



## **Political psychology**

There is a specific personality profile that has attracted a lot of attention from neuro-scientists and psychologists in recent years. The signature of this profile is social “context blindness”, where an individual does not see current events in terms of immediately relevant influences. For many individuals, this means at least three things: a difficulty in relating to others; a need to control the environment; and an ability to focus intensely on a single subject for a sustained period of time. According to *The Lancet*, the syndrome – which has been called “caetextia” by [Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrell](#) – exists to some degree in 1.2% of the population.

Caetextia does not imply poor rational intelligence; it tends, instead, to restrict emotional intelligence. Certain brain circuits are particularly active and are more than usually separated from one another. The result is an ability literally to think differently from others, either by sustained linear processing or by random association. Professor Michael Fitzgerald of Trinity College Dublin, who has done a huge amount of research into the subject, suggests that caetextic individuals have been behind some of humankind’s greatest advances in terms of scientific breakthroughs, philosophical insights, and artistic creations. Caetextia is somehow deeply involved in the evolution of civilisation.

There is, however, a darker side. With caetextia, an individual’s psychological bias will depend on which particular brain circuits are most active and, for some, this will mean a single-minded pursuit of power and control. Here, attitudes tend to be inflexible; beliefs tend to include the idea that the end justifies the means; and strategies can be maintained long after others have lost interest or given up. Such people will not easily be understood by others, will not much care about others’ objections, and will therefore have the ability to rise to very influential positions. If they are attracted into politics, their manoeuvring and decision-making can be very disruptive. In a democracy, caetextic individuals are ultimately constrained by electoral considerations. In an autocracy, however, they can generate massive disturbances for long periods of time. Hitler is one example that springs to mind.

It is, of course, impossible to provide a definitive assessment of Vladimir Putin’s psychology. But “caetextic” would explain his actions and clarify others’ failure to anticipate them. It would also underwrite certain specific conclusions. Firstly, Mr Putin’s ‘long view’ – which has already outlasted the attention span of most election-driven Western politicians – will not be diverted from his objective of restoring some of the territorial integrity of the old USSR. His troops will not therefore easily be dislodged from Ukraine. Secondly, Mr Putin’s response to the political upheaval in Kiev is unlikely to have been based on a sudden whim. The annexation of the Crimean peninsula has almost certainly been part of a long-term plan, with the only missing element being an excuse to act. Thirdly, since the EU – and especially Germany – is highly dependent on Russian gas, Mr Putin has a natural weapon to counteract a hostile European response. Revenue shortfalls would be an acceptable cost.

Even so, this is only one part of the story: Ukraine itself is not blameless. First, it has a major problem with corruption. In 2013, Ukraine was ranked 144th out of 177 by the World Audit Corruption Perception Index; Korea and Somalia were joint 177th. Second, it also has huge debts. The former government originally admitted to \$20 billion of debts, but these are now calculated to be at least \$35 billion. The government twice failed to meet IMF terms for a bailout package and subsequently tried to raise money by choreographing a bidding war between the EU and Russia. The EU (unfortunately) accepted the challenge and initially offered a \$27.5 billion loan over seven years plus a lowering of tariffs and an opening of EU markets. Russia’s counter-bid was a direct \$15 billion loan, a cut in gas prices, and closer economic ties. Of course, neither solution can now be implemented. So, while Western politicians struggle for a solution that neutralises Russian aggression and avoids a default that will impact Europe, the world continues to become a less safe place. The migration of people and capital to safe(r) havens will persist.

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