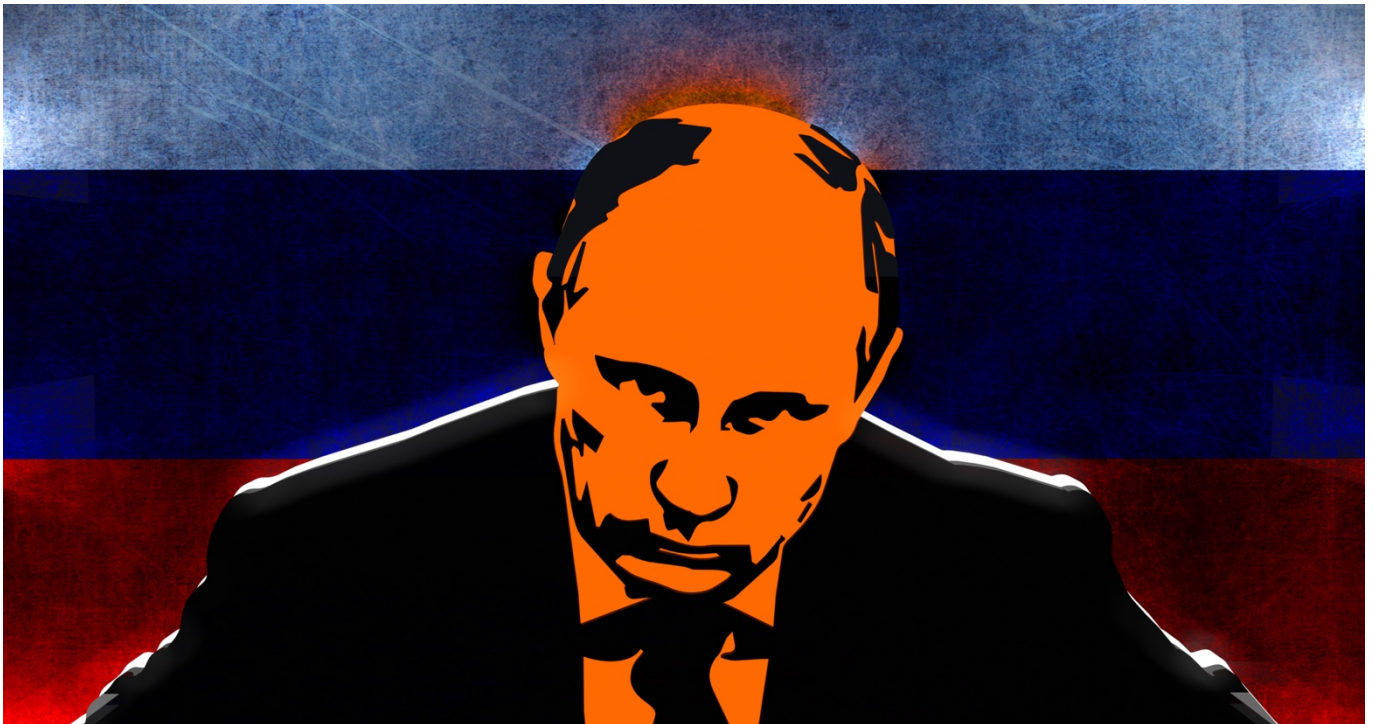




leading brains Review

Putin's Brain



Special Feature

Exploring the brain of Putin - and other psychopaths

BY ANDY HABERMACHER

Reading time: about 20 minutes

There has been a lot written about Putin and Russia over recent days and weeks. Many of them have been spot on. I would like to add to this in my field of expertise, the human brain, and this will highlight just what we are dealing with and the challenges.

Somehow the world was surprised when Russian soldiers marched into Ukraine. Indeed, a think tank had reported just a few weeks previously that the chance of a Russian invasion as less than 50% - they obviously said that it was probability – in retrospect maybe that figure should have been closer to 100% as it is now clear he was always going to invade. Indeed, those neighbouring countries had been warning the West for a long time – the invasion to them was not a surprise, a simple inevitability. I sadly admit my prediction that he will invade directly after the Olympics also proved to be spot on – why were some of the predictions wrong (they all thought they could be wrong, I know)? It lies in the simple fact they were classing “rational” ideas such as damage to economy with benefit of Ukraine – they weren’t thinking of how a Machiavellian Psychopath like Putin thinks.

So, what is happening in the brain of Putin? It is relatively easy to explain when we understand some of the dark traits of personality. And this is what I will outline in this feature article.

So, let’s look into dark personality traits. The *dark triad* is term used to refer to a triad of personality disorders associated with bad, toxic, and plain evil behaviour. For those regular readers of leading brains Review, I also summarised this with respect to toxic leadership in [IbR-2021-06](#). The *dark triad* are:

- **Psychopathy** – cold and heartless
- **Narcissism** – only for the love of oneself
- **Machiavellianism** – shrewd scheming only for personal gain

Colloquially we tend to think of psychopaths as those heartless criminals – and this is true, these are the classic Hollywood supervillains, creating evil plans with no remorse at killing others and playing the dirtiest of dirty tricks. Indeed, an intelligent calculating psychopath is dangerous, very dangerous, indeed. And it is in psychopaths that there has been a lot of research, and brain scanning research at that.

The Dark Factor of personality

The dark triad is an easy way to remember these dark personality traits, but more recent research has come up with a more useful way of describing these. Rather than thinking of all three as separate entities and disorders Moshagen, Hilbig, and Zettler, in 2018 proposed the **D-Factor**. They noted that there is a strong interplay between all of these, and we can therefore think of one D-Factor score with different preferences or flavours of this. This makes sense, but this was a big thing to say at the time. They note nine characteristics of the D-Factor:

- Egoism
- Machiavellianism
- Moral disengagement
- Narcissism
- Psychological entitlement
- Psychopathy
- Sadism
- Self-interest
- Spitefulness

The D-Factor is more useful I think because it also shows some of the other factors that may or may not be associated with the dark triad such as sadism or spitefulness. In the 2018 paper Moshagen et al. summarise succinctly the D-Factor as:

“...the tendency to maximize one’s individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications”

This is however, a more recent concept and if we want to look inside brains, and particularly Putin’s brain, we need to revert to multiple older studies and reviews on, primarily, psychopaths.

So, can we identify a psychopath from their brain activation patterns? The answer is easy: yes, we can.

Brain activation

Brain scanning in psychopaths started in the noughties and has developed ever since. In parallel the understanding of psychopathy have also developed with a clearer understanding of what it is and also differentiations with the criminally intent and the not criminally intent. In recent years there have been a number of reviews and meta-analyses of studies to give clearer understanding. Brain scanning aims to identify what are called primary psychopaths – those that are born with the structural differences that give rise to psychopathy and can be identified in children very early on – yes, as early as 2 or 3 years old!

I'm sure you're itching to understand what is happening in the brain and how we can see this so early – and whether this pattern is reflected in Putin and his brain and whether we can do anything about this.

The first things that jumped out in brain scanning studies was that an area called the *amygdala* that is strongly involved in fear processing but also all emotional processing. This shows decreased activation to emotional stimuli – this falls in line with being cold and fearless – brains of psychopaths do not process fear or emotions in the same way as a non-psychopathic brain.

Prefrontal to emotional connectivity is another area that is reduced. For regular readers of my writing, you will know that the *prefrontal* areas of the brain are involved in the more cognitive rational functions of the brain. This drop in prefrontal connectivity, particularly in an area called the *orbitofrontal cortex*, reduces the impact of emotions on decision making, leading to those cold utilitarian decisions.

The Psychopathic Brain

Prefrontal

Prefrontal functions can be high control, and calculated, or conversely impulsive. However, social and moral disinhibition is exhibited which is associated with prefrontal functioning.

Medial Frontal Cortex

Lack of differentiation between people and objects

Insula

Decreased activation suggesting decreased embodiment of feeling (empathy) for others

Orbitofrontal Cortex (OFC)

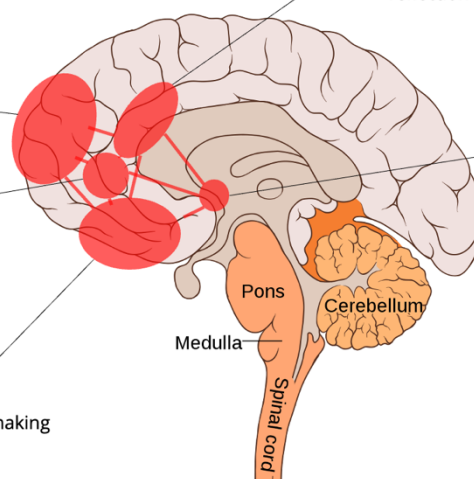
Decreased emotional influence on decision-making

Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC)

Lower activation suggesting lower self reflection and self monitoring

Amygdala

Decreased fear processing



These are the big two but there are also other areas. Readers of *leading brains Review* will already have been introduced to these areas and their functionality. An area called the *insula* is also activated differentially – the insula is an area that is involved in embodiment of feelings, such as pain and disgust but also feeling for others. This suggests reduced empathy for others.

Another area identified in one study in anti-social people was in a region known as the *medial frontal cortex*. This is a region in their frontal lobes of the brain that is involved in social processing. In this region there was little difference shown between processing people and objects – the takeaway here is that some people fail to

differentiate between human beings and objects, effectively seeing people as objects. If you are a grandiose narcissist or psychopath, as *your* objects, or objects for your use.

And finally, an area called the *anterior* and *posterior cingulate cortex* shows less activation. This is an area that is associated with error detection but also internalisation and self-reflection. This therefore suggests less internal reflection or reflection on one's own actions. These people are not self-reflective.

All of this points to a very specific brain in those high in D-Factor. Which matches perfectly to those traits outlined by Moshagen et al.

Note this is not "psychological", this is hard wiring in the brain. This show that they process fear differently are cold and calculating, have little empathy, see people as objects, most likely for their own personal gain, and are not self-reflective. This is "hardwired" and can be seen in young children.

Nature and/or Nurture?

So, this is the nature of a psychopath but how much of this can be changed? The brain is after all plastic and responds to its environment. This is relevant to Putin and his brain because nature alone may not be sufficient, but both nature and nurture together could be disastrous.

For that we should go to the story of Jim Fallon a neuroscientist who was studying brain activation patterns of psychopaths in 2005. On one study he was comparing brain scans of psychopaths to a control group. This particular control group was that of his family – easy and cost effective to organise. On looking through the control group scans he noticed an activation pattern that was clearly psychopathic. Clearly there had been a mix up – he asked his lab assistant to check on the mistake and assign it to the correct group – however the answer came back it was in the correct group. He then asked for the identity of the scan - which he could do as they were of himself and his family. To his surprise, and shock, the brain scan of that psychopathic brain was his own!

For the in and outs of this you may want to read the review in the [Atlantic](#) or in other places (a fascinating read). But the question we then need to ask is how can a psychopath become a successful neuroscientist – or is this common indeed?

The first question is that certain traits of psychopathy are actually beneficial and even celebrated in certain cultures – think of the hard-nosed business person. But your environment can also have a big effect. Jim Fallon notes the positive effects of his upbringing – his educated, relatively affluent middle-class upbringing gave him good guiderails to do the right thing and engage in the world in the right way. But he noted on reflection - which is not something that comes easy to him, and in conversation with those close to him, that yes, he could be an arse, or simply psychopathic. Which of course he initially denied, as a psychopath would, and blame other people. But he is trained in neuroscience and has the cognitive ability to process this and process this he did. He therefore made an effort to become less psychopathic, with some success. He noted, however, that he was just going through the motions of being a nice person. Those around him however, agreed wholeheartedly, that they would much prefer he went through the motions than being an arse.

So, what does this tell us about environment? Firstly, environment can give support and guidance to those high in psychopathic or D-Factor traits to behave in suitable ways and become successful and non-criminal. There is a body of research into so-called successful, or non-criminal psychopaths, but space won't permit going into that here – we after all want to get onto Putin's brain.

Fallon himself at that time spoke of primary and secondary psychopathy. Primary being those hard-wired brain patterns that you can see very early on and secondary as the environmental factors pushing people into psychopathy. So, psychopathy can be inborn and can be mitigated by good upbringing or a suitable environment and society. And an unsuitable upbringing and local environment can push people into criminal psychopathy.

What does this mean for Putin - with no brain scans at hand and only observational evidence? Well, it is still pretty clear (crystal clear actually) where Putin stands. He clearly falls as primary psychopath or high on D-Factor traits and his environment has supported and rewarded this – remember he is ex-KGB.

This brings us on to two other factors which help to magnify D-Factor traits and others are present in Putin – in heaps.

Position Magnifies Psychopathy

Admittedly that title may be a little exaggerated, but it catches your eye and there is some truth in it. Why do I say that? Well, an interesting study I reported on last year, and was one of my most popular [Quick Hits](#), looked into how peoples' opinions and decisions change with positions of power - in this particular study, in supervisor positions in business-related scenarios. This experiment was interesting because it took the same people and then they made judgements based on their position. And lo and behold those in supervisor positions, where they had more power, and more choice, judged people more harshly, and were more willing to punish people for transgressions, and were less forgiving. Power corrupts, as they say.

Obviously not everyone, and not excessively, but the fact is, if you are in position of power, you are more likely to be less empathic, more judgemental, and harsher. Sorry to say. In society this also comes with wealth and privilege where you have more choice either through social influence or through finance – which you will likely take for granted. The authors called it a “*choice mindset*” – when you have the ability of choice through your position in business or society, it is easy to over-estimate how much choice others have and therefore judge them more harshly. Another one politicians and voters should be aware of.



However, I digress a little, what this shows is that positions of power will magnify D-Factor traits and they may appear where non appeared before. Don't get me wrong this is not for everyone – nice people will still remain relatively nice – but psychopathic will likely become more psychopathic.

There is another factor that is interrelated - it is based on *worldviews*. Worldviews are a complex psychological phenomena that influence our whole view of the world and how it operates. They are basically our operating system and are based on multiple assumptions of what is good and bad, human nature, etc, etc.

There are simplistic ways to describe this as outlined in the 1950's by the legendary Tomkins and his *Normative* and *Humanistic* worldviews which aligns pretty neatly with the conservative (normative) and liberal (humanistic) worldviews. Politicians and the general public would be well-advised to educate themselves in this – it explains a lot of politics especially in the USA.

There are more complex version of worldviews such as Pepper's unreconcilable worldviews whereby Pepper proposed that many of the big conflicts in society are not actual conflicts but a result of different worldviews that are not reconcilable. Also, an insightful read. But for a full review of the concepts and complexity of worldviews you should read Koltko-Rivera's review from back in 2004 - but back to the issue at hand. Putin and his invasion of Ukraine.

Here we can see that Putin is operating from a clear worldview. A worldview that power is defined by physical and military power. That the greatness of a nation is defined by its ability to coerce and manipulate other countries. That greatness is defined by the territory that you own. That is Putin's worldview. He operates in this world, and this is also subject to ratification because he will use all these malicious methods to spy, coerce, and influence and if anyone retaliates or spies on him it just reinforces his world view.

His worldview seems to, clearly, be that of the old Soviet KGB spy. A great Russia is a big Russia, A great Russia overpowers their neighbours. A great Russia is in control. A great Russia will destroy you if you do not obey.

Putin cannot imagine, is not capable of imagining, another Russia, a Russia that could be great through peaceful things like generating great science, great art (which Russia consistently has done), or through wielding soft power and positive influence. Putin cannot imagine this; his worldview will block this. His brain will not allow this.

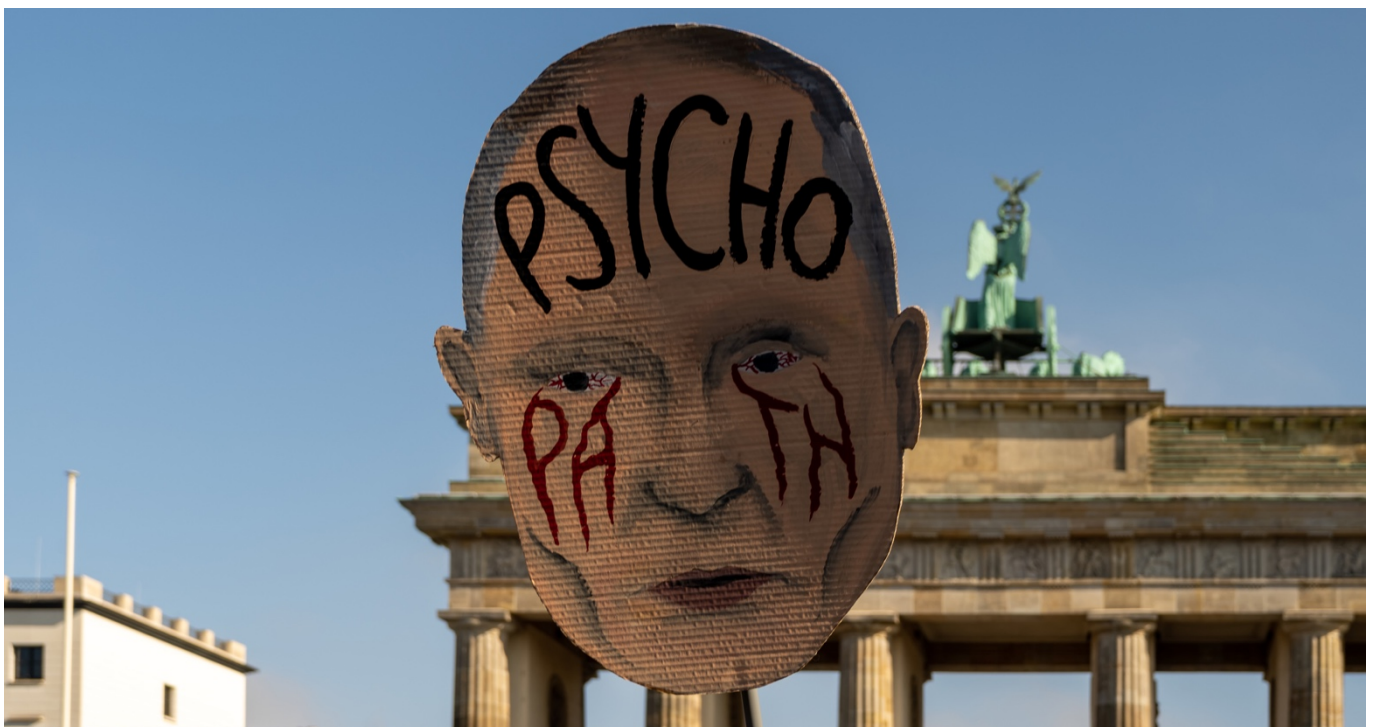
Putin's Brain

So back to the original question of what does Putin's brain look like and what we can predict he will and won't do?

First off, we can safely say he is a primary psychopath or very high on the D-Factor. He exhibits all of these features in abundance. But some psychopaths are hot-headed and impulsive. He is not. He has enough cold calculating power to think long into the future and control his actions to get the absolute best for himself and Russia – but mostly for himself. That is a feature of psychopaths like Putin – it is primarily driven out of self-interest. He is interested in a great Russia but more as justification and to drive his ego, but also to influence others than he really cares for. In his mind he is Russia, and a great powerful Russia at that.

So, combine his brain which is wired to have minimal empathy for others, to be cold and calculating, to be self-interested, not to mention sadistic and spiteful, with his environment, cutting his teeth in the KGB. The right environment to reward all those psychopathic tendencies he has – but as I said, with enough cold calculation to also play the long game. Combine this with his position as President, now for life – meaning he does not have to face voters even in a Russian sort of manipulated way. And combine this with his worldview and we have a perfect storm.

A brain designed to be psychopathic, built in an environment which is conducive to psychopathy, reaping the rewards from his behaviour, in a position of power which magnifies these features, and with his worldview. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.



The predictability of Psychopaths

Now some may think that Putin is unpredictable, but the fact is he is very predictable. We know the features of his personality and how he will respond. What we confuse is our worldview with his worldview - we may see the world through more rational eyes, through more reasonable eyes, more compassionate eyes – so we will not “understand” Putin. In the West we have not been completely naïve, but we have failed to understand how far he will go. How far will he go?

He will go all the way.

You see he is a cold-hearted psychopath in a position of absolute power with a certain worldview. What does this mean for the Ukraine.

It bodes very darkly, and the West would need to sit up and pay attention now - and I mean now.

- Putin does not care how many Russians die
- Putin does not care how many Ukrainians die
- Putin does not care what the West thinks
- Putin does not care about protests in the West (but they show our governments that we care, and they should act, so keep protesting)
- Putin does not care if Russia must suffer for a number of years
- Putin does not care if Russian people will starve or die because of his actions
- Putin will blame all of this on the West
- And Putin will believe this in his own head
- Putin will aim to punish anyone who has assisted Ukraine and will do anything to get back at the West
- I repeat anything – remember he is sadistic, spiteful, and heartless, and with a cold calculating mind.

At this stage of the conflict Putin will make sure that Ukraine is destroyed by any means possible – if he can't take it, it will be destroyed.

I do not say the above lightly. I do not say the above because I do not believe in peace. I personally think it would be so easy to live a peaceful pleasant life – but the fact is, there are Putins in this world and I am no longer naïve to that fact. And he will do as I have outlined above. It is in his nature, his upbringing, his position, and his worldview.

How do you fight a psychopath?

Now the question comes of how you fight such a psychopath as Putin. The answer is, with difficulty, but it can be done. The biggest mistake in fighting psychopaths is not building a very powerful, very aligned coalition. You see those high in D-factor, particularly those that are calculating, are very good at manipulating the system and taking out single threats. One person stands up and is immediately taken out – this serves as warning sign to others, who may think of standing up, that they will suffer and not survive – it is to silence the majority.

So:

- There needs to be a very powerful collective
- There needs to be absolute unity in that collective
- They must act quickly and strongly
- They must be willing to go *all the way* and the psychopath must *believe* that
- A Psychopath will immediately and viciously take advantage of any crack or hesitation
- A Psychopath will push everything to make sure there is no collective against him
- If possible, create an exit where they can save face, or exit with as little damage as possible

Even if this works, I may be that the psychopath will hold resentment against you for your life. This is why it is best that the voice comes from the collective to create a diffuse enemy and not a concrete easily identifiable one.

How to beat Russia in Ukraine?

As I write this, this may be too late, I am more than aware of this. It could be all over when you read this, but it may still help you to understand how it could have been avoided.

Thinking of Russia in Ukraine – first Putin wanted to take Ukraine for his own benefit. As I have outlined, he has no care for the lives of the innocent in Ukraine or in his own military. He expected a strong response from the West but nothing that would stop him taking Ukraine. How to stop him now?

1. **Massive escalation** – show you are willing to go all the way. All sanctions and all support – not just token sanctions. Not just strong sanctions, but willing to go all in!
2. **Strong military intervention** – some may say this is not our role, but it is. It is the West's own decision of whether they want to defend Ukraine. But back to my above points. They should do this quickly and decisively.
3. **Get the Russian people on your side** – now difficult because Putin has massively increased propaganda and effectively cut off access to the outside world. But the West should be pushing strong and powerful messages of how good the Russian people are, how Russia can, should, and will be great without Ukraine – and how Russian can, should, and will be great without Putin. This is really important: attack the psychopath but defend Russia and the good people of Russia (of which there are many).
4. **Promote strong Russian alliances** (not single voices) from well-known Russians such as sports people and artists. This goes back to rule of very strong collectives. Individual voices are powerless, strong collectives are useful.
5. **Get China on board** – this may be more difficult than it sounds (and not obvious) but there are political and popular methods that can be leveraged. Politicising may alienate China but if there is powerful strong grassroots i.e. consumer pressure on China they will move. For example, if there was a massive consumer movement to stop buying Chinese products. If there was massive pressure on companies to cancel or put on hold large orders in China. If there was massive pressure on companies to divest from China from customers and shareholders. This must be done carefully – but pressure there must be. China will choose the rest of the world over Russia but only if there is a very compelling reason to do so. China have their own imperialistic ambitions too – but need the West at this stage.



Why China you may ask – because China is Russia's lifeline at the moment. No China, and Russia essentially loses all meaningful influence and all trade.

Will Putin use nuclear weapons?

I will stick my head out here and say something we all never wanted to hear. I think Putin is likely to use a nuclear weapon. Why?

- It will benefit him
- The West will not retaliate in like
- He will destroy Ukraine and that is enough of a signal for him – that gives him power over other nations so he will sacrifice Ukraine and all those lives for more power over other nations
- He believes he can get away with just “some” Western sanctions and will build his own empire – probably with China

In short, if he can't take Ukraine, the chance of him nuking Kiev, for example, are very high. Sorry to say.

The walrus fight

The concept of a walrus fight is one I use to explain situations like this. In the world of walruses if you don't fight, your lineage dies. One male walrus will control and have mating rights with a harem of females - for another male to get mating rights he will have to beat another male. And boy this male will fight it out. So, a young male will have to pick their fights carefully but when it comes to it, at some stage, they have to go all in – if you don't, you lose, and if you are not willing to go all in, you have no chance of winning – you have lost from the outset. It is about the future of your lineage. You have to be prepared to go all in – be strategic yes, be clever yes, but at some stage you will likely have to fight, and the other walrus will have to believe this.

I see Ukraine as Walrus Fight – a fight that will have ramifications for many generations to come – a ceding of power to the East. A restart of nations taking over other nations by forceful means – unless there is a walrus to stop this. And there is – so far, they have not shown the appetite to go all in. They have not understood that this is a Walrus Fight. A fight for their future lineage.

So, what can you do as in individual feeling powerless?

- Show your support for Ukraine
- Support Ukraine in any way possible: charity, petitions, protests
- Pressurise your government to take serious action
- Show your support for military intervention in Ukraine – it is up to the West to decide whether they protect Ukraine, a sovereign nation, from invasion, and not Putin, and not whether the country is part of NATO or not.
- Create massive pressure on China: support grassroots initiatives to do this

Back to the brain

I do not want to advocate war or aggression – I believe in peace and collaboration and being nice to each other. But the brain and all research into Dark Triad traits and disorders, and the D-Factor, show that with some people you will be left with no option. Putin's brain does not have the wiring to be reasonable and compassionate. This pattern of activation has been magnified through his upbringing and his career in the KGB, and in his position as President for Life. He has consistently shown these traits and has shown how little he cares for human life and moral codes. He doesn't care because his brain does not have the wiring to care – he does not have the worldview to back this up, in fact his worldview is the opposite. He will aim to increase his power at all costs.

This is tragic, tragic for Russia, tragic for the Ukraine, and tragic for us in the West. There is a way to stop him and that is tough, but if we don't, we still have a powerful psychopath on the loose, and a further empowered psychopath at that, that will continue to operate as he has done, potentially with more aggression, vindictiveness, and cruelty.

Sorry to say. But that is Putin's brain ●

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