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Vladimir Putin and the Annexation of Crimea.

Choices and decisions have been around for as much time as people have existed. Traditionally, kings and chiefs made the important choices based on their own opinions and beliefs, but in our contemporary times we still have rulers making these decisions with a bit of help from the followers. One particular decision that interests me greatly, because of my cultural ties, was Vladimir Putin's decision to annex Crimea.

Russia and Putin have recently been viewed by the world through careful and untrusting eyes and Putin’s Russia is not entirely blameless for this reputation. One of the most recent and controversial events was when Russia invaded and then annexed a Ukrainian peninsula, if you look at American and pro-American sources, or reclaimed a military base, if you look at the Russian and pro-Russian sources. The following is my discussion and reasoning through why Putin decided to invade the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

The western countries never saw the invasion coming and did not think that it would happen so soon after the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, we can look back and assess the origins of the invasion. Per most credible sources, the beginning would be in February of 2014.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was at that time that Russian soldiers and civilian volunteers began an abnormal movement onto the Crimean Peninsula. The first reasonable signs of invasion occurred on February 28 of that same year when new checkpoints were established on the two roads that connected the peninsula to the Ukrainian mainland.[[2]](#footnote-2) No one could pass through without heavy and complete screening by the men in vastly different uniforms that were manning these posts. In fact, the whole annexation process was so smooth and coordinated that no shots were even fired by the occupying side until March 18 when a small Ukrainian army base in Simferopol was attacked by Russian sympathizers were one officer was killed and another was injured.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Regardless of whether the invasion was ethical, experts agree that this was a very successfully orchestrated invasion.[[4]](#footnote-4) Putin’s method reminds me of Eugene Kranz’s method during the Apollo 13 crisis. Kranz was successful because he delegated power to people and groups that were below him. [[5]](#footnote-5) Putin does a similar thing by allowing most groups to act autonomously with very little oversight in their basic decisions. This makes me question the whole idea when leaders, such as North Koreas president, try to control all aspects possible. I think that the whole delegation of powers would be a much better alternative in most cases. It would free up the leader to be better prepared to handle very important decisions that sometimes get bogged down by unnecessary ones.

In March, it was obvious that some sort of shift in power occurred on the peninsula, especially after the Crimean Status referendum was passed with a result that called for seceding from Ukraine.[[6]](#footnote-6) The people of Crimea and Sevastopol were legitimately pro-secession, contrary to popular western belief at the time that this was a “carried out under the barrel of a Kalashnikov”[[7]](#footnote-7) or, in other words, forced. In fact, the voter turnout was supposedly more than that for local Crimean elections and as reported by BBC, 95.5% were for joining Russia.[[8]](#footnote-8) Obviously, the European Union and the United States were quick to condemn the referendum by claiming that it was illegal and illegitimate.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, that was expected since both of their interests were directly on the line. Even though some countries and organizations will not officially recognize Crimea as a part of Russia, they cannot deny that it is no longer a part of Ukraine.

The whole unrest in Ukraine started with Euromaidan. Euromaidan began late in 2013 when a significant portion of Ukrainians have been peacefully protesting since November and December in favor of turning towards the West and the United States.[[10]](#footnote-10) It was all fine and dandy until December 17th rolled around. On this day, Viktor Yanukovych, the then acting president, sold $15 billion in government bonds to Russia which effectively slashed the price of natural gas by a third.[[11]](#footnote-11) This caused outrage in the protestors because they realized that Yanukovych was not listening to them and even worse, doing the exact opposite of what they wanted. On January 22nd, ironically the Day of Unity in Ukraine, the protests turned violent and the first casualties were recorded. After this the situation got worse and worse and finally reached a full-blown Ukrainian civil war.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So why would Putin care so much about the conflict in Ukraine to the point of risking the wrath of the world on his back when he made the decision to intervene, specifically in Crimea? The answer is not as abstract as most people initially think. For much of history Crimea was fought over and transferred from one country to another. For our purposes, the most important of these transfers happened in 1954 when the then acting leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, gifted the Crimean Oblast, or region, to Ukraine, which was also, at the time, a region in the Soviet Union.[[13]](#footnote-13) Nobody expected the Soviet Union to fall a mere 35 years later and certainly did not expect there to be conflict between the two sister-states.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Soviet Union did fall, however, not all was lost for Russia. Many treaties were signed between the two newly created countries including one that allowed Russia to have a naval base at Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. This was a very important base for the Russians because it allowed access to the Black sea and the Balkans, where Russia still had influence. Also, the majority of the people on the Crimean Peninsula are ethnic Russians. The Russians make up 58.32% of the population while the Ukrainians are the next largest at 24.32%.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Putin’s actions kind of remind me of the actions of Roy Vagelos in Michael Useem’s book. Vagelos eventually got to a point where there was no way someone would stop him because of how committed he was to his cause.[[16]](#footnote-16) It sounds to me that Putin also similarly inspired to get accomplish what he believes in. I believe that this is a double-edged sword. While Vagelos is a positive example of this, Hitler would be a negative example of this persistence and refusal to reconsider.

Putin does not admit to having broken any law by annexing the peninsula. First he says, in a speech to the state Duma, that the procedure was “in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.”[[17]](#footnote-17) However, many western countries completely disagree. Marc Weller, from the University of Cambridge is one of those skeptical in the legality of this all. He says that the citizens cannot just vote and secede. First, the decision must be discussed with the Ukrainian government. Also, it is crucial to ensure that no outside force is potentially influencing the election.[[18]](#footnote-18)

While I do not have enough knowledge to decide whether the decision was legal, I certainly think that the People’s opinion should be considered and a remain a major part of the whole decision process. Also, it would be hard to negotiate with the official government of Ukraine because, depending on who you ask, it is entirely different since the country is essentially amid a civil war that was a result of all the unrest caused by the Euromaidan movement. Putin then goes on in his speech and tries to use soft power to persuade. He brings up the rich Russian history in Crimea including many military conflicts that involved the peninsula.[[19]](#footnote-19) Many historians would agree with Putin on this. Russia truly has a deep and ancient interaction with the people of Crimea and the land itself.[[20]](#footnote-20) While I agree with Putin that a leader is responsible for their followers, I think that Putin made the wrong choice here. If he had first tried to use more of his soft power, he would have probably gotten a much smaller backlash from all the other countries. In my opinion, a leader should not resort to hard power or force just because the soft power is not effective yet. I am sure that if he tried hard enough to communicate his ideas with appropriate rational about protecting those who identify closer to him rather than the current leader they have, much of the ongoing conflict could have been avoided.

Putin also goes on to address the Tatar minority that have been neglected by both Ukraine and Russia much through the ages. He tries to appeal to them by saying that he would allow their language to be the third official language, beside Russian and Ukrainian.[[21]](#footnote-21) I think that a good lesson that can be extracted from this is to look for more potential followers and not to neglect those that are not in the majority. While one might argue that most minorities are not worth the energy and hassle, I would have to disagree. If a leader stops and tries to help or address some minor problem, it will show his current followers that there is no problem too small for him. That will give the leader a better image in the follower’s eyes because we as humans tend to like those who help us and dislike those who ignore us. This phenomenon is evident right now during the election process. Both Clinton and Trump are trying to appeal to the people with promises of lowering taxes[[22]](#footnote-22) or increasing healthcare.[[23]](#footnote-23) People like when candidates address these important concerns and, in my opinion, helps them to align with the candidate that they feel offers more.

In his speech of justification, Putin then proceeds to pull up the statistics on how Ukraine is reliant on Russia anyway. Putin says that he can see why the Ukrainians are unhappy and basically says that they should demand change but not into the NATO and European Union direction. He says that $20 billion or 12% of the Ukrainian Gross Domestic Product is from Russia anyway.[[24]](#footnote-24) The western countries do agree with Putin on the fact that Ukraine needs Russia whether it likes it or not. Ukraine’s exports fell 23% because they are trading with the EU, they cannot trade with Russia any more. Russia happened to be Their biggest importer while the EU restricts how much Ukraine can export to them.[[25]](#footnote-25) While the Ukrainian government can boast that they are no longer using Russia, I do not think that it will help them. The inflation rates have skyrocketed and the people paying for all of this are the average Ukrainians.[[26]](#footnote-26)

I think that there are a couple lessons that I picked out for myself in this part. First, I think that Putin is partially correct in that there is no point of trying to doing something just so you can say you did. I believe that the leader must not always act on their pride. Sometimes that pride needs to be put into the back seat to achieve a goal. Ukraine’s number one priority should be the well-being of the citizens. Instead the leaders of the new Ukrainian political system seem to be more focused how to show Russia that Ukraine is better off without them. This is how, in my opinion, Napoleon’s downfall began. Napoleon was a great leader until his motivation became “winning fresh glory”.[[27]](#footnote-27) I think that selfishness has no place in a good and effective leader. I believe that the followers are the ones that are traditionally the selfish ones. They are the ones that want change or to be led, but are either too lazy to do it themselves or do not care enough for the others around them.

Another lesson that I got from Putin’s comments on economics is to be open minded. I believe that it is not the best thing in the world for Americans to trade oil with the Middle East, but just because we do not agree with someone’s mentality or ideas does not mean that we cannot interact with them anymore. A leader should not dehumanize those that oppose the leader’s viewpoints. On the contrary, I believe that much can be learned if we try to explain to one another why we think option ‘a’ is better than option ‘b’. This would not only create a more peaceful environment, but also allow for individuals to expand their view points and see the decision in a different light or in someone else’s shoes.

Another point that Putin makes is that if Ukraine was to join NATO, it would be bad news for Russia.[[28]](#footnote-28) The ideologies of the West and Russia are not compatible and it would bring a huge military alliance to Russia’s doorsteps. I think that it is the duty of the leader to protect the ideology of the followers within reasonable bounds. It does not mean that some crazy leader should now start running around and yelling that the moon landing was faked just because it is sincerely what he believes in. A good leader should take all the arguments presented to them and reason through them to see if they have something worth mulling over and thinking about. In my opinion, a good leader is one that can adapt his or her view not only to suit the followers, but also to the evidence and arguments that are available. It used to be a common belief that smoking was not bad for people. In 1960, one-third of American doctors believed that cigarettes caused lung cancer.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, as we can see today, that belief has changed. The faster the doctors accept the data presented to them, the more lives they can potentially save. For a leader, I think that this kind of judgement and thinking process is necessary because other people’s lives may depend on him or her.

Now since we have explored the reasons and logistics behind Putin invading Crimea, we can see that it is not as easy to judge whether or not he did the wrong thing. In my opinion, Putin should have tried to be a little less aggressive and a bit more diplomatic. As previously stated, I believe that he could have negotiated with the Ukrainian government and worked some sort of deal out. Therefore, I do not think that Putin was necessarily wrong in annexing Crimea, just that he probably could have and should have obtained Crimea without angering so many people unnecessarily. However, there are still many lessons to be learned from the situation. The lessons mentioned above are not all the possible lessons that could have been drawn out form the situation. Also, the lessons learned depend entirely upon the person and what they see in the situation. Therefore, I think it is important to keep studying other leaders and their decisions so we can have a better understanding of how we should act and give us a standard to judge the decisions of others.

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