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Throughout the post-Soviet period various conspiracy theories, most of which have been anti-Western, have moved from the margins of intellectual life to the mainstream of Russian politics. The trauma of the Soviet collapse enabled political elites to offer a conspiratorial reading of the event, and use this both for the purpose of nation-building and for suppressing democratic opposition by accusing its proponents of having destroyed the Soviet Union from within. Russian political elites use conspiracy theories to tackle emerging challenges by dividing Russian society into a majority loyal to the Kremlin, and a minority which is supposedly out to destroy Russia. The state authorities, including top-ranking politicians, seem to be the main producers of this conspiracy discourse; however, they use it with great care, with much reliance on the support of intellectuals who take part both in the production and dissemination of these theories to the general public. Studying conspiracy theories in Russia provides us with a means to comprehend domestic politics and to explain the strategies of the Russian political elite on both the domestic and international levels.

conspiracy theory, Russia, New World Order, Putin, color revolutions, Ukraine

Chapter 24

Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia

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"Why does the West hate us?" asked the famous post-Soviet conspiracy theorist Nikolaĭ Starikov in the title of his popular book.[1] In his view all Russian revolutions, liberal reforms, and political turbulence that have taken place in the last 300 years can be closely linked to a conspiring minority of West-leaning activists who used financial resources provided by the West, primarily the United Kingdom and the United States, to destroy Russia from within. Indeed, most post-Soviet Russian authors of conspiracy theories base their ideas on the notion that the West—perceived as a single, undifferentiated entity—has a devilish plan to destroy their great country, divide its massive territory into a number of puppet states, and plunder its gas, oil, and other natural resources.[2] Conspiratorial ideas about the West permeate the language of the post-Soviet media and politics, and some particularly notorious conspiracy theorists joined the ranks of high-profile politicians and public intellectuals in the late 2000s.

Since 1991, conspiracy theories have been gradually moving from the margins of political discourse into its center. This process reached its highest point in 2014–2016 during the Ukraine crisis, when anti-Western and anti-U.S. conspiracy theories became a feature of daily life for millions of Russians and their political leaders. In 2015 we learned from Vladimir Putin that the Internet was the invention of the CIA and therefore part of the anti-Russian conspiracy.[3] From First Deputy Prime Minister Arkadiĭ Dvorkovich, we got to know that the drop in the price of oil was brought about by foreign plotters who were trying to destroy Russia.[4] In 2016 we learned from Putin's economic

advisor Sergeĭ Glaz'ev that the Russian government had been infiltrated by foreign agents who were determined to undermine the country's economic stability by means of international sanctions.[5] Influenced by their leaders, Russians started to believe that the United States and the European Union were Russia's worst enemies and that Ukraine was a puppet state whose leaders were appointed in Washington, D.C. to assist in Russia's downfall.[6]

In order to understand how conspiracy theories have developed and functioned in Russian society post-1991, it is important to bear in mind that they can serve as an effective tool for interpreting power relationships in the modern world, analyzing complex issues that affect people's daily lives, and explaining why a particular community (or, indeed, an entire nation) undergoes traumatic experiences. Turbulent times often produce talented leaders who successfully mobilize the public by spreading conspiracy theories which gain them popularity and political success. As Mark Fenster noted, conspiracy theories can be seen as populist theories of power.[7] They possess an important communicative function by helping to unite their audience as "the people" against an imagined "other," a secret "power bloc." These populist calls help leaders to polarize society and undermine their opponents by ruining their reputations and in some cases even justifying repression against them. This is what we can observe in post-Soviet Russia, where anti-Western conspiracy theories have become part of daily life and cannot be treated, as is often the case, as part of a paranoiac's worldview. They have been a very effective and powerful weapon in the power battles that helped the Kremlin justify its move toward authoritarianism and its introduction of new antidemocratic laws in the 2000s.

Conspiracy theories in Russia can be analyzed in two ways. First, they can be seen as a tool of national and social cohesion. Second, they can be treated as a powerful instrument in the battle between political opponents. With the emergence of nation-states out of the former Soviet Union and their attempts to establish a sovereign people and a path toward democracy, the conditions were created for the emergence of populism. The populist rhetoric, in turn, enabled politicians to discursively divide the social into two camps, with "the other" acting in opposition to "the people." In the case of Russian national identity, the "other" has historically been the West, regarded either as a positive model for Russia to emulate or a negative example to be rejected. This has helped to determine the idea of Russia's national identity and its place in world history.[8] In this context, fears about anti-Western conspiracy arise as part of the so-called *ressentiment* that came from the recognition of the discrepancy between Russia and the West, and which demonstrated either Russia's equality with or its superiority over the West.[9] In the mind of a typical Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as the ultimate and insidious other that seeks to undermine the progress of the Russian nation toward its glorious future.

Virtually all of the main actors in political life in post-Soviet Russia have employed the rhetoric of conspiracy: it enables them to strengthen their legitimacy in the competition for public support and power resources. For example, the Kremlin regularly uses conspiracy ideas to explain the authoritarian measures it takes against its opponents, which include foreign NGOs, opposition politicians, and diplomats. This provides it with an opportunity to shape the image of the dangerous other and convince the population of the need to continue to support the government. At the same time, the liberal opposition

also uses conspiracy theories about the Kremlin, insisting it is run by the KGB clan, which will stop at nothing to protect its power. One example is the theory that Putin was responsible for the explosions in apartment houses across Russia in 1999; this effectively justified the war in Chechnya in the 2000s, which in turn enabled Putin's popularity to skyrocket within months of his appointment as prime minister and even attracted a reasonable amount of support from the oppositionist communities.[10]

In analyzing post-Soviet Russian conspiracy theories, it is worth considering the following aspects of the phenomenon:

1. While there are several alternative theories—for example, it could be the Jews or the Russian government conspiring against the Russian people—the most popular theory is that there is a Western conspiracy against Russia. This originated in a particular reading of the Soviet collapse in December 1991. The speed of the collapse, and the confusion it produced both in the population as a whole and among the country's elites, resulted in the spread of the idea that the United States and the internal agents of "Western influence" were behind it. Thus, the Soviet collapse and the events which followed it—the economic reforms and the decrease in Russia's influence in the world—were seen as the highest point in the West's bid to destroy Russia.
2. Russian politicians and intellectuals often actively exploit conspiracy theories to help them carry out their domestic policies and nation-building agenda, as well as achieve their goals in international relations.[11] Conspiracy theories are a powerful tool in popular mobilization, and they

can also help to destroy the reputations and legitimacy of political opponents by connecting their names to the U.S. government or intelligence services. Therefore, the conspiratorial reading of the Soviet collapse helps to define as "us" the Russian public which is loyal to the country, and "them" as those who welcomed the destruction of the USSR, benefited from it, and worked for the West. This division within Russian society helps the Russian authorities to demonize their opponents and delegitimize their positions on the political stage. Since these notions are actively exploited to challenge the Kremlin's political rivals, conspiracy has become a crucial element in political discourse.

3. Russian political leaders are very careful in how they spread conspiracy theories themselves. This role is given to either public intellectuals or low-ranking politicians who have access to the state-affiliated media. Yet the Russian political leadership also, at times, refers to or hints at conspiratorial ideas, which turns them into a valid part of political discourse. This careful and instrumental application of anti-Western conspiracy theories is used by the Kremlin to confuse observers and polarize the Russian population.

4. Unlike in the United States, where conspiracy theories spread from grassroots to the upper level of society, in Russia this has been a top-down process, with Kremlin-loyal intellectuals, book publishers, and the media helping to spread these theories among the population. However, it is important to note that although this discourse is important for the stability

of Putin's political regime, the Kremlin does not allow genuine conspiracy theorists—that is, true believers in conspiracy theories—to fill powerful positions. Accordingly, these people have limited capacity to define the political agenda of the country.

1991: The Triumph of Russia's Enemies

"The Soviet Union collapsed not as a result of natural processes…, but as a result of political conspiracy on the part of the 'fifth column' . . . as a result of conspiracy headed by B. Yeltsin."[12] In 1999 the MP and former general prosecutor Viktor Iliukhin accused the then Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, of destroying the USSR and letting a small "cabal" of 200 rich families loot the economy and destroy those remnants of the population who still remembered living a relatively prosperous life in the Soviet Union. This speech and the attack on Yeltsin was an important moment; it marked the point at which anti-Western conspiracy theories appeared in parliament as a political instrument which could undermine Yeltsin's legitimacy during the 1998–1999 impeachment procedure. A determined focus on the 1991 collapse led to Yeltsin being presented as the "other," a puppet of the West who stood against the Russian nation. The attempt to impeach Yeltsin also coincided with a rise in anti-Western sentiment in Russia which was related to the NATO operation in Serbia in 1999; this too was used by the opposition to win voters' support.

Iliukhin's arguments benefited immensely from an already elaborated corpus of ideas about the Soviet collapse which appeared in Russia post-1991. The anti-Western ideas that circulated during the Cold War in the USSR had informed the first generation

of conspiracy theorists, who claimed that the destruction of the USSR was the United States' top-priority goal, while Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika—a set of reforms that liberalized the country's politics and economy in the late 1980s—was part of a malicious plan aimed at the destruction of the Soviet Union.[13]

A number of articles, which were actually based on forgeries, explained to the Russian readers how Soviet and Russian political leaders, in collaboration with the West, destroyed the Soviet Union. The most popular forged text in this collection—the so-called *Plan Dallesa (The Plan of Dulles*)—was purported to be a U.S. National Security Council directive about a strategy for the moral and cultural corruption of the Soviet people.[14] Another claimed that Mikhail Gorbachev actually confessed that he destroyed the Soviet Union, with the support of the United States, out of hate for the country.[15] Russian nationalists actively shared and discussed the supposed revelations made by President Bill Clinton in his speech at a Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting in 1995 about a Western plot against Russia.[16] Each of these texts encapsulates popular conspiracy ideas about American (or British) involvement in the destruction of the USSR and depicts Gorbachev and Yeltsin as key destructive individuals following the plan of their "American masters." In the 1990s, Yeltsin's opponents, together with some Russian nationalists, used these negative images of the Russian political elite to delegitimize their policies and gain the support of both the national patriotic and communist electorate.[17]

The opening up of Russia to Western European cultural influence resulted in the transfer of some conspiracy theories from abroad with a view to understanding what happened to the USSR in 1991. An ex-KGB officer, Igor Panarin, claimed that in 1943 the United States and the United Kingdom started the "first information war" against the

Soviet Union.[18] The Committee of 300, the Trilateral Commission, and the Council on Foreign Relations reputedly waged this war by organizing subversive campaigns against the USSR. It is likely that Panarin's concept absorbed and was shaped by notions of global conspiracy that were popular in Western Europe and the United States at that time; he then went on to reinterpret these conspiracies as exclusively anti-Russian. For example, Panarin identified American banker David Rockefeller as the mastermind behind the Soviet collapse. Panarin also depicted The Committee of 300, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Trilateral Commission as the main centers of anti-Russian conspiracy in the West. Indeed, these organizations do play major roles in the New World Order conspiracy theory, but they do not mention Russia specifically.[19]

Starting from the mid-2000s, the Soviet collapse became an important component of the Kremlin-endorsed nation-building narrative. Rueful feelings about this once-great country having lost its greatness because of its attempt at democratization, supported by the notion of a conspiracy on the part of "Western enemies," cemented national cohesion and represented the political leadership as being in tune with the people. The dramatic picture drawn by Putin and his aides from the mid-2000s focused on the socioeconomic and political inequities faced by Russian society in the 1990s. The famous Putin argument, that the Soviet collapse was "the major geopolitical disaster of the century," signified the start of this process.[20] Therefore, a positive attitude toward a lost past, connected with the Soviet experience, offered an alternative image of the post-Soviet changes; it served as an important tool with which to identify "the people" as a pan-national "community of loss" and contrast them with the collective "other" represented by a group of people who had no such nostalgia for the Soviet past. This is a model of

nation-building which Serguei Oushakine described as "the patriotism of despair."[21] The actors included in this collective other usually consisted of the most westernized part of Russian society. This, in principle, made it possible for them to be represented in the emerging official discourse as agents of foreign and subversive influence.

The official narrative of the Soviet collapse in 1991, which was disseminated through the media and public speeches of pro-Kremlin intellectuals and politicians, merged nostalgia about the lost Soviet Union with the conviction that Russia, as an important player in world politics, was under attack by countries wanting to acquire its vast territory and its abundant natural resources. The Soviet collapse was closely linked to a loss of national identity and was seen as a tragic event caused solely by a conspiracy on the part of Western enemies.

Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Practices

The first attempts to use anti-Western conspiracy theories on the Russian political stage were made in 2003–2004 when the Kremlin faced several challenges from its political rivals. Putin's close aide Vladislav Surkov expressed the belief that anti-national conspiracy existed within Russia as well as outside its borders:

> We should all recognize that the enemy is at the gates. The frontline goes through every city, every street, every house . . . in a besieged country the fifth column of left- and right-wing radicals has emerged . . . Fake liberals and real Nazis have a lot in common. [They have] common sponsors from abroad. [They have] common hatred toward Putin's Russia, as they describe it. In reality [it is a hatred toward] Russia as such.[22]

The active employment of anti-Western conspiracy theories since then has turned these theories into a crucial element in domestic politics.

In 2003 the richest man in the country, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested, largely because of his political ambitions and lack of loyalty to the Kremlin.[23] The case against Khodorkovsky was made by conservative groups of pro-Kremlin elites in the context of a "creeping conspiracy of oligarchs" who saw Putin as a weak leader who should be replaced. Khodorkovsky's enemies unabashedly claimed that Khodorkovsky was preparing to overthrow the regime and pass power to a small cabal of financial tycoons who profited from extracting fossil fuels, and who would protect their power by appealing to the West for support. It was also rumored that documents had appeared on Putin's desk which provided evidence that Khodorkovsky had struck a deal with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that included the assurance that when he was president of Russia, he would abandon nuclear weapons.[24] This alleged deal with the United States was instrumental in sealing Khodorkovsky's fate. His openness to the world, political ambitions, and willingness to become part of the global financial elite were seen as indicative of just how alien he was to Russia. During the second trial against him in 2009–2010, a famous Russian conspiracy theorist, Alexander Dugin, suggested that Khodorkovsky was an agent of the New World Order which aimed to destroy Russia's sovereignty and place it in the hands of the United States.[25] As a result, Khodorkovsky spent 10 years in prison, and Putin was rid of his competitor.

Fighting Against Revolutions

The next challenge to the regime came in 2004 when the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet states demonstrated to the Kremlin that its power could be challenged by

alternative forces. Russia's power brokers had a very important task: to ensure that the transfer of power in 2007–2008 from Putin to his successor would be smooth and secure, especially given the events in Ukraine in 2005 where crowds in the center of Kyiv prevented the election of the pro-Kremlin candidate. Again, the threat was linked to the West—specifically, to the United States—which, according to pro-Kremlin sources, planned to overthrow the Russian regime as soon as Putin, after serving two consecutive terms as president, was required by the constitution to leave the Kremlin. Supposed threats to the regime were said to emanate both from the political opposition and from the nongovernmental organizations that monitor elections and violations of human rights and which were said to be linked to the United States. They have been constantly demonized in the Kremlin-loyal media as conspirators and internal enemies who destroyed the USSR in 1991. Authoritarian changes in legislation were justified by the Kremlin as an attempt to protect the country from foreign invasion brought about by the subversive actions of NGOs.

Both the parliamentary and presidential campaigns of 2007–2008 and 2011–2012—both of which were seen as crucial elements in preserving the legitimacy of the regime—have revolved around the notion of a Western plot to overthrow Putin. This has helped the Kremlin to ensure a sufficient level of public support, has strengthened Putin's power, and has justified repression against the opposition. Putin is represented by the state-aligned media as the key figure defending the country from Western conspiracy. Moreover, Putin's public image has been constructed in such a way that he seemingly represents not only the Russian nation but all of the nations that are trying to resist the

United States and other forces of globalization, which are sometimes referred to as the New Order.

The Kremlin's reaction to the Ukraine crisis in 2014 is a clear illustration of how essential anti-Western conspiracy theories have become for the political establishment in Russia, and how conspiracy theories have been used as an apparently legitimate part of political discourse. Putin's appeal to the Council of the Federation on March 1, 2014, for permission to deploy military force in Ukraine was explained by the senators of the Federal Council as a response to the threat of a U.S. invasion of Ukraine and was supported unanimously.[26]

The media campaign to persuade the population to interpret Russia's policies in Ukraine in an anti-Western light is seen by pro-Kremlin politicians and media as payback for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was supposedly organized by the West. By means of the press and television talk shows, public intellectuals and politicians loyal to the Kremlin interpreted the Euromaidan movement—civil resistance to the corrupt regime in Ukraine—as a result of subversive Western action which brainwashed Ukrainian citizens and turned them against Russia. The opposition in Ukraine and the new president Poroshenko have been described as a "fascist government" under the auspices of the CIA. At the same time, the intervention in the Crimea was justified by the need to protect "compatriots" from extreme Ukrainian nationalists backed by the West and the NATO fleet. The Crimea's annexation was described in the state-aligned press as the end of the New World Order's rule in Russia and a key step in the construction of the Russian nation.[27]

Conspiracy Theorists at the Kremlin Throne

Public intellectuals loyal to the Kremlin have been the key element in spreading conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia. It was they who explained that the dramatic domestic changes experienced by Russian citizens in the 1990s, during the economic reform and political transition from socialism to democracy, were the result of subversive actions by the "conspiring West." Public intellectuals' criticism of the West, as expressed in conspiracy theories, also provided both the population and the authorities with an idealized image of Russia: despite the country's socioeconomic upheavals, they managed to present it as a great multi-ethnic state, which managed even after the 1991 shock to resist attempts of the West to control its territory and resources.

What distinguishes Russian conspiracy culture from, for example, that of the United States, is the engagement of public intellectuals on the side of the ruling elites. The anti-elitism of conspiracy theorists in the United States suggests that they belong to "the people" and strengthens the populist nature of their rhetoric. It is likely that U.S. conspiracy theorists would like to become a part of the political elite and influence the political agenda in the country.[28] However, in contrast to Russia, public consensus in the United States regarding the boundaries and rules of acceptable forms of political rhetoric significantly lessens the chances of American conspiracy theorists acquiring high social and academic standing.

Unlike their American counterparts, Russian authors of anti-Western conspiracy theories are often seen as particularly influential public intellectuals who have published well-received books and have access to the media, particularly those controlled by the state.[29] Conspiracy theorists are employed to delegitimize political opponents and, in some cases, justify major changes to legislation. Natalia Narochnitskaia, a pro-

government historian, and Alexander Dugin, a prominent philosopher, are two good examples. They both blame the West for waging a war against Russia which, they argue, is aimed at destroying Russia's greatness and military potential.[30] All the same, they depict Russia as a great state which is managing to resist occupation by the New World Order. In her speeches Narochnitskaia has often described pro-Western liberal opponents to the Kremlin as a group of internal conspirators in collaboration with the West who have nothing in common with the Russian nation and who are doing untold harm to Russians' memory of their great past.[31]

Even the most bizarre conspiratorial ideas are not excluded from mainstream Russian politics. Public intellectuals provide the grounds for the popularization of conspiracy theories which top-ranking officials can use later for various domestic and international purposes. For example Nikolaĭ Patrushev, head of the major counterintelligence agency from 1999 to 2008 and now secretary of the Security Council, openly claimed that the United States was the main instigator of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014. According to Patrushev, the motive behind the Ukraine crisis was not the people's desire to have a more democratic country; rather, it was the United States' desire to create a new generation of Ukrainians who despised Russia and would ensure that Ukraine was removed from Russia's sphere of influence.[32]

How Paranoid Is the Kremlin?

At the high point of the Ukraine crisis in March 2014, German Chancellor Angela Merkel observed, in a telephone conversation with then U.S. president Barack Obama, that Vladimir Putin had "lost touch with reality."[33] She hinted that Putin had lost his mind and that his actions were not rational. However, for Russian elites, conspiracy theories are not

a way of perceiving reality but a crude and powerful mechanism of popular mobilization. Few people in Europe and the United States are aware of this.

Some of the leading Russian conspiracy theorists' criticism of Kremlin policies—which is primarily concerned with what they see as a lack of active engagement in eastern Ukraine—reveals an interesting interaction between the Kremlin and the ardent supporters of conspiracy theories.[34] It also shows how Kremlin policies, wrapped in conspiratorial rhetoric, can be misunderstood by Europeans and Americans. The limited and largely covert involvement of Russian forces in eastern Ukraine was not enough for those who advocated the immediate annexation of the region. The regions of eastern and southern Ukraine, which had been part both of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, were seen by anti-Western Russian philosophers as the crucial focal point for the restoration of the empire. This was the linchpin of many Russian nation-building projects as well as a major battleground with the West.[35] The Kremlin used this historical heritage when bargaining with the European Union and the United States to justify both the federalization of Ukraine and Russia's resistance to the Ukrainian authorities in the Donbass region. Yet these issues disappeared from the mainstream media and political discourse as soon as the Kremlin achieved certain goals.[36]

Some Russian conspiracy theorists saw the conflict as the beginning of a conservative revolution in Russia and the end of the Western domination.[37] Some went even further. For the most prolific anti-Westerner, Alexander Dugin, this was the start of the long-awaited "war of the continents"; for others it was the start of a new cold war.[38] Neither of these plans was on the Kremlin's agenda at the time, and their supporters suffered minor repercussions. This case proves that those at the top of the Russian

political elite are generally circumspect in their use of conspiracy theories; they keep genuine theorists at a distance from the decision-making process on important matters, unless their actions benefit the Kremlin's plans.

Conclusion

The case of post-Soviet Russian conspiracy culture sheds light on how conspiracy theories can help to keep an authoritarian regime in power. In Putin's Russia, theories about a malign and dangerous West have helped to maintain social cohesion and have formed the basis of many political campaigns aimed at legitimizing the regime. The constant juxtaposition of "the people" of Russia, whose concern (unlike in 1991) is the preservation of the state and the maintenance of the status quo, and the "other," which seeks to undermine the integrity of the nation, is a tool that has been used to deal with ever-emerging conflicts in the country. The West is presented as the embodiment of a powerful external foe that bolsters the nation's internal enemies. Social mobilization is carried out through aggressive campaigns in the state-aligned media to detect and destroy enemies and allows the Kremlin to meet social, political, and inter-ethnic challenges.

Many of the conspiracy theories popular in Russia today originated in Europe and the United States, but by the mid-2010s they found a place in the rhetoric of Russia's mainstream intellectuals and politicians. The importation of conspiracy theories, their application to the domestic situation, and even their subsequent exportation by means of international broadcasting (for example, the television channel Russia Today, now known as RT) is a curious case of how global conspiracy theories work in this new, "post-truth" world.[39]

The events of the last decade have demonstrated that Russia can swiftly evolve from the position of decaying post-imperial state located on the outskirts of the growing European Union to that of an important player in international affairs, capable of undertaking a significant role in the domestic politics of the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. Conspiracy theories have been the key element in this process. On the one hand, they have become the driving force in popular mobilization, creating space for the authorities to implement their ideas about how the country should be run. On the other hand, active disinformation campaigns abroad questioned the quality of democracy in many European countries, not to mention the United States. The success of these disinformation campaigns, which are based on conspiracy theories, depends on independent actors working tactically for their own benefit.[40] Therefore, a deeper analysis of Russia's conspiracy theories will help us to comprehend what strategies Russia's elite can design to protect and increase its power.

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