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Putin Poses a Serious Threat to the U.S. and NATO

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A recent poll shows Americans' overwhelmingly fear Putin, and that they want Trump to do "much more" to protect the homeland and our allies

Russian President Vladimir Putin made global headlines February 28, 2018, by announcing in his angry, menacing State of the Union address – his last before elections next month – that Russia has developed a range of weapons, including new first-strike nuclear missiles “that cannot be stopped” and hypersonic underwater torpedoes that make NATO defenses “completely useless.” Promising his nation’s nuclear superiority over the West, “Listen now,” he warned, adding, “I’m not bluffing.”

Most Americans – including most officials in Washington – are focused on the threats posed by North Korea, Iran, ISIS and al Qaeda. But as serious as those threats are, we need to understand afresh just how grave a threat Putin poses to the U.S. and our NATO and Middle Eastern allies. He has just threatened us with a new first-strike nuclear weapon that he claims cannot be intercepted.

Putin is not going anywhere. On March 18th, Russians will head to the polls, where the 65-year-old autocrat is widely expected to win re-election.

After his seizure of Crimea in 2014, Putin’s approval rating shot up 18 points to **83 percent**. The only time his ratings were higher (**89 percent**) was in September 2008, after he invaded and occupied one-fifth of the Republic of Georgia.

Having arrested, intimidated or driven into exile all serious political opponents, Putin has effectively cleared the field. But with a **sluggish economy**, **rising poverty**, and the disposable income of average Russian workers **dropping** in 2017 for the fourth year in a row, his popularity may be **slipping**.

A January poll found that **81 percent** of those who are planning to vote at all say they will support Putin. But two February polls painted a different picture. One found Putin’s support at **67 percent**. Another pegged his support at only **57 percent**.

There are plenty of reasons to take the results of any public opinion poll in Russia with a healthy dose of salt. But what if Putin’s numbers are eroding? Might he once again resort to military aggression to distract Russians from their economic woes?

In my forthcoming political thriller, ***The Kremlin Conspiracy***, a fictional leader in Moscow fashions himself a 21st century Czar. Determined to expand his borders and thus restore the glory of Mother Russia, he plots a lightning-fast attack on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, convinced he can seize their capitals in less than 96 hours, and equally convinced no one will dare stop or remove him.

The Baltic States, of course, are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 2004. A Russian invasion of any or all of them would, therefore, trigger Article V – the mutual defense pact – requiring a massive military response by the U.S. and the rest of NATO to re-liberate them.

The novel raises a critical question: Would Washington and Brussels really risk nuclear war with Putin for the sake of three nations few Americans can find on a map?

That said, to do nothing — to abandon to the Kremlin the heroic people of the Baltic States, who have built thriving democracies and free economies after decades of Soviet occupation — would spell the end of NATO and collapse of U.S. global leadership. What ally could trust written promises from the U.S. if Washington turned a blind eye to their NATO partners?

A Russian leader who took such a daring gamble and won would overnight become the most powerful man in Europe, and perhaps the world, armed with nuclear warheads and the ballistic missiles to deliver them.

While the book is a work of fiction, the scenario may not be. Indeed, Americans are increasingly concerned by the threat Putin poses, and concerned as well that Washington is not doing enough to keep the nation and our allies safe.

To better understand American attitudes toward Putin – especially as the mid-term U.S. elections approach and Russia dominates headlines – I recently commissioned McLaughlin & Associates, a respected polling firm, to ask three specific questions of 1,000 likely American voters. The results were sobering.

Seventy-three percent of Americans agreed with the following statement: *“In light of Russia’s invasion of Georgia and Ukraine in recent years; Russian forces fighting in Syria to protect the regime of Bashar Assad; Russia’s continuing sales of arms and nuclear technology to Iran; and Russian hacking of U.S. computer networks and attempts to interfere in American elections; I have come to believe that Vladimir Putin and the government of Russia pose a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States, our NATO allies in Europe, and our Mideast allies, such as Israel.”*

Only 13 percent disagreed, while 14 percent said they didn’t know or weren’t sure.

Additionally, fully 61 percent said they are worried more Russian attacks may be coming. Only 17 percent said they were not worried, while 22 percent weren’t sure.

What is more sobering is that only 35 percent said they were convinced President Donald Trump truly understands Russia and is doing enough to counter the threat. Fully, 52 percent said they were not convinced and want Mr. Trump to do “much more.” Thirteen percent weren’t sure.

The national security team President Trump has put into place – from Vice President Mike Pence to Defense Secretary James Mattis to CIA Director Mike Pompeo, among others – are first-rate professionals. They clearly understand the threat and the stakes.

But Mr. Trump and Congressional leaders in both parties must urgently work together to develop and lay out for the American people a comprehensive strategy to counter the Russian threat and dramatically strengthen the NATO alliance lest today’s fictional premise become tomorrow’s nightmare scenario.

Joel C. Rosenberg is a *New York Times* bestselling novelist. His latest thriller, *The Kremlin Conspiracy*, releases March 6. For full polling results, visit JoelRosenberg.com.

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