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ARTICLE

The fog of leadership: How Turkish and Russian presidents manage information constraints and uncertainty in crisis decision-making

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ABSTRACT

Leaders choose to mislead their domestic peers when the political risk and cost associated with a particular foreign policy decision is too great and when the structure of the political system in question is too leader-centric to afford these costs being incurred by the leader. This article argues that risk, uncertainty and imperfect information are not necessarily external, unwanted, or unforeseen factors in foreign policy decisions. In certain cases, they too are instrumentalized and adopted consciously into decision-making systems in order to diffuse the political costs of high-risk choices with expected low utility by insulating the leader from audience costs. This dynamic can be best observed in leader-centric and strong personality cult systems where the leader's consent or at least tacit approval is required for all policies to be realized. This article uses two important case studies that effectively illustrate the use of deliberate uncertainty in decision-making in leader-centric systems: post-2014 Russia (War in Donbass and the annexation of Crimea), and Turkey (ending of the Kurdish peace process and the change in policy towards Syria).

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Introduction and theoretical background

Uncertainty is interpreted by the major theoretical schools in International Relations as fear (Tang 2008; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Keohane and Nye 1977) (realism), ignorance by rationalists (Glaser 2010; Zacher and Matthew 1992), confusion/ambiguity by cognitivists (Iida 1993; Goldberg et al. 1999) and indeterminacy by constructivists (Wendt 1999; Mitzen 2006), all of which suggest that uncertainty arises as an exogenous variable upon which political actors are dependent. Furthermore, uncertainty is treated as an unwanted exogenous factor, which imposes psychological constraints and emotional triggers that lead to poor policy signalling and information flow across countries and agencies, usually increasing the chances of conflict escalation (Fearon 1995; Rathbun 2007; Bas 2012; Huth et al. 1992).

This article argues that risk, uncertainty, and imperfect information are not necessarily external, unwanted, or unforeseen factors in foreign policy decisions. In

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certain cases, they too are instrumentalized and adopted consciously into decision-making systems to diffuse the political costs of high-risk choices with expected low utility. Thus, this article treats misinformation not only as an exogenous factor (i.e., for misleading the enemy or a system-level variable that blurs rational decision-making), but as an endogenous, inward factor: the deliberate utilization of uncertainty and imperfect information by leaders is a mode of in-group political communication.

Why would leaders mislead their own inferiors? Why for example, would a president choose to deliberately mislead his/her own Minister of Foreign Affairs in making foreign policy, or his/her own prime minister or ambassador? I argue that there are two reasons for this: first, leaders choose to mislead their domestic peers when the political risk and cost associated with a particular decision are too great (audience cost aversion) and second, when the structure of the political system in question is too leader-centric to allow the leader to incur these costs (audience cost diffusion). In such foreign policy decisions, audience costs need to be deflected away from the central leader as leadership survival may be viewed as central to regime survival.

The first and second reasons may seem paradoxical. Why would a leader-centric political system choose to seek ways to insulate the leader from important decisions? Is the very purpose of a leader-centric system not to put the leader at the centre of all decisions? Here, I argue that this is not always the case, especially in unavoidable, high-risk scenarios where the expected utility is low. In such cases, the leader 'sacrifices' an intermediary by deliberately creating a blurred vision of events and an unclear directive, which forces the said intermediary to improvise in order to muddle through the fog. In the face of uncertainty, the intermediary then follows a relatively autonomous set of decisions on the leader's behalf, curating a set of initiatives neither explicitly supported nor rejected by the leader. If this set of decisions generates a political outcome that strengthens the position of the leader, then the intermediary is rewarded and remains in place. Silence is often a sign of approval in these cases. If, however, the decision incurs negative political costs to the leader, then the intermediary is removed and the leader denies giving such orders, usually in a public statement. Although the popular term 'plausible deniability' is used to define such circumstances, the term does not properly address the cost/payoff motives associated with such distancing.

By the deliberate use of uncertainty, the leader accomplishes three things:

- insulates himself from the political costs of unforeseen and uncertain decisions with expected low utility;
- gives the intermediary a small degree of autonomy to craft policies and options on the leader's behalf (and also to deflect accusations of autocracy);
- if the autonomous decision of the intermediary generates positive political capital (meaning, if it yields the desired utility), then the leader can at any time 'own' the intermediary's decision to strengthen his/her own position; if not, the leader denies giving such an order to begin with and removes the intermediary. The punishment however, is not severe, and is limited to removal, since the intermediary undertakes a heavy burden on behalf of the leader; this type of cannon fodder behaviour is strongly encouraged in over-centralized policy systems.

This dynamic can be observed best in leader-centric and strong personality cult systems where the leader's consent or at least tacit approval is required for all policies to materialize. Yet there is usually a paradox in these systems. All decisions require the approval of the leader, but what if the leader is wrong and the audience cost of a mistake generates too much adverse effect on leadership (hence, regime) popularity over time, endangering government authority? In less leader-centric political systems, the political costs of admitting wrong policy are more widely distributed across the political spectrum: to the cabinet, ministers, and agencies. If a president or prime minister makes a decision and fails markedly, then they resign or lose votes and the system keeps working with new figures. Yet in hybrid/authoritarian systems, the state apparatus grows dependent on the prestige and political capital of the leader to function. In such systems, political costs incurred by the leader are not only about the leader per se, but also about the legitimacy of government agencies and state institutions in general, all of which configure their relative standing and power relations based on their proximity to the leader in particular and that leader's political capital in general. There is generally no real and nationally agreed upon options and prospects of democratic government change through elections.

Deliberate uncertainty and imperfect information enter the scene at exactly this moment. Although leaders in over-centralized systems pursue hands-on, micromanaged administrative styles during their early periods of power accumulation, they reverse this trend and become increasingly withdrawn from making stark and direct policy decisions during the later phases of their tenure. This is because once they are successful in power consolidation and centralization efforts, they render state institutions dependent upon this legitimacy and political capital, generating a symbiotic relationship. At the end of the power consolidation process, such leaders create an audience cost shield around themselves to protect themselves from the adverse effects incurred by mistaken decisions. This political buffer usually comes both in the form of a group of people (loyalists that make and unmake policy in the leader's name) and/or a system of confusion (an unclear division of labour where correct decisions can later be owned and mistaken decisions disowned by the leader) all aimed at diverting attention away from the leader when things go wrong. That is why even the most leader-centric systems tend to operate on a degree of delegation and 'horizontal power' to diffuse these political costs. However, the leader chooses to delegate this burden based on two conditions, where:

- the delegated figure is a strong loyalist, is willing to take the blame for mistaken decisions, and is willing to give most of the credit of successful decisions to the leader – mostly because his/her political and personal future depends on a long-standing relationship with the leader;
- there is an unavoidable, high-risk decision, with low expected utility and with an uncertain outcome where the potential of failure incurs significant political costs by the leader.

When these conditions are met, the relationship between the leader and the policy intermediary becomes similar to trapeze artists, where the intermediary is the proverbial 'flyer', who takes a big leap of faith hoping that the autonomy within which he

operates will lead to the desired outcome. If successful, then the leader 'catches' the intermediary; if not, the flyer is left to fall.

Although authoritarian systems provide some of the best examples to such systematic uses of misinformation, in recent years, Donald Trump's administration in the US, Theresa May's government in the UK, Victor Orban's government in Hungary, and Mateusz Morawiecki's government in Poland have begun using similar tactics in foreign policy. In doing so, democracies that have power-centralizing leaders are also vulnerable to the effects of deliberate misinformation. However, this article uses two important case studies that effectively illustrate the use of deliberate uncertainty in decision-making in leader-centric systems: post-2014 Russia and Turkey under Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Regardless of regime-type differences, both countries' political cultures value strong leadership and strong concentration of political capital and authority under these leaders. Both leaders have also identically instrumentalized deliberate uncertainty and created insulators to diffuse the political costs of high-risk foreign policy decisions. To test these claims, this article looks at how misperceptions and uncertainty work as decision-making heuristics in Russia's decision to go to war in Donbass (April 2014) and annex Crimea (March 2014), and in the Turkish case, its Syria policy (2012–2015), and its decision to end the Kurdish peace process in July 2015.

Hierarchical misinformation heuristics: Russian *Sistema*

Both agency-centred and structural analyses of Russian foreign policy-making agree on the occasional erraticism of the Kremlin (Baev 2011; Mearsheimer 2014; Trenin 2003). Gleb Pavlovsky, however, emphasizes that Putin's seeming erraticism is calculated – 'hypocrisy and penchant for gambling are fundamentally rational and devoid of eccentricity' (Pavlovsky 2016). Pavlovsky plays down the narrative of a strongman in the form of an all-powerful Putin and argues that there are similar powerful figures around him such as Sergei Ivanov (Chief of Presidential Administration), Vladislav Surkov (Personal Adviser), Alexei Miller (Chairman of the Management Committee, Gazprom) or Igor Sechin (Chairman of Rosneft), who also act in their own interest. These figures create a system that is a far cry from traditional understandings of autocracy, and instead lead to a form of complex interdependence of 'bureaucratically successful individuals that make up the state' (Pavlovsky 2016). This is called the *Sistema (Сисmема)*, a concept that was first introduced by Alena Ledeneva, and re-conceptualized by Pavlovsky later; it defines a loosely connected network of elites operating under deliberate uncertainty (Ledeneva 2013, 89).

Ledeneva rejected the claim that there was a 'power-vertical' (i.e., a vertical power hierarchy) in Moscow and instead asserted that there is a network of powerful people, among whom Putin's position is closer to being *primus inter pares* than an autocrat. The currency of the system is ambivalence and paradox. It is useful in getting things done quickly, albeit with high costs, inefficiency, and the resultant creation of overlapping and confusing systems of interdependence between elites (Ledeneva 2012, 17). Stanislav Belkovsky also argued a similar line and asserted that *Sistema* is a 'rhizome state', where horizontal networks with 'innumerable multiplicities of power centres' make it difficult to know where Putin enters the scene and

when he is out (Belkovsky 2013, 54). Yet Putin himself does not sit atop *Sistema*, nor does he actively steer its general course. He is isolated at the centre, protected from the political costs of decisions and, as he admits, he can only make things happen by directly and forcefully intervening at the personal level, at the cost of great political capital. In that respect, Ledeneva claims that Putin is half in charge of *Sistema*, and half its prisoner.

Sistema evolved in two phases: pre- and post-2012. Before 2012, Putin's early years (namely, his first presidential period of 2000–2008) was marked by power consolidation, which he called 'managed democracy' (Petrov and Michael 2005). In a managed democracy, there was a clear-cut hierarchy in decisions from Moscow to the federal level, and from the federal to the regional offices. Then came Medvedev's presidency, which lasted from 2008 to 2012, during which Putin was the prime minister and allowed Medvedev a degree of freedom in crafting and executing his own policies. Then in 2012, when Medvedev and Putin switched places, Putin started to animate a different type of political personality, purging many of the power brokers and bureaucrats that were attached to the Kremlin during Medvedev's time. In his prime ministership, Putin was silent, and was deliberately opaque over which figures Medvedev should appoint or dismiss. He allowed Medvedev full authority in enacting policy until the end of his tenure, and it was only when Putin became president that he made his views clear through the purges. While in the first part of his presidency, Putin adopted a top-down and hands-on approach, in his second presidential term, he used ambivalence and uncertainty as a currency. In this second period, Putin added a new layer of uncertainty to the picture, which rendered his persona and office largely ambiguous in terms of approval or disapproval, effectively insulating himself from policy commitments (Wegren 2015, 73). In contrast to his earlier tenure, which was based on strong signalling and direct control, the second period relied directly on uncertainty and imperfect information as a form of administration. In the absence of direct approval, consent for certain projects was given discretely in the form of *otmashka* (*ОТМАШКА*, or go-ahead) which is not really support, but an indifferent form of non-objection (Pavlovsky 2016). As *otmashka* is neither rejection nor support, it made it easier for Putin to deny or affirm support to the policy depending on its success or failure.

In a decision-making environment where transparency is not valued, or purposefully avoided or weakened, decisions and their political costs fall upon a single individual or a small, closely knit network of elites, who in turn seek ways to obscure and diffuse these costs. I argue that this is the fundamental logic of *Sistema*: there cannot be any policy costs associated with the policy if decision-makers never approve these decisions in the first place. While it is relatively easier to commit to low-cost and/or high expected utility decisions, the 'commitment deficit' associated with high-cost and/or low expected utility decisions leads to the creation of a 'horizontal power' in which the leader is insulated and policy managers emerge on his behalf. These policy managers then enter into a tactical gambit in the face of emergency decisions or high-risk long-term policy options:

- do nothing, do not act as a buffer in return for the sake of retaining rank or position, but risk losing favour with the leader over the long-term, or;
- decide to act as a buffer, formulate/initiate policy, and win the favour of the leader by acting as cannon fodder in the absence of a clear policy direction and with the understanding that failure will result in removal from office.

Once the gamble begins, intermediaries tend to choose the option that best ensures winning further favours from Putin and continued access to the Kremlin, rather than mere political survival. Survival in the form of retaining position and rank is an unclear gain, as unfavoured intermediaries who do not risk themselves may still lose access to Kremlin, whereas those who take the risk and lose positions can still be rewarded with Kremlin access through backchannels. In Kremlin discourse, these intermediaries are called 'curators' – political bureaucrats and also project managers that are directly endorsed by the president to handle a particular task (Pavlovsky 2016). Endorsement in this case however, is not permanent, as Putin's endorsement of a curator does not necessarily imply his endorsement of the curator's set of policies, or his projects, but is a short-term 'nod' that endorses the risk the curator is undertaking. A capable curator, who crafts sound and calculated policies, but is unwilling or unsure about exporting the political capital of his successful decisions to Putin is regarded as 'idler' and thus, does not serve the *Sistema*. When successful curators become 'too famous' in the media, or in policy circles, they are expected to lower their profiles and channel political capital to Putin. There also exists a level of autonomy granted to curators in initiating and running a particular project: if the project produces positive results, the curator stays in place and is rewarded with continued access to Kremlin's resources. If not, Putin distances himself from the decision and curator – for he never directly approved the project to begin with. The curator is then removed and the president saves face, for he never approved the project in the first place. Throughout the curator's policy process, Putin does not intervene on the curator's behalf – even to make small nudges – in order to distance himself from accusations of autocracy: after all, Putin delegated, did not micromanage, but in the absence of his close attention, the project failed, or he was 'deceived' – or so goes the narrative. Once a curator fails, Putin knows which decisions and choices have led to such failure and can then easily go in the other direction to 'fix things personally'.

Jurisdictional conflicts between multiple curators handling similar tasks emerge frequently. When multiple curators end up clashing, or entering into each other's project areas, they are free to use any means necessary to compete over different outcomes (if their approach to the project is not similar or complementary) and in a Darwinist political setting, whichever curator wins the contest continues to influence the outcome (Granville et al. 2012, 18). This contest is another game of survival, which tests curators' administrative, bargaining, and alliance-building capacities against other curators that are operating within the same policy arena.

Sistema as a foreign policy decision-making heuristic

A good testing ground for how *Sistema* works in foreign policy is the Ukrainian crisis (annexation of Crimea and the subsequent involvement in Donbass); it is also where deliberate uncertainty has led to most clashes between Putin's curators. By mid-2014, a large number of Russian paramilitaries and militias started appearing through Donbass, most of which, according to Ukrainian intelligence, were led by Sergei Aksenov (leader of the Russian Unity party), funded by a Putin curator – Konstantin Malofeev (Weaver 2014; Schwartz 2014; Keating 2014; Arkhipov et al. 2014) – and controlled by another curator – Igor Girkin (Strelkov) (Walker 2016; Shamanska 2016; BBC News 2014), who had taken the liberty of arranging the situation. The arrival of these armed units, on the

other hand, was something the Kremlin could disassociate itself from, as there was no apparent connection between Putin and the deployment. As far as Moscow was concerned, these were concerned nationalists who just went to the frontlines by themselves – Putin could claim he did not give such an order, and there was a period of plausible deniability in the important earlier phases of the conflict (Karatnycky 2015).

The Crimean intervention has been more carefully oiled and directed. The emergence of 'little green men', who took over the Crimean parliament, led to a chain of events that ended up with the local parliament's call for a (disputed) referendum to join Russia. Despite the anonymity of the early pro-Russian armed forces without insignia, Russian forces were already legally deployed in the peninsula under the jurisdiction of the 2010 Kharkiv Pact, which extended Russia's control over Crimean naval facilities until 2042 (Galeotti 2016b). Once Crimea was under Russian control, they unilaterally annulled the treaty in March 2014. Although clashes between Ukrainian and Russian forces restarted in August 2016 owing to demarcation disputes, the transition from crisis, takeover, referendum, and accession treaty went smoothly and according to a pre-set plan, unlike Russian actions in Donbass. Had the appearance of paramilitaries on Donbass ended up creating the desired outcome (forcing the other side to back down or establish deterrence capability) then the process would have continued unhindered. Yet the curators Girkin and Malofeev clashed – as curators, by definition do so often – with disastrous outcomes, especially in crisis scenarios (Rusnáková 2017; Bukkvoll 2016).

On 17 July 2017 2014, a pro-Russian militia used a surface-to-air SA-11 missile to shoot down the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MAS 17), killing all 298 passengers aboard. The mechanics of the incident remained so obscure for so long that the incident was effectively dissected and explained better through Bellingcat – an open-source intelligence initiative – rather than state agencies (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2017). Which specific Buk missile system unit fired the missile, where it came from, and under whose command (or influence) the operators of the Buk were engaged in this operation were matters fiercely contested by Russia. In fact, this was one of the most serious cases of *Sistema* going wrong (Gibney 2015; Gregory 2014). The relative autonomy Putin allowed to his curators and his subsequent self-distancing from the tactical-level calculus became a form of management system, leading to serious miscommunication between the local militia that shot down the plane and their obscure Russian superiors. According to *The Guardian*, Igor Strelkov, Igor Bezler, and Nikolai Kozitsyn had discussed the shooting-down in social media soon after the downing of the plane, trying to understand under whose jurisdiction this event had taken place (Luhn 2014).

Yet the biggest problem with using such a loose decision-making approach, where the autonomy of a militia can cause a major international crisis like the MAS 17 incident, is the difficulty of cleaning up such processes. While it is relatively easy to get a curator to initiate a project (or policy) through giving it *otmashka*, freezing or backtracking it from the Kremlin proves to be very difficult – especially when the curator's autonomy generates a sudden, unforeseen problem with very high political costs. After all, Sistema necessitates autonomy and uncertainty, and thus, the Kremlin cannot easily pull back an initiative it did not directly approve. Putin attempted to resolve the MAS 17 crisis, which was the low point of an already problematic process of

militia autonomy in Donbass, by assigning another curator – Ramazan Kadyrov, the Chechen leader – to bring back the militias operating within Ukraine

(Karatnycky 2015). Yet despite Putin's bid to act directly and scale back Russian involvement in Donbass, Kadyrov was unable to recall all of the militias as many continued to remain in the area and fight (Fuller 2016). This created another set of unforeseen problems on the ground with further jurisdictional crises between curators, making de-escalation practically impossible.

A second problem with the curatorial approach in Donbas was the clash of several policy entrepreneurs who attempted to resolve or cover-up the MAS 17 incident through conflicting and mutually defeating methods. While one Putin curator, Vladislav Surkov (Deputy Chief of Presidency), was tasked to restore order in Donbas, another curator, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, was assigned to cooperate with the parties in the Minsk talks (Socor 2016). One curator to cover up MAS 17, and another to appear cooperative with the West proved to be a clumsy diversification approach, especially given the fact that Russian troops were already posting selfies from within Ukraine (Jones 2014). This dual assignment generated great operational conflicts between Surkov and Lavrov, demonstrating an overall erratic exercise of foreign policy by Russia (Galeotti 2016a). This Darwinian competition was eventually won by Surkov, following the offensive carried out by the Ukrainian forces in August 2014, necessitating the rapid expansion of Russian army presence in the region. This expansion strengthened Surkov's hand, allowing him to become the primary intermediary in Donbass, and leading to Putin's decision to recall Lavrov from negotiations now that the Ukrainian offensive had proven that diplomacy would not solve the issue. Whether Surkov's victory implied a wider Russian victory is up for debate. If the hypothesis is that Russia wanted exactly the same smooth process in Donbass that it was able to secure in Crimea, then Surkov's influence can be viewed as a failure. Yet if the second hypothesis is true, that Russia never wanted to annex Donbass and the purpose was to create a semi-frozen proxy conflict there, then Surkov's role has largely been successful. The deadlock on both sides and Russia's opening of a third front – Syria – is, perhaps, evidence that supports the first hypothesis.

A final point about *Sistema* is that although it is tailored to diffuse the costs of failed policies, failure is rarely admitted. In Donbass the initial gambit may have failed, but this did not lead to withdrawal from Ukraine – a show of admitting to failure – but instead necessitated the creation of a new distraction to divert attention: this would be Syria. Thus, Russia's Syria campaign had one objective: to become a national and international diversion from Donbass and reassure Russia's friends and enemies of its military capabilities (Nye 2016). A new set of curatorial networks was set up in the Syrian campaign, with Donbass' lessons in mind.

To summarize, when *Sistema* works, it shields the leader from the political costs of bad decisions. The use of deliberate misperception allows Putin to deny involvement if things go wrong and yield support for the policy just in time when it generates the optimum outcome. Through leaving curators in doubt, Putin relieves himself from the burdens of micromanaging, over-commitment to a policy, and loss of political capital if a policy generates unwanted outcomes. The autonomy in *Sistema* is hardly democratic, however – it is only given to the most loyal of intermediaries, who are not always democratically elected. Furthermore, when the system fails, it increases both administrative and

bureaucratic tensions, leading to animosity among the key figures in charge. In cases of high-profile international crises too, the immense cost of failure creates a dangerously ambiguous environment where only the most daring of curators act on behalf of the leader, while more calculating ones do nothing, leading to more sharp and extreme policies and actions prevailing within *Sistema*. When things indeed go wrong on the other hand, it becomes much more difficult to stop or recall the policy as it was never formulated centrally; this turns the administration into a loose cannon that has to address the failure of an extreme policy with an even more extreme response.

Sistema both supports and is supported by improvisation. Deliberate uncertainty makes it easier for the leader to isolate himself from the effects of bad policies and take responsibility only for those that reinforce his position. However, it also enables a country's foreign policy to be more adaptable and mouldable – even at the expense of flying blind – from a strategic point of view. It can be argued that Putin's Crimea gambit was riddled with mistakes and disasters (such as the case of the MAS 17 flight), but in the end, Moscow did dominate the Black Sea and annexed Crimea, both of which were bigger gains than Moscow initially projected. The cost on the other hand, is equally substantial – the risk of Donbass turning into a long-term frozen conflict that indefinitely sucks up Moscow's resources. It can also be argued that the cost of failure in Donbass is the reason why Moscow chose an even greater gambit – the Syrian campaign – to offset the political costs created by the confusion generated by *Sistema*, thus necessitating a far greater investment to offset the political costs of the initial investment.

The agency-structure debate in deliberate uncertainty: fraction-actor networks in Turkish foreign policy

I conceptualize a 'fraction-actor network' as a decision-making setting in which too many actors focus their attention on the same set of policies. There is no division of labour over policy issues between actors with different set of skills; instead, there is labour duplication where actors with similar skill sets preside over multiple, similar issues. This renders both the actors in the decision-making environment and the policy issues they focus on as fractions of a whole, which do not necessarily add up to a coherent whole. The lack of clarity over the exact initiator and overseer of policy is exacerbated by the fact that actors who deal with the same issues often find themselves with problems of redundancy. While jurisdictional problems also exist in *Sistema*, they are largely deliberate. In Turkey's case however, intermediaries find themselves in jurisdictional conflicts not as a result of central planning, but the lack thereof.

Fraction-actor networks emerge in decision-making settings where loyalty and ideological allegiance are prized more than the actual technical ability and expertise of actors to match the problem at hand. This creates a setting where the division of labour is not necessarily distributed according to the abilities of the elected officials (i.e., the Minister of Culture handling culture issues), but according to their loyalty and ideological commitment (i.e., the most ideologically committed and loyal ministers handling the most important policy areas at the same time, such as foreign policy, national security, and defence, whereas those who are ideologically less committed handle less important issues). The resultant decision-making system renders all actors 'fraction-actors' as none of them have the exclusive portfolio to steer a particular policy,

and those that have stronger ideological commitments and loyalty tend to contribute more to the policy process than those with more technical expertise in the matter. This is especially the case in 'high politics' issues of national security and foreign policy.

Fraction-actor networks are useful for achieving one purpose: loyalty and ideological purity, which in turn (is expected to) lead to faster decision-making. They emerge in hybrid political systems that are neither fully authoritarian (officials are still elected through public vote), nor fully democratic systems (widespread suspicion requires a degree of control over elected representatives) that emphasize rapid policy enactment (Santiso 2013; Whitehead 2002). These systems are usually driven by a powerful leader, who presides over a government that is tasked less with policy formulation and more with the diligent and unquestioning implementation of policies crafted by the leader and his close cohort. However, in high-risk time-constraint scenarios where the leadership proves unable to make a decision, several high-level intermediaries involuntarily become 'curators' and have to deal with the problem through a confusing distribution of power. It is specifically in these scenarios that the division of labour becomes even more obscure, leading to 'too many cooks in the kitchen' and the emergence of unclear policy positions and directives. As such systems tend less to separate policies based on their type (health, public works, defence, labour) and more according to their importance (important: defence, foreign policy, national security; less important: health, labour, culture, and so on) all of the most important people in the decision-making start focusing on exactly the same problem.

Domestically, one of the best illustrations of Turkey's fraction-actor network decision-making has been the Kurdish peace process (2009–2015). The arrest of the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and the organization's subsequent interregnum in the early 2000s made way for an alternative non-military discourse, which was provided by the AKP in the form of electoral politics and public works. In doing so, Erdoğan was operating within constraints set by the military (Traynor 2007), which he always feared was ready to engage in a *coup d'état* against him (Hardy 2010). Indeed, in many ways, being overly dependent on the military would open up the space for military involvement in politics, which in turn would lead to a more direct military intervention against the government (Steinvorth 2010; Spiegel 2007; Aydinli 2009). Within these constraints, Erdoğan was a fraction-actor, the front man of the wider Kurdish question, but sharing both policy formulation and policy execution with then President Abdullah Gül, Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu, Undersecretaries Feridun Sinirlioğlu and Hakan Fidan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), respectively, and successive Ministers of the Interior and Defense. On the other side was another constraint – PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan, who exerted varying degrees of influence over the course of the peace process (although Öcalan was not a buffer to Erdoğan, but another fraction-actor who competed with others). This network was overseeing more or less the same portfolio: negotiating PKK's disarmament and ceasefire, managing the transition of the PKK's violent aims into parliamentary representation, and granting PKK's lower ranks pardon and senior ranks asylum in Europe. Up until 2011, it can be argued that Erdoğan perhaps had equal influence over these matters compared to other fraction-actors.

The Kurdish peace process was a microcosm of the drawbacks associated with fraction-actor networks: a high-risk, low expected utility case whereby the lack of an overall plan, clear objectives, and an unclear division of labour between fraction-actors plagued a vital political process. Neither Erdoğan (who was constrained by his cabinet), nor the government (which acted under the constraint of the military) nor the military (which was constrained by the pro-peace public opinion) had a clear idea of what success meant regarding the peace process, or how to achieve it. Neither party was willing to suffer the political costs of being portrayed as 'traitors' on the one side, and 'warmongers' on the other. Therefore, both the government and the military operated in a self-generated environment of uncertainty to obscure the political responsibility of any failure, in which political speech and statements were in Erdoğan's control, but not actual policy.

This changed in 2009 owing to the other fraction-actor, Abdullah Öcalan, and his attempt to break this self-generated deadlock of uncertainty by proclaiming his own 'peace process' (Hürriyet 2011) and take risks. In order to retain the balance of power between fraction-actors, the government chose to pre-empt Öcalan's peace plan and initiated a hastily mustered alternative plan, which would be alternately called the 'peace/opening process' or 'resolution process' (Ensaroglu 2013). The government had bypassed Öcalan, but not at the expense of suffering from the political costs arising from the nationalist electorate.

However, the deadlock was broken and having initiated a peace process, the government only had to go forward. The first phase of the Kurdish peace process (2009–2011), which had begun merely to sideline Öcalan's initiative, ended because of a lack of clarity over aims, causing commitment problems on both sides of the negotiating table (Gunter 2014). In 2012, another, better-crafted peace process began, largely in response to the Arab Spring movements on which the PKK wanted to surf (Oğuzlu 2012; Gunter 2011). Although a much better division of labour between actors was attained with better policy goals, the second peace process also failed, less because of Turkey's own internal problems, and more because of the spillover effects of the Syrian Civil War (Unver 2016b).

Until the official collapse of the second peace process in July 2015, Turkey's handling of the policy resembled less a fraction-actor network and more a Russian *Sistema*. Uncertain about the outcome of the Syrian Civil War and its impact on Turkey's peace process, President Erdoğan chose to insulate himself within a buffer of curators: Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the peace process Yalçın Akdoğan, Minister of Interior Efkan Ala, MIT Undersecretary Hakan Fidan, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ, with Akdoğan having the most say over the process (BBC Türkçe 2015). Once the second peace process began to derail by early 2014 however, Erdoğan withdrew himself even more from the decision-making process, giving his long-time companion Yalçın Akdoğan exclusive curatorship over the matter. Although the relative stability brokered by Akdoğan hinted at the success of the process, in February 2015 it all came down to what is known as the '*Dolmabahçe* consensus'[1] – which was strongly denounced by Erdoğan, despite his earlier go-ahead – *otmashka* (Sabah 2015). It is still unclear why Erdoğan chose to distance himself from the Dolmabahçe consensus despite his earlier non-intervention (and even tacit go-ahead) to the process, but it is after this point that Erdoğan completely distanced himself from the process, leaving all of the curators of the peace process in a self-generated environment of uncertainty. Months later, figures that had the greatest influence over the peace

process – Davutoğlu, Ala, and Akdoğan – were all removed from their positions, not making it to the new government that was announced in May 2016.

Fraction-actor networks and the Syrian civil war

'Fraction-actor network' is also a fitting conceptualization of Turkey's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, in that both the country itself and the decision-makers within it have not been the sole determinants of policy. Turkey's Syria policy was certainly not independent, as Ankara was only one of the partners in the triangular alliance with the United States and Saudi Arabia (Doherty and Bakr 2012; Hosenball 2012). Although NATO later joined in as an alliance, mostly under the aegis of the 'Global Coalition Against Daesh', Turkey's Syria policy has been largely driven by Washington and Riyadh, especially in favour of protecting Sunnis against the sectarian spill over of the Syrian Civil War and later, to counter Iranian and Russian geopolitical aims. Within the alliance Turkey was at the forefront of all efforts – both sharing the longest border with Syria and hosting the largest number of refugees – yet unable to materialize this unique position into a coherent policy that could steer its allies' perspectives. Ankara was either too impetuous too early (such as by sharply expressing its regime change policy in Syria, and expecting a quick victory over Assad, which allowed Iran to counterbalance faster), or too late in joining its allies' pre-mediated positions (such as by taking precautions to bar ISIS encroachments into Turkish territory). That is why many of Turkey's initiatives over the Syrian Civil War ended up out of sync due to over-commitment, political coordination problems, and an overall disconnect with its partners.

Through earlier phases of Syrian discontent (March–July 2011), Turkey was alone in trying to use its political capital to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Assad not to target his own citizens (Black 2011); in contrast Washington and Riyadh were more eager for a military intervention, encouraged by the quick toppling of Libyan and Egyptian autocrats (Bar'el 2012). After several weeks of brutal crackdown by Assad on domestic dissent, Turkey changed course by the summer of 2011 and joined the bandwagon with Washington and Riyadh, gambling on the expectation that Assad would not put up much of a fight if challenged militarily (Hürriyet 2012). This in turn led to a directly confrontational rhetoric in Ankara with explicit support for Assad's forceful removal. However, this momentum in favour of Assad's removal failed to turn into decisive action as Iran began deploying the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) to support Damascus (Fassihi 2012).

Even though Turkey had rather rapidly shifted its pro-consensus focus into one favouring a military campaign against Assad, this time it was the US and other NATO countries that were discouraged from doing so, owing to Iran and Russia's successful counter-balancing efforts. It was by early 2012 that Turkey began to overcommit to the anti-Assad opposition in Syria, pursuing an 'open-door policy' (Kirişçi and Ferris 2015) over the Syrian border and supporting obscure groups whose main commonality was their anti-Assad stance. In supporting these groups, Turkey was again a fraction-actor, as both the US and the Saudis followed this policy as well (Chivers and Schmitt 2013), but Ankara seldom showed caution in supporting these groups. This lack of caution, arising from the pursuit of deliberate uncertainty over a Syria policy, ended up creating enormous political costs in what is known as the 'MIT scandal' of January 2014 when the Turkish Gendarmerie intercepted two semi-trailers that were carrying arms and supplies to Syria (Pamuk and Tattersall 2015;

Kızılkoyun 2014; *The Guardian* 2015). In an unexpected standoff between the gendarmerie troops and MIT operatives, the tension was eventually diffused, but not before it became public that the trailers were transporting arms without parliamentary approval or a governmental decree. Although the government scrambled to cover the issue up in various ways, including intelligence concerning the contents of the shipment being attained through illegal methods (Pamuk and Tattersall 2015; Russia Today 2017; *The Guardian* 2015), the scandal remained a sustained source of political costs for Erdoğan, even though Turkey was only part of the coalition that favoured sending arms to Syrian rebels.

The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as the dominant Sunni fighting faction in Syria complicated Ankara's calculations further. Beginning with the May 2013 Reyhanlı bombing, ISIS used Turkey as a 'surrogate mother',[2] benefiting from the open-door policy on the border and establishing a wide network within Turkey (Stein 2016; Blaser and Stein 2015). Turkey's relative apathy towards earlier encroachments of ISIS ended up complicating its future alliance commitments, and generated another set of political costs both domestically and internationally (Unver 2016a; Collard 2015; Collinsworth 2014). This period of over-commitment ended with the entry of Russia into Syria in the summer of 2015, which led to substantial escalation over airspace contestations with Turkey, and reached its zenith with Turkey's decision to shoot down the Russian jet in November (Unver 2015; Galeotti 2015). Afterwards, Turkey faced substantial restrictions from Russia both in terms of airspace access into northern Syria and Ankara's ability to support anti-Assad groups there. By early 2016, Turkish policy had already become dependent on the negotiations at the great power level, lowering its profile even further (Çandar 2016). In all three periods of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey was a fraction-actor – one that was unable to steer the course and strategy of the alliance, while exerting its weight either too early, too late, or too much on policy options that were outside her allies' scope, and ending up shouldering much of the political costs of these initiatives.

Yet, Turkish foreign policy's internal machinations too, have been a story of fraction-actors that operated under a great degree of uncertainty, most of which was internally generated. Ahmet Davutoğlu (both as foreign minister and after September 2014, prime minister) and Undersecretaries Feridun Sinirlioğlu and Hakan Fidan operated as anchors in close proximity to Erdoğan. With longer experience in foreign affairs, the Davutoğlu-Sinirlioğlu-Fidan trio was the main layer of insulation for President Erdoğan and it was among them that Turkey's Syria policy was formulated. This meant that although there may have been a clear power vertical in other policy areas, foreign policy was one of the rare issues where President Erdoğan's role became one of equals, or *primus inter pares* at best.

The division of labour over Syria was confusing, and deliberately so because of the immense uncertainty and rapidly diminishing expected utility of the policy. MIT handled the support and logistics of anti-Assad groups within Syria (Ergan 2015; Entous and Parkinson 2013), whereas it was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which coordinated with its counterparts in the capitals of the anti-Assad coalition (Solomon and Pop 2015). The Turkish Armed Forces were in charge of controlling and protecting a porous border (Pamuk 2016) and semi-autonomous Turkish aid agencies such as the IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation, led by Fehmi Bülent Yıldırım), both coordinated aid in northern Syria and acted as Turkey's forward intelligence assets in the region (Winter 2016; Lundquist 2014; Tabak 2015).

Erdoğan was not much of a commanding figure in these buffers, but more of a pivot or anchor through which these agencies communicated with one another and acquired their legitimacy. The biggest difference between Turkey's fraction-actor network and the Russian Sistema however, was the fact that these buffers were not insulating Erdoğan from the political cost of their decisions – as Sistema did to Putin; to the contrary, they were using Erdoğan's political capital to get things done and to prevail within domestic inter-institutional competitions for policy relevance. When the MIT scandal broke out for example, the burden fell more on Erdoğan than Fidan, as the latter never gave an interview or made a public appearance. Similarly, when both Davutoğlu and Sinirlioğlu failed to coordinate between Turkey and its allies to better synchronize the anti-Assad (later, anti-ISIS) campaign, when the armed forces patrols were growing insufficient in controlling the border, and when the IHH began to get too closely connected to the armed groups in Syria, (Gartenstein-Ross 2014, 11) the political costs all fell on Erdoğan himself, instead of the initiators and practitioners of these policies. Increasingly, it was Erdoğan who was unable to exert his desired weight over decisions and also, to protect himself from the political costs of their results. Such political costs could only be diffused through Erdoğan's own domestic framing skills and agenda-setting strategy, and not those of his insulators.

While the MAS 17 incident was an alarming failure of the Russian *Sistema*, the MIT scandal and growing ISIS threat had similar effects on Turkey's fraction-actor approach to decision-making. However, in comparing *Sistema* with fraction-actor networks, measurements of power and capabilities matter immensely in assessing how both countries employed managed uncertainty. Russia managed to steer back from the fallout of the MAS 17 incident because it had the capability and autonomy to do so: it was fighting in Ukraine – a militarily inferior power – and it was fighting alone, without the constraints of a larger alliance. Turkey was different. It was fighting a proxy war in Syria, which was not as inferior to Turkey as Ukraine was to Russia, and it was acting as a junior partner in a wider and often very confused alliance. Thus, even though the MIT scandal fell on Erdoğan's shoulders, both the decision to send arms and to revert back from the policy to send arms were not on his initiative. MIT was sending arms in tandem with American and Saudi intelligence (Mazzetti and Younes 2016; Mazzetti and Apuzzo 2016; Entous 2016) and backtracking from supporting Sunni groups that required active American and Saudi political consent – which did not exist.

The immense difficulty with which the Kremlin tried to pull back from Donbass multiplied in Turkey's case, which is one of the main reasons why Ankara had to pursue its failed Syrian policy long after its failure was apparent prior to the arrival of Russia into Syria at the end of the summer of 2015. In that event, Ankara would also probably continue its active engagement in Syria had Russia not intervened and had Russia not substantially increased the costs of engagement for Turkey following the SU-24 jet downing incident in November. It is important to note that Russia, which operates through *Sistema*, clearly understood the machinations of Turkey's involvement in Syria and targeted Davutoğlu, Sinirlioğlu, Fidan, and IHH simultaneously through diplomatic, political, and military pressures. Eventually, Davutoğlu was forced to resign as prime minister (Malsin 2016), Sinirlioğlu was sent to New York to take up Turkish Permanent Representation (Kart 2016) (along with foreign assignments for almost all of his top decision-making cohort in the Ministry (Güvenç 2016)), Fidan was internationally and domestically exposed following his agency's failure to

detect the 15 July 2016 coup attempt (Parkinson and Entous 2016), and IHH was both military targeted by Russian jets in Syria (Al Rifai 2015) and also humiliated after Turkey mended ties with Israel (Saltzman, 2015). Turkey gradually replaced its set of curators, announced that it would abandon its policy to topple Assad, and began cooperating with Russia and the US equally to further its national security interests (France 24 2016).

Yet an important question remains: how did the fraction-actor network approach influence Turkey's ability to meet its main objectives in Syria? If one thing is clear, it is that rapid and unaccountable decision-making in Syria did more harm than good for the country's foreign and domestic policy, both over the short- and medium-term. Deliberate use of managed uncertainty and fraction-actors certainly hastened decision-making, but in the wrong direction. This approach has also lead to a setting where buffers enjoyed insulation more than Erdoğan; instead of insulating him from political costs like the Sistema, curators were insulated by Erdoğan from the political costs of their engagements, until they were removed. In many ways, Turkey's fraction-actor networks have been the reversal of *Sistema* because of how buffering works, and who is ultimately shielded from political costs.

Conclusion: is managed uncertainty good policy?

This article began with a theoretical problem: how can we conceptualize uncertainty and imperfect information as endogenous and internally directed processes in policy analysis? In doing so, this article has detailed how Russia and Turkey used managed uncertainty in making foreign policy decisions over an extended period of time, in scenarios with low expected utility. The most direct use for deliberate confusion both in *Sistema* and the fraction-actor network model is audience cost diffusion and aversion: by assigning curators, leaders seek to insulate themselves from the adverse effects of bad decisions. This type of deliberate uncertainty is consensual, in the way both the leader and the insulators agree on the terms: protection of the leader from the political costs of failed decisions is the most important regime survival issue.

Russian and Turkish applications of deliberate uncertainty failed to generate the desired outcome for both countries. Russia had to settle for less than it bargained for in Ukraine, and Turkey both failed to sustain its peace process and its strategic priorities in Syria. However, both Putin and Erdoğan remain in power with perhaps greater public support and mandate than before they initiated their respective policy processes. This suggests that *Sistema* and the fraction-actor model are not really methods to make better policy or attain strategic goals, but serve merely to secure the legitimacy and popularity of the leaders against negative outcomes of high-risk scenarios. Both conceptualisations and their similarities reveal new insight over predicting and explaining Russian and Turkish foreign policies and how both countries measure risk, success, and failure in international relations.

Notes

1. This refers to the February 2015 formal meeting between the government officials and pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) members, officially confirming the agreement that would result in increased autonomy for the Kurds in exchange for PKK's disarmament.
2. This term was originally coined by Metin Gürcan; see Ongun (2016).

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