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(Reuters. "Putin Issues Nuclear Warning to the West over Strikes on Russia from Ukraine." *CNN*, 25 Sept. 2024, www.cnn.com/2024/09/25/europe/putin-nuclear-warns-west-missile-strikes-ukraine-intl-latam/index.html.)

Fear-based Politics of Vladimir Putin

By: Ben Capocci '26, College of the Holy Cross

The shirtless, horse-riding, "strongman" of the Russian Federation is a scared man. He is scared for his nation's international standing and security, which is clear from his politics.

As the Russian war effort in Ukraine is still far from success, Putin has chosen to up the ante by issuing a [statement threatening the usage of nuclear arms](#) against its former co-republic, Ukraine. This way of action can be seen as a manifestation of Russia's strength as Moscow appears willing to do whatever it takes to save its [nationalistic patriots, longing for the return of the protection of Russian rule](#), and to re-establish itself amongst the great world powers.

However, it also can be seen as an action led by distinct fear and terror that stems from its not-so-distant past.

This is the fear of being attacked. It's the terror of losing status or the fear of being judged for Russia's totalitarian past that led to millions of deaths. Otherwise, why wouldn't they commemorate the fear and pain of those besieged in the city of [Leningrad](#) for nearly 900 days or Stalin's [Great Terror](#) which saw millions imprisoned and killed over any sign of dissent?

This fear is not something simply disposed of, much to the dismay of Russian and Soviet leadership. Fear of both external and internal forces is so deeply entrenched into Russian society that even Putin is unable to escape it.

Many characterize the Federation's current foreign policy as being in line with a form of [offensive realism](#) as Russia attempts to use its power to aggressively advance their interests at the expense of the West. This view does not take into account the inherent driving force behind Russia's actions and views today's events in a static, frozen context. [Defensive Realism](#) is the way in which Putin's actions should be viewed through. Because what truly drives Russia and Putin is fear. [Fear](#) that what happened to their predecessors may happen to them.

This fear that has characterized Russian society has now been encapsulated by a new "boogie monster" that has not so slowly inched closer to Russia's doorstep. That "monster" who keeps Mr. Putin up at night is NATO. Following the collapse of the USSR, there was a moment in which there was a glimpse of hope at cooperation between former adversaries as Russia even had [hopes of joining NATO in the early 1990s](#). But this never came to be as the Atlantic organization continuously treated Russia as a [subsidiary](#) and encroached into former Soviet Republics creating a real, or imagined, threat to Russian [values](#) and power. As NATO inched closer and closer [towards the borders of Russia](#), fears of a similar situation to that faced by the USSR during World War II arose (Albeit, to a lesser degree and in a different manner). Action was deemed necessary over fear of this new threat.

Putin's [annexation of Crimea](#) and subsequent invasion of Ukraine were the actions taken. Of course, Putin won't come out and say that he is scared of the West, after all he has an image to uphold! To justify his actions, he points to auxiliary reasons that are often thought of to be the *only* reasons. These include the claim that those in Ukraine were really more Russian than Ukrainian and welcomed the invasion. Or the statement that the Russians are fighting ["Neo-Nazis"](#) inside of Ukraine that are threatening Russia itself.

In fact, the Russian Federation is scared for its safety. Since the founding of the USSR and through the creation of an independent state, Russia has never been embraced by many nations throughout the world, especially not by the West. Russia's past has shown that it will be challenged, and with that challenge will come great destruction. Russia's contemporary international policies will continue to be aggressive as fear prompts Putin to take, what he believes to be, preventative measures.