

Operant Subjectivity

The International Journal of Q Methodology

The Faces of Putin: An Application of Q and the Single Case

Charles Gaukel

Director, Q-Sensus Consulting LLC

Abstract: This article discusses the potential Q Methodology – particularly the use of a study based on a single case – could play in assisting foreign policy analysts and specialists in one of their most challenging tasks: anticipating future actions of other state or nonstate actors. The task is inherently difficult as those future actions usually are dependent on policy decisions by key leaders – decisions that may not been finalized or are subject to change. In nearly all cases, analysts must make assessments of foreign leaders in the face of information that is scarce, conflicting, and ambiguous. The study uses a 36-item Q sample drawn from Margaret Hermann’s trait analysis approach to assessing leadership style. This study of Russian leader Vladimir Putin explores the insights Q can provide via a single-case study. Only publicly available information was used for this study. The study explores the extent to which, in the subjective view of the participant, Putin’s leadership style has changed since he first assumed the Russian presidency in May 2000. The study examines Putin’s leadership style at three potentially significant inflection points: upon becoming president, the 2014-2015 Russian military interventions in Crimea/eastern Ukraine and Syria, and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Sortings for each of these periods were done under three distinct Conditions of Instruction that explored how Putin sought to project his leadership image (or “face”) to three key audiences.

Keywords: foreign policy, intelligence analysis, leadership style, Putin, single-case studies

Introduction

A key task for intelligence and foreign affairs specialists is to estimate the likely future decisions and policies of state and nonstate actors, as with the current concern over the actions of Russia under longtime authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin. While pundits and those the British sometimes refer to as “The Chattering Classes” are fond of claiming after some major international development that “I knew it all along,” actual efforts to forecast the future actions of powers great and small are fraught with uncertainty. As examples, from the American perspective alone, one could cite Pearl Harbor, the outbreak of the Korean war, the Cuban Missile Crisis, 9/11, and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq following the American-led invasion in 2003. Perhaps the most critical element of uncertainty is that much of what the “other side” may or may not do at some future time is heavily contingent on the decisions of one or

Contact author: charlesrg@verizon.net

© 2023 The International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity ©2023 The Author

more human actors who themselves may not have decided on their course(s) of action or may change their mind after an initial decision.

The criticality of understanding foreign decisionmakers for intelligence analysis was demonstrated by the publication in September 1962 – just one month before the Cuban Missile Crisis – of a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate that assessed the Soviet Union was unlikely to risk heightening the threat to the United States by introducing offensive nuclear missiles into Cuba. Sherman Kent, then-director of CIA’s Office of National Estimates, later related that “We missed the Soviet decision to put missiles into Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make such a mistake” (Steury, 1994, p. 185).

Notwithstanding differences among international relations scholars as to whether individual leaders are worth much attention in the face of systemic factors, this author’s 30-plus years of experience in intelligence analysis was that senior U.S. policymakers invariably believe that individuals and personal relationships are of critical importance. These U.S. leaders, and it seems likely, their foreign counterparts, expend great effort attempting to understand the motivations, desires, interests, strengths, and vulnerabilities of their opposites, which is not surprising, given that these leaders usually rose to their positions by influencing, leveraging, supporting, or outmaneuvering their counterparts.

Method

A previous study examined the potential for Q methodology in providing analysts with insights on foreign leaders by illuminating the perceptions of that leader by a set of experts (Gaukel, 2021). This effort demonstrates an alternative application by examining how Q and the methodologically rigorous insights it can provide might prove of value in assisting an individual analyst to better track how their own assessments of a foreign leader may change over time. To do so, it utilizes a single case application of Q, in which a single participant performs multiple Q sorts under differing Conditions of Instruction (see Brown, 1980; and the 2017 special issue of *Operant Subjectivity*, “Q Methodology and the Single Case”). The sorter in this study was the author, a former intelligence analyst who, although he had no analytic responsibility for covering Putin nor claims deep expertise on the Russian leader, has, like many observers of the international scene, followed Putin’s career with interest since Putin first emerged as an aide to then- Russian President Yeltsin in 1996. Only publicly available information was used in the study.

Preparation of the Q Sample

This study, as with its predecessor, utilizes a Q sample drawn from a trait analysis approach developed by Margaret Hermann for assessing how leadership style affects the ways decision makers respond to varying situations. Hermann argues that leadership style, which Barber argued often results from a leader’s reliance on behaviors perceived to have been successful in their early political successes (Barber, 1977, p. 99), can best be determined by discerning the answers to three critical questions:

1. Does the leader accept or challenge the political constraints they face?

2. How open is the leader to incoming information – do they selectively use information that conforms to their preexisting beliefs or are they open to altering course based on new information?
3. Why has the leader sought their position – are they task-oriented (driven by a cause, ideology, goal, or set of interests they wish to advance) or are they relationship-oriented (focused on feedback from and interaction with salient constituents? (Hermann, 2002, pp. 5, 24.)

Hermann's methodology seeks to provide answers to these three questions by assessing seven key leadership traits that, according to her research, are particularly salient for assessing leadership style (Appendix B). From these three questions and their underlying seven traits, Hermann developed an eight-cell typology of leadership styles, as shown in Table 1 (Hermann, 2002, pp. 2-10).

Table 1

Hermann's Leadership Style Typology

Responsiveness to Constraints	Openness to Information	Task/Goal Focus	Relationship Focus
Challenges Constraints	Closed to Information	Expansionistic (Focus is on expanding one's power and influence.)	Evangelistic (Focus is on persuading others to accept one's message and join one's cause.)
Challenges Constraints	Open to Information	Incremental (Focus is on maintaining one's maneuverability and flexibility while avoiding the obstacles that continually try to limit both.)	Charismatic (Focus is on achieving one's agenda by engaging others in the process and persuading them to act.)
Respects Constraints	Closed to Information	Directive (Focus is on personally guiding policy along paths consistent with one's own views while still working within the norms and rules of one's position.)	Consultative (Focus is on monitoring so that important others will support, or not actively oppose, what one wants to do in a particular situation.)
Respects Constraints	Open to Information	Reactive (Focus is on assessing what is possible in the current situation and nature of the problem and considering what important constituencies will allow.)	Collegial (Focus is on reconciling difference and building consensus, empowering others and sharing accountability in the process.)

Note: Adapted from "Assessing Leadership Style: A Trait Analysis," by M. G. Hermann, 2002, Social Science Automation Inc., p. 9 ([LTA.pdf \(socialscience.net\)](#)). Copyright 2002 by Social Science Automation Inc. Adapted with permission.

Hermann's writings on her structured approach to assessing leadership style provides a wealth of material, or concourse, for drawing a Q sample (Brown, 1993, pp. 94-97) to assist analysts in assessing foreign decisionmaker decision-making tendencies. The argument here is that a Q methodological approach is likely be of value in making analysts explicitly aware of what might otherwise be unobserved changes over time in their assessments when tracking a long-in-power leader. On long-tenured leaders such as Putin, there may well be a great deal of information, but much of it is ambiguous, conflicting, or, as in Putin's case, intentionally misleading or false (see Hill & Gaddy, 2013, pp. 6-9). In such cases, there rarely can be an acknowledged "right" answer. Or to put it more accurately, the correct answer cannot be known (at least as of yet), but analytic insights might help guide policymakers toward useful ways of thinking about and anticipating possible actions by their foreign counterparts.

This paper makes no effort to test Hermann's approach, and therefore there was no attempt to model in the Q sample the full complexity of her methodology – in particular, how the seven leadership traits interact to address Hermann's three basic questions. Instead, a 36-statement Q sample was drawn from Hermann's work to reflect the binary choices for each of the three key questions, as shown in Table 2.¹ This provided six replications of each answer to the three questions, providing a strong set of "stimulus" statements in the Q sample.

Table 2

Experimental Design Based on Hermann (2002)

Response to Constraints (A)	Response to New Information (B)	Orientated to Tasks/Goals or Relationships (C)
Accept (6) (A1)	Open (6) (B1)	Tasks/Goals (6) (C1)
Challenge (6) (A2)	Closed (6) (B2)	Relationships/People (6) (C2)

Note: Six replications of each cell for 36-item Q sample.

Examples:

- Cell A1; Accepts Constraints: Is open to bargaining, trade-offs, and compromise. (Statement #2.)
- Cell A2; Challenges Constraints: Is intent on meeting situations head-on. (Statement #21.)
- Cell B1; Open to New Information: Carefully studies the situation and seeks additional data before choosing a response. (Statement #8.)
- Cell B2; Closed to New Information: Has a well-formulated vision or agenda that frames how data is perceived and interpreted. (Statement #3.)

¹ See Appendix A for the full Q sample.

- Cell C1; Task/Goal Orientated: Sees the world in terms of problems and the role of the group as providing solutions to these problems; views people less as individuals and more as instruments. (Statement #14.)
- Cell C2; Relationship/People Oriented: Is sensitive to what key constituencies want and need and attempts to provide it. (Statement #23.)

Conditions of Instruction

Given that in a single-case study all the Q sorts are performed by the same subject, the Conditions of Instruction for each sort are of critical importance. For this project, the author completed separate sorts portraying his judgments of how Putin sought to project his leadership image at three distinct times: upon becoming president in 2000, during the military takeovers of Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2014-2015, and during the ongoing invasion of Ukraine that commenced in February 2022. For each of these three periods, separate sorts were completed to reflect, in the subjective view of the sorter, how Putin sought to portray his leadership style to three separate audiences: the general Russian public, Russian economic elites, and the international community. This provided a total of nine Q sorts for analysis.

It is important to note that this study was done in a retrospective fashion. The author-sorter did not complete the sorts at the actual times discussed above, but rather, by using his memory of what he had thought about Putin at those time periods. In addition, when completing the sorts, the author-sorter purposefully referred to no additional stimuli (notes, relevant articles or reports) beyond the Q sample itself. As such, the sorter's recollections were subject to all the frailties and shortcomings of human memory, perhaps most importantly, hindsight bias. That is, the cognitive bias that leads people, after the fact, to believe that they had actually known/predicted/forecast a specific development that was later to occur, a mistake stemming from the knowledge they only gained as the event actually unfolded (Fischhoff, 1975; Kahneman, 2011, pp. 201-204; Kundra, 1999, pp. 182-187).

That the author-sorter in this study was affected by hindsight bias is a given, notwithstanding conscious effort to be aware of the bias and seek, as best possible, to complete the sorts on the basis how he remembered viewing Putin at the periods specified in the Conditions of Instruction. Yet that very limitation of the study underscores one of its main implications – the great value for an analyst tracking a key foreign leader in using an approach such as Q provides in real time. By doing so, the analyst would have a documented, methodologically-sound record of what they assessed about the foreign leader at key periods during that leader's career. Having such a record would help the analyst avoid their own vulnerability to hindsight bias ("I always thought that about Leader X"), and, perhaps of more import, alert the analyst in real time to subtle changes in their perceptions of the foreign leader – say, for example, changes in the leader's risk-taking propensity. Such changes in the analyst's own perceptions, if gradual, might otherwise not be recognized in the quotidian deluge of information and work. The Conditions of Instruction tasked the author-sorter with arraying the statements along a semi-normal forced distribution that ranged from (+4) "Most Agree" that a statement was representative of Putin to (-4) "Most Disagree" that a statement was representative of Putin.

Analysis

Using PQMethod (Schmolck, 2014), the Q sorts were correlated and then factor analyzed using Principal Components. Rotation was done with Varimax. In factor analysis, an eigenvalue of 1.0 or greater often is used as to determine the number of factors considered significant (see McKeown and Thomas, 1988, p. 51; Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 104-106), In this study two factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 – Factor C being particularly dominant. As Brown has noted, however, an overly rigid adherence to statistical criteria can lead one to overlook perspectives of particular interest (Brown, 1980, pp. 220-238). Such is the case in this study. Factor B (eigenvalue 0.72) was included for analysis because although defined by only a single Q sort, it represented a perspective of particular salience for the study: the perception of Putin by the international community at the time of his coming to power.

This highlights yet another advantage of Q. While retaining the power and rigor of a quantitative methodology, it permits the researcher to undertake explorations of the data driven by theory or the salience of a particular perspective on the subject at hand, and not be solely reliant on statistical thresholds. Given the single-case nature of this study and the small number of sorts in total, the number of sorts on any factor was not a driving concern of the researcher. Rather, the goal was to see if Q could help uncover analytically useful perspectives on Putin’s leadership and what might be driving those subjective viewpoints over time.

Results

Table 3 shows the loadings of the nine sorts on the three extracted factors.

Table 3

Q Sorts and Factor Loadings

Sort	Time Frame	A	B	C
1	2000: Putin to Public	.91	.06	.36
2	2000: Putin to Elites	.94	.27	-.03
3	2000: Putin to International Community	.25	.96	.03
4	2014/2015: Putin to Public	.18	-.02	.91
5	2014/2015: Putin to Elites	.09	.11	.90
6	2014/2015: Putin to International Community	.36	.25	.73
7	2022/2023: Putin to Public	.04	.02	.92
8	2022/2023: Putin to Elites	.14	.08	.90
9	2022/2023: Putin to International Community	.06	.00	.96

Note: Significant Loadings in Bold

Factor A: Hopeful

Factor A, defined by sorts 1 and 2, represents how, in the retrospective view of the author, Putin appeared to both the Russian public and Russian economic elites as he came to power in 2000. As Hill and Gaddy have argued, despite his KGB career and ties to the Yeltsin regime, the then-relatively little-known Putin successfully exploited his St. Petersburg background to portray himself – first as prime minister, then acting

president, and then, as of March 2000, elected president – as an outsider who would work with other power centers to restore order and the authority of the state following the political and economic chaos of the Yeltsin era (Hill & Gaddy, 2013, p. 106-161).

Hill and Gaddy devote an entire chapter to Putin's statist identity, emphasizing how he was able to play on a deeply embedded belief in Russian mythology of the need for a strong state (Hill & Gaddy, 2013, pp. 38-62). Long before Putin's rise, Hedrick Smith had similarly noted this theme in his work on Russia during the sclerotic Brezhnev era (Smith, 1976). With such a cultural backdrop, it is not surprising that stress on the importance of the state was central in Putin's "Millenium Message," published in December 1999, just as Yeltsin was stepping down and handing power to Putin.

For us, the state and its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and the people. For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly to fight against. Quite the contrary, it is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and the main driving force of any change. . . . Society desires the restoration of the guiding and regulating role of the state (Putin as quoted in Hill & Gaddy, 2013, p. 40).

From today's perspective it can be hard to remember just how weak the Russian state appeared in the late 1990s, which was a time of economic turmoil, misappropriation of important economic assets by the new class of oligarchs, and, just as Putin became prime minister, a series of deadly apartment bombings blamed on Chechen terrorists that killed over 330 civilians.² All of this set the scene for Putin to project the image of a strong and dynamic leader who would revitalize the state, protect the public, and yet was relatively nonideological and eager to work collaboratively with key constituencies so as to avoid instability and turmoil within the ruling class. That this perception resonated with the Russian public and elites in 2000 (at least in the retrospective view of the sorter) is reflected in those statements that Factor A found most correct in its description of Putin.

+4 (13.) Is interested in expert opinion or advice from those highly attuned to important constituencies.³

+4 (23.) Is sensitive to what key constituencies want and need and attempts to provide it.

+4. (30.) Seeks political insights as to who is supporting what and with what degree of intensity.

+3 (2.) Is open to bargaining, trade-offs, and compromise.

+3 (6.) Is adaptable to the situation and remains open to responding to the demands of domestic and international constituencies and circumstances.

+3 (28.) Devotes energy and time to building relationships with and persuading others.

After more than two decades of Putin's authoritarian rule, the emphasis of Factor A on Putin's supposedly collaborative nature strikes an odd note, but it should be recalled that Putin had rapidly risen through connections with those around Yeltsin and showed

² The involvement of Russian security forces in the bombings in order to provide Putin with an opportunity to demonstrate his toughness against terrorists has long been rumored but not publicly proven.

³ In this and following sections, the first number (with a + or - sign) is the factor score. The following number in parenthesis is the statement in the Q sample.

little inclination to use the instruments of the state to go after those who had ill-gotten gains during the preceding decade, so long as they supported Putin's policies. Indeed, Putin's first decree as acting president in December 1999 ensured that there would be no corruption investigations or charges against Yeltsin or his relatives.

Given this environment, it was not unreasonable to conclude that Putin would see little alternative to working with other key interest groups as the outsider from St. Petersburg first assumed the mantle of power. Thus, the strong rankings such as the +4 given to statements such as Statement 23 ("Is sensitive to what key constituencies want and need and attempts to provide it") or the +3 to Statement 2 ("Is open to bargaining, trade-offs, and compromise").

For the public, Putin's assumption of power seemed to hold the prospect of a return to political and economic stability and strong action against the Chechen terrorists allegedly behind the apartment bombings, not to mention the potential to regain some of Russia's lost international influence and prestige. For the economic elites, Putin's seeming willingness to take a collaborative approach was correctly judged as indicating they would be permitted to hold their newfound (and usually illegitimate) wealth, so long as they provided political and financial support to the new regime.

Further insight to this relatively positive early depiction of Putin can be seen in those statements which were viewed by Factor A as most unrepresentative of Putin's appearance to the Russian people and elites as he came to power.

- 4 (7.) Is driven internally – is pushed to act by ideas and images that they believe and advocate.
- 4 (27.) Focuses on substance, not the people involved.
- 4 (29.) Focuses attention on persuading others of their position.
- 3 (3.) Has a well-formulated vision or agenda that frames how data is perceived and interpreted.
- 3 (20.) Is driven by a commitment to a particular cause, ideology, or set of interests.
- 3 (22.) Is constantly asking for updates on progress on a project, what is happening to implement a solution, and options for dealing with problems.

Again, we see reflected in these assessments by Factor A the perception of a nonideological leader with no driving personal agenda but a commitment to work with key power centers to advance the broader public good of restoring order and state authority. Those items Factor A placed at the Most Disagree end of the spectrum also demonstrate that in Q, the counterpart of a statement placed at Most Agree often is not that statement's inverse or negation. Rather, it may be an entirely different aspect of the subject at hand. For example, the aspects of leadership that Factor A thought most representative of Putin in 2000 centered on his perceived adaptability and willingness to work with key constituencies. For Factor A, at the Most Disagree end of the array, one finds not an emphasis on an unwillingness to work with other parties, but rather a sense of a leader lacking strong ideological goals or clear vision/commitment to a particular cause. These aspects of Putin's leadership style may well be related, but they are not simple opposites, revealing a nuance to Factor A's viewpoint that might well be lost in a typical R methodology study relying on large n opinion polls or Likert scales.

Analysis of the perspectives of each Factor in a Q study often focus largely on those statements which receive either a Most Agree or Most Disagree rating, because the extremes of the spectrum are the statements with which the sorter had the strongest

reaction or emotional engagement. In other words, they are the statements from the Q sample that held the most meaning, or significance, for the sorter. As such, those statements clustered at or near the zero point on the array are not those statements carrying “average” or “medium” significant, but rather those about which the sorter is neutral or for whom the statements do not carry significance – either positive or negative (Brown, 1980, p. 22, pp. 132-133). That is, meaningfulness increases as one moves outward in either direction from what Stephenson termed the distensive zero, noting “All the information, so to speak, bulges out or distends from it – it is all contained in the dispersion about zero, that is, in the variance” (Stephenson, 1953, pp. 195-196).

In this study, however, a close look at the statements located at or near the zero point can be useful in uncovering aspects of Putin’s leadership style about which the sorter was uncertain rather than either agreeing or disagreeing. And for Factor A, it is here that we find a number of statements dealing with Putin’s willingness to challenge constraints and act unilaterally.

0 (1.) Often pushes the limits of what is possible.

0 (15.) Achieves quick resolutions on decisions, dealing forcefully with the situation of the moment.

+1 (34.) Is in charge and believes they know what should be done.

This clustering of similar statements in and around the zero point demonstrates that Factor A did not deny the potential for Putin to govern in an authoritarian manner, but rather was uncertain about the extent to which Putin, as he came to power, would be willing to act unilaterally or in an undemocratic manner. Again, this is a nuance of Factor’s A viewpoint that Q, in which all statements are assessed in relation to all other elements of the Q sample, reveals more fully than likely would be the case in a survey approach based on agree-disagree answers to individual questions. Returning to Hermann’s typology, the overall perspective offered by Factor A of Putin as he came to power seems closest to Hermann’s “Consultative” leader (Table 1): “Focus is on monitoring so that important others will support, or not actively oppose, what one wants to do in a particular situation.” Note, however, that in Hermann’s typology, such a leader is expected to respect constraints. Of that, with respect to Putin, Factor A was far less confident.

Factor B: Hopeful but Wary

If Factor A saw Putin in 2000 as likely to work with key constituencies, including the powerful oligarchs who had emerged in the 1990s, Factor B (representing the sorter’s recollection of his assessment of how the international community saw Putin in 2000) viewed the newly-emergent Putin as more focused on solving problems – whether that meant working with or around others. For example, like Factor A, Factor B gave high scores to Statements 2 and 6 regarding Putin’s situational adaptability and openness to bargaining and trade-offs. The difference in their views, however, shows in Statement 27: ([This leader] focuses on substance, not the people involved), scored by Factor B as a +4, while given a -4 by Factor A. Thus, for Factor B, Putin’s seeming willingness to compromise and adapt reflects tactical approaches used to gain substantive progress, not ethics-based principles about how to deal with people.

+4 (2.) Is open to bargaining, trade-offs, and compromise.

- +4 (6.) Is adaptable to the situation and remains open to responding to the demands of domestic and international constituencies and circumstances.
- +4 (27.) Focuses on substance, not the people involved.

This sense of Putin using a situational approach to gain his objectives is further revealed in Factor B's treatment of Statements 8, 13, and 32. For Factor B, Putin, while generally uninterested in people as people, is seen as a leader who thoroughly studies situations, seeks out information about key groups, and then seeks to move relevant constituencies toward support for his objectives.

- +3 (8.) Carefully studies the situation and seeks additional data before choosing a response.
- +3 (13.) Is interested in expert opinion or advice from those highly attuned to important constituencies.
- +3 (32.) Devotes energy and time to mobilizing effective action toward solving problems, achieving causes, and moving toward their policy goals.

Factor B's perception of Putin as a nonideological problem-solver also comes through in those items Factor B found most unrepresentative of Putin. Factor B shared Factor A's disagreement that Putin had a strong ideological orientation or commitment to specific policy objectives, but Factor B strongly disagreed with the suggestion that Putin would seek to empower group members or limit himself to moving only as fast as constituencies would like to go. Moreover, Factor B's -4 scoring of Statement 22 ("Is constantly asking for updates on progress . . .") and -3 rating of Statement 15 ("Achieves quick resolutions on decisions, dealing forcefully with the situation of the moment") reflect a judgment that Putin would take the long view, recognizing that Russia's problems would not be quickly resolved and that his own objectives and associated policies were likely to evolve and require careful study, planning, and action.

- 4 (7.) Is driven internally – pushed to act by ideas and images that they believe and advocate.
- 4 (17.) Believes that mobilizing and empowering group members is what leading is all about.
- 4 (22.) Is constantly asking for updates on progress on a project, what is happening to implement a solution, and options for dealing with problems.
- 3 (3.) Has a well-formulated vision or agenda that frames how data is perceived and interpreted.
- 3 (15.) Achieves quick resolutions on decisions, dealing forcefully with the situation of the moment.
- 3 (31.) Will only move the group toward its goals as fast as the members are willing to move.

In a manner somewhat similar to Factor A, Factor B does not outright reject the idea that Putin will challenge constraints, seek to move unilaterally, or skew the information he receives and acts upon to fit his own beliefs. Instead, and again demonstrating Q's ability to surface nuance in people's subjectivity that can get lost or overlooked in large *n* studies, Factor B placed such statements near the center of the spectrum, in this case

reflecting uncertainty about how the then still largely unknown Putin would act when in holding the reins of power.

- +1 (18.) Is interested in information that is both supportive and discrepant of the options they are considering at any point.
- +1 (21.) Is intent on meeting situations head-on.
- +1 (24.) Believes it is important to exert control and influence over their environment.
- +1 (25.) Sees constraints as obstacles to overcome, not insurmountable barriers.
- +1 (34.) Is in charge and believes they know what should be done.
- 1 (1.) Often pushes the limits of what is possible.
- 1 (12.) Tends to be reactive, and waits to see how situations play out before acting or deciding.
- 1 (36.) Is flexible in reacting to objects or ideas; has a sense that issues are more gray than black or white.

Of course, such generalized viewpoints as that of “The Russian Public,” “Russian Elites,” or “The International Community” are at best very rough approximations that reveal the perceptions of the sorter himself about Putin and his audiences at the three time periods cited. In no way are they intended to suggest there was in reality a single, distinct view held by each of these three abstract groups. Putin has all along, for example, garnered some support internationally, particularly in arguing that his actions in places such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria represent not Russian interference in foreign countries but a push-back against US-led efforts to impose Western policies and governing practices on others. And even in the West, Putin has at times gained a sympathetic hearing. Long before President Trump repeatedly spoke admirably about Putin, for example, in 2001 then-President George W. Bush famously (no doubt to his later regret), claimed to have looked Putin in the eye and gotten a “sense” of his soul.

Returning again to Hermann’s typology, Factor B’s assessment of Putin seems closest to Hermann’s “Incremental” leader (Table 1): “Focus is on maintaining one’s maneuverability and flexibility while avoiding the obstacles that continually try to limit both.” Such a leader, according to Hermann, is open to information to make necessary adjustments while moving toward their objectives. Note, however, that in Hermann’s framework such a leader also will challenge rather than accept constraints. Of that Factor B, like Factor A, was uncertain as Putin came to power. It is unlikely that in 2000 either factors could have anticipated that Putin would successfully maneuver to remain in power into a third decade.

Factor C: Putin Revealed

Factor C is defined by six of the nine sorts in this single-case study, with all sorts from the 2014/2015 and 2022/2023 time periods. By then Putin had been in power for well over a decade and his leadership style had become much more observable. Moreover, his actions and policies on the domestic and international scenes had markedly sharpened views of the Russian leader. These include his response to the Beslan school terrorist attack in 2004, in which over 330 hostages were killed, his Munich speech in 2007 which lashed out at the United States in rhetoric that mimicked the darkest days of the Cold War, his 2008-2012 switch of presidency and prime minister posts with Dmitry Medvedev, military intervention in Georgia and occupation of two breakaway regions, crushing of pro-democracy protests in 2011-2012, repression and

assassination of dissidents at home and abroad, invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, military intervention in Syria in 2015 to preserve the regime of President Assad, interference in the US 2016 presidential election, and invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A lot of water under the bridge indeed.

Not surprisingly, Factor C's perception of Putin greatly emphasizes his determination to exert control, move quickly and force others to react to him, and push hard against domestic or international constraints. Indeed, in the view of Factor C, there probably are no better descriptions of Putin than Statements 24 and 34.

- +4 (21.) Is intent on meeting situations head-on.
- +4 (24.) Believes it is important to exert control and influence over their environment.
- +4 (34.) Is in charge and believes they know what should be done.
- +3 (1.) Often pushes the limits of what is possible.
- +3 (10.) Trusts their intuition and is often willing to go with the option that first presents itself.
- +3 (25.) Sees constraints as obstacles to overcome, not insurmountable barriers.

While the sorter judged that all three audiences largely shared this view of Putin from 2014 on and thus loaded on Factor C, it should not be assumed that for all of them this was an entirely negative take on the Russian President. Notwithstanding his political repression and electoral machinations, Putin may well continue to benefit from significant domestic support – particularly from the oligarchs he has allowed to maintain their fortunes as long as they do not threaten his political position. That the thus-far unsuccessful military adventure in Ukraine has hurt him politically at home seems a certainty. Whether it will prove politically ruinous is yet to be seen.

Factor C's consistent view of Putin as an aggressive leader willing to defy constraints and seize the initiative in anticipation of wrong-footing his rivals comes through at the left end of the Q-sort array as well, where Factor C placed those statements judged most unrepresentative of Putin.

- 4 (9.) Prefers not to take the initiative, and lets others take responsibility for anything too daring or out of the ordinary.
- 4 (12.) Tends to be reactive, and waits to see how situations play out before acting or deciding.
- 4 (17.) Believes that mobilizing and empowering group members is what leading is all about.
- 3 (11.) Likes to build teams and share responsibility. Often seeks out opinions from relevant constituencies as to what is feasible at any point in time.
- 3 (16.) Accedes to the limits they perceive in the environment.
- 3 (18.) Is interested in information that is both supportive and discrepant of the options they are considering at any point.

While much of this may be seen as now-common wisdom about Putin, analysts seeking to anticipate future moves by Putin might wish to look closely at how Factor C rated a number of statements that address Putin's willingness to carefully assess situations and consider differing viewpoints before acting. If Factor C's judgments about Putin are correct, his apparent willingness in 2022 to act instinctively and without careful consideration of the consequences (in sharp contrast to Factor B's assessment of

Putin in 2000) would seem to put the Russian president at serious risk of another miscalculation along the lines of his invasion of Ukraine. In this respect, at least, Factor C's appraisal of Putin appears generally aligned with Hermann's "Expansionist" leader: "Focus is on expanding one's power and influence." Such a leader, according to Hermann, can be expected to challenge constraints while remaining closed to information that does not comport with their preexisting beliefs.

-4 (12.) Tends to be reactive, and waits to see how situations play out before acting or deciding.

+4 (21.) Is intent on meeting situations head-on.

+3 (10.) Trusts her/his intuition and is often willing to go with the option that presents itself first.

-3 (11.) Likes to build teams and share responsibility. Often seeks out opinions from relevant constituencies as to what is feasible at any point in time.

-3 (16.) Accedes to the limits they perceive in the environment.

-3 (18.) Is interested in information that is both supportive and discrepant of the options they are considering at any point.

Another aspect of Factor C of interest is the loadings on the factor by the two sorts representing how, in the sorter's judgment, Putin appeared to the international community in 2014/2015 and 2022/2023. In the 2014/2015 sort, this loading on Factor C was, though clearly significant, the weakest loading on the factor, suggesting the sorter retained some uncertainty about just how far toward authoritarian and unilateral rule Putin would move. By 2022/2023, the sort performed under the same Condition of Instruction was by far the highest loading on the factor, as shown in Table 4. The difference between the two loadings is statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.⁴

Table 4

Loadings on Factor C: Putin Revealed

Sort	Time Frame	Factor C
4	2014/2015: Putin to Public	.91
5	2014/2015: Putin to Elites	.90
6	2014/2015: Putin to International Community	.73
7	2022/2023: Putin to Public	.92
8	2022/2023: Putin to Elites	.90
9	2022/2023: Putin to International Community	.96

⁴ The normalized standard error of the difference in the two factor loadings was $z=3.37$ (see Expositor). A normalized score of $z>3.29$ includes 99.9 percent of area under the normal curve. Thus, the difference between the two loadings is statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Discussion

Of course, there are limits to teasing out the meaning of these shifts between and within the three Factors in this study. For example, as the researcher attempted to represent the international community's take on Mr. Putin, his sorts moved from defining Factor B (seeing Putin focused on policy success through collaboration and manipulation of others), to loading on Factor C, and then strongly loading on Factor C (seeing Putin as an aggressive authoritarian focused on control and maintaining the initiative). Did the researcher accurately recall his assessments of how Putin sought to project his leadership image to those groups at those times? And even if the researcher did correctly remember his judgements from those periods, were those judgments reasonably accurate?

Perhaps most interestingly, do the changing perceptions of Putin's leadership demonstrated here by Factors A, B, and C reflect real changes in Putin's behavior, or has Putin in reality acted with substantial consistency throughout his time in power and others, including the author-sorter, have simply changed their views of him? (See Bort, 2022 for a discussion of "Putin the Gambler.") Or, did the invasion of Ukraine perhaps reflect a much higher tolerance for risk than Putin had previously evinced?

- Had he been moving in that direction for years without outside observers noting the change, as Bort argues? If so, what was driving Putin in that direction?
- Did Putin simply not recognize or properly calculate the risks involved in his "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine?
- And if Putin is primarily interested in maintaining control and challenging constraints to his authority, why accept the risk that a failed invasion could threaten his entire regime, a regime that otherwise appeared to face little in the way of serious challenge after it crushed the opposition in 2012?
- Or, is Putin now so focused on his place in Russian history and a desire to be remembered as the man who restored the Russian Empire that the need to ensure Russian dominance of Ukraine outweighed for him any danger that a failed venture could pose to his hold on power?

A Q study of the type herein described – or any study, for that matter – will not uncover the "final" answers for these questions, which are typical of the difficult issues with which intelligence analysts contend. That is, they are mysteries rather than secrets, for which there are no certain correct answers, at least not at the time when analysts must provide insights on the matter at hand to those charged with making policy decisions. Yet, if done contemporaneously with the events in question, a study along these lines could provide significant help to analysts in recognizing when their own subjective views are shifting, perhaps in ways too nuanced for them to otherwise notice. Moreover, it could help analysts avoid hindsight bias by creating a documented record of what they thought about the questions at hand at specified times, rather than forcing them to rely on always frail human memory. Those gains alone would be most beneficial and might free up time for analysts to ponder the mysteries noted above, among many others.

References

- Barber, J. D. (1977). *Presidential character: Predicting performance in the White House*. Prentice Hall.
- Bort, C. (2022, March 10). Putin the gambler. *Foreign Affairs*.
- Brown, S. R. (1980). *Political subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science*. Yale University Press.
- Fischhoff, B. (1975). Hindsight \neq foresight: The effects of outcome knowledge on judgment under uncertainty. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 1, 288-299.
- Gaukel, C. (2021, September 16-17). *Using Q to assess foreign leaders at a distance: Test case with former Iranian President Rouhani*. [Paper presentation]. 37th Annual Conference for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity, Nantes, France, (online).
- Hermann, M. G. (2002). *Assessing leadership style: A trait analysis*. Social Science Automation. [LTA.pdf \(socialscience.net\)](#)
- Hill, F. & Gaddy, C. (2013). *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Kundra, Z. (1999). *Social cognition: Making sense of people*. The MIT Press.
- McKeown, B. & Thomas D. (1988). *Q methodology*. Sage Publications.
- Schmolck, P. (2014). PQMethod (v. 2.35). <http://schmolck.org/qmethod/#PQMethod>.
- Steury, D. (Ed.). (1994). *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates*. Washington DC: Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence.
- Stephenson, W. (1953). *The study of behavior: Q technique and its methodology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Watts, S. & Stenner, P. (2012). *Doing Q methodological research*. Sage Publications.

Further Reading

- Bar-Joseph, U. & Kruglanski, A. (2003). Intelligence failure and the need for cognitive closure: On the psychology of the Yom Kippur surprise. *Political Psychology*, 24(1): 75-97.
- Brown, S. R. (1986). Q technique and method: Principles and procedures. In W. D. Berry and M. S. Lewis-Beck (Eds.), *New tools for social scientists: Advances and applications in research methods* (pp. 57-76). Sage Publications.
- Brown, S. R. (1993). A primer on Q methodology. *Operant Subjectivity*, 16(3/4), 91-138.
- Brown, S. R. (2017). Autobiography and problem selection. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1/2), 82-97.
- Brown, S. R., Wolf, A., & Rhoads, J. (2017). *An abductory examination of abduction* [Paper Presentation]. 33rd Annual Conference for the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity, Glasgow, UK.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2020, July 21). *Intelligence and analysis*. <https://www.cia.gov/offices-of-cia/intelligence-analysis/index.html>.
- Expositor. (1992). A note on measuring changes in Q factor loadings. *Operant Subjectivity*, 15(2), 56-61.

- Gladwell, M. (2003, March 10). Connecting the dots: The paradoxes of intelligence reform. *The New Yorker*, 83-88.
- Hagan, J. D. (2001). Does decision making matter? Systemic assumptions vs. historical reality in international relations theory. In J. D. Hagan and M. G. Hermann (Eds.), *Leaders, groups, and coalitions: Understanding the people and processes in foreign policymaking* (pp. 5-46). Blackwill Publishing.
- Hermann, M. G. (Ed.). 1977. *The psychological examination of political leaders*. The Free Press.
- Hermann, M. G. (1993). Leaders and foreign policy decision making. In D. Caldwell and T. McKeown (Eds), *Diplomacy, force, and leadership: Essays in honor of Alexander George*. Westview.
- Hermann, M. G., Preston, T. Korany, B., & Shaw, T.M. (2001). Who leads matters: The effects of powerful individuals. In J. D. Hagan and M. G. Hermann (Eds.), *Leaders, groups, and coalitions: Understanding the people and processes in foreign policymaking* (pp. 83-132). Blackwill Publishing.
- Heuer, R. J. (1999). *The psychology of intelligence analysis*. Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence.
- Jervis, R. (1976). *Perception and misperception in international politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Jervis, R. (2010). *Why intelligence fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*. Cornell University Press.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1977). *Psychopathology and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1952). Political factors in the formulation of strategy. *Naval War College Review*. 4(10), 71-77.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1965). *World politics and personal insecurity*. The Free Press.
- McDougal, M. S., Lasswell, H. D., & Reisman, W. M. (1973). The intelligence function and world public order. *Faculty Scholarship Series Paper 665*.
- Kent, S. (1966). *Strategic intelligence for American world policy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kowert, P. (1996). Where does the buck stop?: Assessing the impact of presidential personality. *Political Psychology*, 17(3), 421-452.
- Milburn, T. G. (1977). The Q-sort and the study of political personality. In M. G. Hermann and T. G. Milburn (Eds.), *The psychological examination of political leaders* (pp. 130-144). The Free Press.
- Rittel, H. W. J. & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4: 155-169.
- Rhoads, J. (2017). Foreword to the special issue: Q methodology and the single case. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1/2), 1.
- Rhoads, J. (2017). Investigating political types, part I: A study of "Phil," the political agitator. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1/2), 59-69.
- Rhoads, J. (2017). Investigating political types, part II: A study of "Cole," the political administrator. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1/2). 70-81.
- Shlaim, A. (1976). Failures in national intelligence estimates: The case of the Yom Kippur war. *World Politics*, 28(3), 348-380.

Smith, H. (1976). *The Russians*. Ballentine.

Stephenson, W. (2017). Fragment from case Martre. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1/2), 2-20.

Thomas, D. (2017). The presentation and remembrance of self in everyday academic life: Building the case for single-case studies in a science of subjectivity. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, 39(1-2), 22-36.

Verzberger, Y. (1993). *The world in their minds: Information processing, cognition, and perception in foreign policy decisionmaking*. Stanford University Press.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international relations*. Addison-Wesley.

Wohlstetter, R. (1962). *Pearl Harbor: Warning and decision*. Stanford University Press.

Wohlstetter, R. (1965). Cuba and Pearl Harbor: Hindsight and foresight. *World Politics*, 43(4), 691-707.

Appendix A

Factor Q-Sort Values for Each Statement

<i>Statement</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>
1. Often pushes the limits of what is possible. (A2)	0	-1	+3
2. Is open to bargaining, trade-offs, and compromise. (A1)	+3	+4	-2
3. Has a well-formulated vision or agenda that frames how data is perceived and interpreted. (B2)	-3	-3	+1
4. Differentiates among people, places, and ideas; sees varying reasons for developments, and tolerates ambiguity in the environment. (B1)	0	0	-2
5. Has created an advisory system composed of individuals who support their ideological or political predisposition. (B2)	+1	0	+2
6. Is adaptable to the situation and remains open to responding to the demands of domestic and international constituencies and circumstances. (A1)	+3	+4	0
7. Is driven internally — is pushed to act by ideas and images that they believe and advocate. (C1)	-4	-4	+2
8. Carefully studies the situation and seeks additional data before choosing a response. (B1)	+1	+3	+1
9. Prefers not to take the initiative, and lets others take responsibility for anything too daring or out of the ordinary. (A1)	-2	-1	-4
10. Trusts their intuition and is often willing to go with the option that presents itself first. (B2)	0	-2	+3
11. Likes to build teams and share responsibility. Often seeks out opinions from relevant constituencies as to what is feasible at any point in time. (C2)	+1	+2	-3
12. Tends to be reactive, and waits to see how situations play out before acting or deciding. (A1)	-2	-1	-4
13. Is interested in expert opinion or advice from those highly attuned to important constituencies. (B1)	+4	+3	-1
14. Sees the world in terms of problems and the role of the group as providing solutions to these problems; views people less as individuals and more as instruments. (C1)	0	+2	+1
15. Achieves quick resolutions on decisions, dealing forcefully with the situation of the moment. (A2)	0	-3	+2
16. Accedes to the limits they perceive in the environment. (A1)	-1	-2	-3
17. Believes that mobilizing and empowering group members is what leading is all about. (C2)	-1	-4	-4
18. Is interested in information that is both supportive and discrepant of the options they are considering at any point. (B1)	-2	+1	-3
19. Is driven by a desire for feedback from those around them — acceptance, approval, support, status, or acclaim. (C2)	-1	0	-1
20. Is driven by a commitment to a particular cause, ideology, or set of interests. (C1)	-3	+2	+1

21. Is intent on meeting situations head-on. (A2)	+1	+1	+4
22. Is constantly asking for updates on progress on a project, what is happening to implement a solution, and options for dealing with problems. (C1)	-3	-4	-1
23. Is sensitive to what key constituencies want and need and attempts to provide it. (C2)	+4	+2	+1
24. Believes it is important to exert control and influence over their environment. (A2)	+2	+1	+4
25. Sees constraints as obstacles to overcome, not insurmountable barriers. (A2)	+2	+1	+3
26. Sees flexibility, political timing, and consensus building as key leadership tools. (A1)	+2	0	0
27. Focuses on substance, not the people involved. (C1)	-4	+4	0
28. Devotes energy and time to building relationships with and persuading others. (C2)	+3	0	-1
29. Focuses attention on persuading others of their position. (B2)	-4	-2	-2
30. Seeks political insights as to who is supporting what and with what degree of intensity. (B1)	+4	-1	0
31. Will only move the group toward its goals as fast as the members are willing to move. (C2)	-1	-3	-2
32. Devotes energy and time to mobilizing effective action toward solving problems, achieving causes, and moving toward their policy goals. (C1)	-2	+3	-1
33. Places great emphasis on consistency — not bending to the whims of circumstances. (B2)	0	0	0
34. Is in charge and believes they know what should be done. (A2)	+1	+1	+4
35. Seeks information that reinforces their points of view. (B2)	-1	-2	+2
36. Is flexible in reacting to objects or ideas; has a sense that issues are more gray than black and white. (B1)	-2	-1	0

Note. All statements refer to Putin and begin with “This leader.”

Appendix B

Hermann's Leadership Trait Model

Hermann uses content analysis of leaders' public statements — preferably interviews (which she argues are more likely to reflect the leader's own words) rather than formal speeches — to ascertain the answers to her three basic questions of whether the leader (1) Accepts or Challenges Constraints, (2) Is Open or Closed to New Information, and (3) Is Oriented to Tasks/Goals or Relationships. In their research, Hermann and her associates determined that these three questions can be addressed by using content analysis to determine the interaction of seven key leadership traits, as summarized below.

Accept or Challenge Constraints	Open or Closed to New Information	Orientated Toward Tasks/Goals or Relationships
Belief that one can influence or control what happens.	Conceptual complexity (ability to differentiate among things and people in the environment).	Tendency to focus on problem solving versus maintenance of the group.
Need for power and influence	Self-confidence.	General distrust of others.
		Intensity with which one holds an ingroup bias.

Note. Summarized from Hermann, 2002, pp. 10-32.