of 2014, can we truly expect a political leader—any political leader—to evaluate the benefits, costs, and risks involved in a particular course of action in an unbiased and objective way? Even under the assumption that nonintervention could mean losing access to the Black Sea, was Putin's Crimean gambit worth the cost? As costs, benefits, and risks are evaluated differently depending on actors' relative positions, the question cannot be answered without assessing how he and others involved in the decision might have perceived the situation.

The tendency of framing the annexation of Crimea as a "gain" for Putin illustrates another shortcoming of a rationalist view. According to this simplified view, Putin the "preference-maximizer" sought to harness the turmoil in Ukrainian politics and score a geostrategic "win." This ignores the prevalent opinion among Russian officials that considered Khrushchev's gift of Crimea to Ukraine a historic mistake that needed correcting (Hopf, 2016). Crimea, for Putin, was his to lose. Indeed, by "securing" Crimea, Putin was widely credited with improving Russia's "standing" in the world (Lukyanov, 2014).

Prospect theory, and its central claim that the dread of losses is a much stronger motivating factor than the possibility of gains, has already found its way into the IR literature (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Taliaferro, 2010). Its implications for Russian foreign policy in the Ukraine crisis are discussed by Forsberg and Pursiainen (2017): Putin, the theory suggests, was ready to take the risk of invading Crimea because he "had interpreted the political developments in Ukraine in early 2014

[4]Arguably, Ukrainian NATO membership had become a much fainter possibility after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, at the latest. This does not make the phenomenon of NATO enlargement as a persistent specter in Russian security policy (for instrumental, affective, or other purposes) any less intriguing.

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as a loss of the preferred status quo" (p. 229). While prospect theory enables a more differentiated representation of relative preference hierarchies, its applications in FPA generally foresee deviations from the rational-actor assumption as and when necessary to match empirical aberrations. Similar charges have been brought up against neoclassical realist approaches, which would evoke bounded rationality and violate the parsimonious logic of structural theory on an ad hoc basis.

Appraisal theories of emotion, by sensitizing the analyst to the relative importance of concerns across time and different actors, can be of use in such cases. One actor's perceived gain does not translate into an equal loss to another. Western decision-makers likely underestimated the weight of concerns associated with Ukraine to their Russian counterparts—those concerns not being limited to the territory and historical significance of Crimea, but also what influence over Ukraine meant for Russian aspirations of regional dominance and Putin's own claim to power back home. As Tsygankov (2015) summarizes, "support for Crimea and hostility toward the Ukrainian revolution must be understood as a reflective reaction to what the Kremlin views as neglect of Russia's values and interests and unjust treatment by the West" (p. 29).

The association agreement offered by the EU, in the eyes of Putin and his associates, embodied these perceptions. Beyond an innocuous free-trade agreement, its importance can be explained by what it might have signified to the Russian leader: It made a mockery of his own efforts to build an integrated economic space and institutionalized a permanent loss of influence over Ukraine (Hill & Gaddy, 2013, p. 363). It touched on a number of affectively valenced concerns far beyond the economic realm. Besides, the security dimension of the agreement was unambiguous. The document explicitly called on all parties to "promote gradual convergence on foreign and security matters with the aim of Ukraine's ever-deeper involvement in the European security area" and "taking full and timely advantage of all diplomatic and military channels between the Parties" (European Union, 2014).

An affect-centered view suggests that decision-makers have strong incentives to privilege negative information and are more receptive to the impact of negative emotion (Johnson & Tierney, 2019). Consequently, they also treat adverse scenarios as more likely—partly because negative outcomes would be felt much more severely.[5] As we evaluate the causal relevance of decision-makers' subjective interpretations of the likelihood of future scenarios, affect can play a crucial role.

Putin's actions in late February 2014 and subsequent justifications suggest that the framing of his choices was impacted by worst-case thinking, and his decisions were taken under the influence of negative affective valence associated with these adverse outcomes. Not only did he risk losing what he had already attained through his work on the Eurasian Economic Union (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 278), Putin did not want to go down in Russian history as the president who had lost Crimea "for good"—and with it, naval access to the Black Sea, public support at home, and a great deal of standing as a provider of regional security—together with a sense of having betrayed Russians in Crimea. Not taking the chance presented by the crisis in Ukraine might have seemed like a sure loss to him.

An argument could be made that the logic of status concerns, at its core, relies on the emotion of anger (and relatedly, perceptions of what constitutes unfair treatment). However, the connections between the concept of status and anger are rarely made explicit. Engaging with the psychology of status seeking, at the individual level, is a worthwhile exercise because it enables us to hypothesize under what circumstances particular concerns matter most to decision-makers. Anger and its various manifestations, such as disdain, resentment, outrage, or contempt, are particularly useful to the social scientist, because these are the kinds of emotions that "want" to be expressed (van Kleef et al., 2008, pp. 16–17). They are important

[5]Regarding the role of emotions in making predictions, this article draws on Feldman Barrett (2018).

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communicative devices, indicating that a vital concern has been impacted or a significant boundary has been crossed.

Fear of NATO?

Rationalist accounts fall short in explaining why Russia views an organization like NATO as the gravest threat to its security, as evidenced by its official foreign policy doctrine (Gordeev, 2014). Surely, Putin or those close to him, cannot seriously be afraid of an invasion by the North Atlantic alliance? Initially viewed as a relic of the Cold War or an insufficiently reformed organization, the threat of enlargement did not loom large in Russian discourse throughout much of the 1990s (Patrushev, 2005, p. 102). In 2014, even after the most recent phase of enlargement, NATO forces on the Russian border hardly posed an existential threat to Russia. A purely power-political viewpoint fails to account for this fixation, especially since a much more substantial threat looms right across its 4200 km south-eastern border: China. Not only does China surpass Russia in every conceivable metric of material power,[6] the sparsely populated Russian far east is much more vulnerable to territorial incursions than the west of the country.

The importance of NATO, as Tsygankov (2018) convincingly argues, cannot be explained without understanding Russians' historically developed perception of the alliance, policymakers' experience in dealing with NATO representatives since the end of the Cold War, or without the help of ideational concepts like identity, culture, and values. References to Russia's primordial fears of encirclement and invasion have been made across different theoretical accounts. Structural realists refer to the balance of power; liberal analysis studies how security threats shape domestic actors' preferences and the process of making foreign policy. Both, it can be argued, disguise ontological foundations based on assumptions about human nature. Consequently, they do not outline the mechanisms by which these phenomena operate. Fear of encirclement rests on both social and psychological factors. The persistent narrative of a "besieged fortress" may have contributed to an image of the state as an "embodied condition" (Toal, 2017, pp. 46–47). In other words, Russians, including its leaders, may care about territorial security in ways that seem unfamiliar to Western observers.[7]

Equally possible is the view that the state's territorial integrity serves as a proxy for more existential fears. As Galeotti (2016) argues, the NATO threat might be less of a military one but one of "cultural influences, economic pressure, and political penetration." This, in the eyes of the Russian leadership, amounts to a "civilizational threat aimed at making Russia a homogenized, neutered, subaltern state." Conversely, around the year 2014, characterizations of Western decadence and moral depravity also enter official Russian discourse. Europe, in these portrayals, has lost its sovereignty and become a vassal to the liberal foreign policy agenda of the United States.[8]

To Russian elites, the perceived challenge of democratization was not to the stability of the regime but to *their* regime.[9] As MacFarlane (2016) suggests, "Putin and his colleagues have taken the democratization of neighbouring countries, notably Ukraine, to be a compelling threat, not so much to Russia, but to the structure of power and profit he and his

[6]With the notable exception of nuclear weapons.

[7]Putin makes direct reference to Western efforts to contain and keep Russia down in his March 18 address (Putin, 2014c). See also Putin (2015). The sentiment is also expressed by Russia's NATO representative (Grushko, 2014).

[8]Putin's contemptuous attitude towards Europe and view of Russian civilizational superiority are expressed in several 2014 speeches, for example, Putin (2014d, 2014e). It is also reflected in other official documents published in 2014, for example, the Ministry of Culture's position that "Russia is not Europe," (Izvestiya, 2014).

[9]This kind of thinking is represented, for example, in a speech by the head of Russia's Security Council (Patrushev, 2014).

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colleagues have attempted to build in Russia" (pp. 351–352). Putin himself has expressed this directly on numerous occasions, for example,

> In in the modern world extremism is often used as a geopolitical instrument to rearrange spheres of influence. We see the tragic consequences of the wave of the so-called "colour revolutions," the turmoil in the countries that have undergone the irresponsible experiments of covert and sometimes blatant interference in their lives. We take this as a lesson and a warning, and we must do everything necessary to ensure this never happens in Russia. (*BBC Russian*, 2014)

After the ouster of Yanukovych, Russian officials quickly began to construct an enemy image around NATO and its members states, suggesting the United States and its allies had worked with activists inside Ukraine to engineer the overthrow of the legitimate government. In a press conference on March 4, Putin expressed a similar sentiment and reserved Russia's right to intervene militarily in Ukraine on "humanitarian grounds."

> Our partners, especially in the United Sates, always clearly formulate their own geopolitical and state interests and follow them with persistence. Then, using the principle "You're either with us or against us" they draw the whole world in. And those who do not join in get "beaten" until they do. Putin (2014b)

Emotion holds further clues as to this choice of enemy image. Someone who is fearful has a higher tendency to identify future threats—including nonexistent ones—and is worse at calculating the costs and risks of their actions. These effects are not limited to the social space but have physiological manifestations—in elevated adrenaline or cortisol levels. The speed and intensity with which events around the Euromaidan movement unfolded and were—if only in word—endorsed and further fueled by Western officials likely induced a fearful response among the Russian elite. Yanukovych's banishment and the West's ecstatic advocacy of political change in Kiev, irrespective of its character, surely sent a chill down Putin's spine.

The experience of fear may not be limited to the individual decision-maker. Applied to a broader institutional context, it may become self-sustaining through narratives, doctrines, or practices emphasizing enmity or aggression. Beyond vicarious identification with one's own state, the role of emotion in foreign policy involves the reduction of the "other side" to a simpler affective category, often irrespective of who its individual agents are. Lopez et al. (2011) refer to this as the "unitary actor heuristic" (p. 67). For reasons of "cognitive simplicity," human brains have evolved to represent groups as if they were a special category of individual, relatively unstable and with a relatively short shadow of the future.

Affectively charged attitudes are persistent and color expectations of future relations with the other side. In some cases, that anthropomorphic view overpowers actual leadership changes, however consequential. Despite diplomatic initiatives and confidence-building measures surrounding the U.S.-Russian "reset," for example, Vladimir Putin played down hopes for an improvement in relations: "[T]he US is a very big ship and cannot change its course dramatically in a few months." Besides, Obama would only be around for "eight years maximum" (Barry, 2009). Assessments differ as to the precise moment when Putin's views of the West changed to bitter and contemptuous. However, his October 2014 speech at the Valdai discussion club is one of the first, unambiguous articulations of an irreconcilable breach in relations (Valdai International Discussion Club, 2014).

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Conclusion

The conceptual lens of affect supplements prevailing frameworks for foreign policy analysis, informed by the main IR theories. Structural realists have suggested that NATO expansion paired with "liberal illusions" caused Russia's moves against Ukraine. Liberal theorists view Russian foreign policy as an outgrowth of Putin's increasingly authoritarian domestic rule and have promoted a tough stance to counter Russian aggression. Social constructivists argue that the state Russian-Western relations is malleable, and that increased attention to identity-formation, the diffusion of norms, and the creation of values might salvage the situation.

It is partly due to shortcomings of prevalent paradigms that Russian actions have repeatedly blindsided foreign policy analysts. Structural realism and liberalism rely on the rational-actor assumption, whereas constructivist scholarship, emphasizing the intersubjective nature of the social world, generally does not produce distinct theories of actorhood. Both rationalist and constructivist theories rely on a traditional, cognitivist outlook, which makes them suboptimal models of decision-making. Affect presents both a complementary perspective and an analytical middle ground between these accounts. A didactic and probabilistic approach, the affective lens is not intended to disprove competing narratives, however. In fact, affective science corroborates some assumptions on which rationalist or constructivist models are predicated.

The primary reason why affective phenomena 'matter" in analyzing Russian foreign policy, and international politics more broadly, lies with the responses they tend to generate. Outrage conveys that a red line has been crossed and lends credibility to a threat. Contempt is more problematic than resentment because it prohibits diplomacy. Fear destroys trust while also encouraging risk taking. All emotions, much like ideology and worldview, act as a filter through which another's actions are perceived.

However, even if we assumed that foreign policy was determined solely by emotions, that variable alone would not suffice to explain the outcome. Putin might have decided against an annexation of Crimea in the exact same "affective scenario" and with the same weight attached to the relevant concerns, if just one structural condition had been different— for example, if Russian special forces could not have been mobilized as rapidly, or if Washington had anticipated the move and sent a clear warning to forestall Russian intervention. Action tendencies that are based on appraisal processes, as sketched out in this article, can offer a plausibility check for conceivable policy choices but do not provide conclusive evidence or a basis for prediction.

A perspective that pays heed to the action tendencies propagated by certain affective experiences can account for a more unconventional interpretation of Russia's annexation of Crimea: in marked contrast to an improvised reaction to a popular uprising, some in Moscow might have seen events in Ukraine as a welcome occasion to take the shackles off. As one Russian columnist suggested, until 2014, maintaining the "illusion of having common values with the West" had at times been "psychologically uncomfortable" for the Russian leadership. Crimea presented an opportunity to take a leap outside the familiar "framework of the partnership paradigm." It proved to be a "liberation" and an end to the "hypocrisy" of the pre-2014 years (Frolov, 2015).

Since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia's foreign policy orientation has solidified around a realpolitikal understanding that emphasizes the necessity of regional dominance and at times borrows from geopolitical theory as well as civilizationalist

and Eurasianist narratives. From analyzing official doctrine, statements, and associated discourse on Russian relations with its neighbors and Western states, there is little reason to assume a divergence between what the Russian president expresses publicly and his personal experience—at least with respect to the fundamental direction of Russian foreign policy. With a view to domestic politics, espousing conservative values and using nationalist rhetoric may be popular with those parts of the population and segments of the elite he is seeking support and recognition from. However, the self-affirmatory function of affect and research pointing to the convergence of "genuine" and "instrumental" emotion over time would suggest that Putin believes what he says. Tragically, that might also be true of some of his more outlandish, recent claims.

With respect to broader developments in Russian-Western relations, the affective lens suggests that fear for regime survival, which goes hand in hand with elites' more visceral fears concerning their personal safety and well-being, and internalized anger over perceived status denial are persistent drivers of Russian foreign policy. The annexation of Crimea, as a significant event in the downward trend of Russian-Western relations, did not result directly from a "feeling." However, the role of affect can also not be removed from the course of events—not in political reality, and, as this article has attempted to illustrate, it should not be ignored in analysis either.

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