

The “Hidden Hand” of External Enemies

THE USE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES BY PUTIN’S REGIME

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Deploying and seeking to capitalize on conspiracy theories is fairly common among political actors worldwide. Explaining some events as the result of an internal or external opponent’s sinister plans can empower theorists and disempower adversaries. With their actions, conspiracy theorists can mobilize supporters, reduce their own responsibility for failures, create scapegoats, sharpen popular negative sentiments, and provide easy explanations for social problems (particularly at times of crisis). Furthermore, such theories can serve as a means of entertainment, thereby raising their popularity and extending their reach.

Various conspiracy theories play an important role in contemporary Russian politics. The substance of such theories focuses on the threatening plans of “foreign enemies,” among which the United States and its allies take pride of place. In the Yeltsin era, the authorities rarely resorted to conspiracy theories. However, President Vladimir Putin’s regime has increasingly employed them in order to sideline the opposition.

This memo examines the use of conspiracy theories by supporters of Putin’s regime by exploring the following issues. First, it examines the nature of conspiracy theories in Russia before Putin came to power. It then looks at two major outbreaks of government-inspired anti-opposition conspiracy theorizing: after the color revolutions of the mid-2000s and during the Russian election campaigns of 2011-12. Finally, it analyzes the means by which opposition members have responded to conspiracies directed against them.

The Legacy of the 1990s

In the Soviet period, conspiracy theories were a substantial part of official ideology – that the USSR was surrounded by malicious enemies. During the Cold War, the main

perceived conspirator was the United States, often inseparable from its “satellite” states in Europe and elsewhere.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and communist ideology, as well as the effect of severe and protracted economic crisis in Russia, greatly influenced both the content and prevalence of conspiracy theories. On the one hand, post-Soviet Russia largely turned away from such ideas as they were associated with some of the seedier aspects of Soviet ideology, including enemy seeking, calls for tightening the political regime, and repression against “accomplices of the enemy.” On the other hand, widespread nostalgia for the USSR, the rise of nationalist sentiment, severe economic circumstances, emerging ethnic conflicts and separatism, and perceived decline of moral values fuelled conspiracy theories.

These theories provided, first and foremost, simple and clear explanations for the reasons for these ills. According to one of the most typical explanations of this kind, the United States arranged the collapse of the USSR and then, by manipulating the corrupt Russian leadership, induced it to implement disastrous reforms, stir up secessionism, and promote immoral and corrupting patterns of mass culture. Among texts that fuelled anti-American conspiracy theories in Russia, a key one was the so-called “Dulles plan,” made public by the Russian media in 1993. According to the plan, supposedly invented by former CIA chief Allen Dulles, the United States aimed to corrupt the USSR by secretly promoting immorality, corruption, alcoholism, and drug addiction among its citizens. By the 2000s, proof that the plan was false was generally known (the plan’s content corresponded to text from Anatoly Ivanov’s novel *Eternal Call*). However, it was still cited by some regional politicians (who alleged that the anti-Putin opposition was still carrying it out) even during the presidential election campaign of 2012.

In the post-Soviet period, the range of conspiracy theories became more diverse, accompanied by a decline in America’s “hidden hand.” This was due, partly, to the increasing popularity of radical nationalism in Russia, which added secret Masonic and Zionist organizations, China, Turkey, and international radical Islamic groups to the roster of Russian antagonists.

Among the pro-Western ruling elite that was in power in the 1990s, conspiracy theories were not that popular, but such ideas were widely accepted among the military and the security services. This popularity can probably be explained by an entrenched “besieged fortress” and “worst-case scenario” mentality, together with the spread of ideas of classical geopolitics stressing the inevitability of a geographic and perpetual Russia-U.S. confrontation. Such a mindset implied that democratic freedoms and international contacts should be restricted in order to cover all possible security breaches that could be used by potential external enemies and their internal accomplices. Putin’s affiliation with the security services and the strengthening of the latter’s position during his presidency made it more likely that the regime would employ conspiracy theories in its rhetoric and policy.

The “Orange Plague” and “Scavenging” Civic Activists

During the first few years of Putin’s presidency, the administration did not systematically resort to conspiracy rhetoric. While international terrorism was labeled Russia’s main external enemy, the United States and NATO were positioned as allies in the common fight against evil, especially after the events of September 11, 2001.

However, the situation changed after the series of color revolutions in the post-Soviet space starting in 2003-2004. Many in the ruling elite perceived and portrayed these events as steps in a purposeful plan to establish pro-Western regimes in post-Soviet states, driving Russia out of its traditional sphere of influence. Moreover, the Ukrainian events—which Russian opponents labelled as the “orange plague”—were interpreted by some as a test plot intended to be used later in Russia to replace the existing government with a pro-American puppet regime. The prevention of “color revolutions” became one of the main priorities for pro-government youth organizations such as “Nashi” and the “Young Guard of United Russia,” both of which emerged in 2005.

Unsurprisingly, politically active non-profit organizations and their Russian-based foreign donors were targeted by the authorities. Already in 2004, the Soros Foundation terminated its projects in Russia. In early 2006, amid an espionage scandal involving an officer from the British embassy in Moscow responsible for financial assistance to some NGOs, a new law placed Russian non-profit organizations under strict bureaucratic control with wide scope for arbitrary government enforcement, seriously limiting the participation of foreigners in such organizations.

The campaign against NGOs damaged many Russian recipients of foreign grants, including academics for whom this kind of financial support was a significant supplement to a meager salary. While no attack on academic grantholders could be linked to the government, such people often fell under suspicion of the vigilant regional branches of the security services and of cautious university functionaries, some of whom considered any cooperation with Western (especially U.S.) funders and partners as a betrayal of Russian national interests.¹

During the election campaign of 2007-08, Putin and his supporters strongly focused on incriminating liberal opponents for plotting against Russia in concert with foreign enemies. In a speech to supporters in November 2007, Putin declared that this opposition had learned from Western experts how to organize color revolutions, that they had practiced these skills in neighboring countries and were seeking to do the same in Russia. Putin alleged that the opposition was “scavenging” at foreign diplomatic missions in the hopes of obtaining funding and support. It is notable that in this and other cases, Putin usually only vaguely mentioned would-be external and internal conspirators. According to Matthew Gray, author of *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*

¹ Some academics even used public accusations of supplying foreign intelligence services with sensitive information to settle scores with rival colleagues.

(2010), authoritarian leaders of Arab countries often resorted to similarly vague accusations because such rhetoric complicates refuting charges.

During this period, the pro-government media systematically used anti-Western conspiracy theories to discredit the opposition and politically active NGOs. Such “theories” were represented in various genres, such as in pseudo-analytic television programs like Mikhail Leontiev’s *Odnako*, “investigative” NTV documentaries that sought to compromise regime opponents, and shows like “Explorations of Historical Secrets” that purport to uncover sinister plots. In most cases, television stories about conspiracies, regardless of their genre, were presented in similar styles utilizing huge volumes of reliable facts intermixed with some dubious assumptions, accompanied by rapid-fire narration and sensationalist tones.

“Rocking the Boat” for the Money of the “Washington Obkom”

During the 2011-12 election campaigns, network activism, a growing volunteer movement to prevent election fraud, and post-election mass protests became serious challenges for Putin’s authoritarian regime. As one of the main counter-moves, he intensified the use of conspiracy theories in which opposition activists were accused of carrying out the instructions of foreign enemies, especially the U.S. State Department or, more broadly and metaphorically, the “Washington *Obkom*,” which sought to “rock the boat” and destabilize Russia.²

Before the 2011 parliamentary elections, among the main targets of pro-government conspiracy theorists were Alexei Navalny and *Golos*, an election monitoring NGO. In trying to discredit Navalny, who launched an Internet-based corruption investigation against high-standing officials and famously dubbed United Russia the “party of crooks and thieves,” pro-government opponents focused on his half-year fellowship at Yale University, where he allegedly was trained how to mobilize mass protests to overthrow a government. In a similar way, *Golos* was portrayed as an organization serving the anti-Russian interests of its foreign donors by systematically collecting and publishing information about electoral violations with the aim of negatively portraying the authorities and election commissions and subsequently undermining public confidence in the Russian political system.

Since the parliamentary elections, conspiracy theories have become almost the main ideological weapon for Putin’s supporters. They are used to de-legitimize mass protests and protest voting. Such conspiracy narratives typically depict Russia’s heterogeneous opposition as a single entity, easily amenable to manipulation by bribing its leaders, who in turn are instructed by the “Washington *Obkom*” and color revolution guidebooks (most infamously the work of American political scientist Gene Sharp). Putin himself repeatedly accused unnamed opposition members of intending to implement the plans of foreign powers to export the Orange revolution to Russia, which for the latter could have the same disastrous consequences as the upheaval in Libya. As

² *Obkom* refers to Soviet regional communist party committees, which issued instructions to all local authorities and informally supervised them.

earlier, accusations against the opposition were readily broadcast by television channels. Notoriously, NTV, which even before the elections served as the key media outlet for compromising regime opponents, issued several “investigative” shows during the 2011-12 campaign, one of which was devoted to slandering *Golos* while another, titled the “Anatomy of Protest,” was about the organizers and participants of anti-government meetings.

Although top-ranked officials normally refrained from naming the alleged conspirators, some secondary political figures periodically claimed that the United States was behind the protests. The new U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, has been a recent conspiracy target, his appointment explained by his scholarly specialization in democratic revolution. The invitation to some opposition activists to visit the U.S. embassy shortly after his arrival in January 2012 was portrayed by theorists as a training session for organizing protests. As often happens in such cases, attempts of Embassy representatives to refute these accusations had little success, mostly because the pro-Putin propaganda machine dominates the Russian information space. Moreover, such conspiracies are hard to refute since a significant portion of the Russian population distrusts the United States. This distrust is illustrated by the fact that since 2005 the United States has appeared regularly among Russia’s top five enemies, according to surveys by the Levada Center polling organization.

How the Opposition Tries to Avoid Being Targets of Conspiracies

Of course, opposition members try to avoid or counter any conspiracy charges directed against them. Some typical ways they do this include:

1. *Refuting allegations using rational arguments and pointing to the inadmissibility of unproven personal accusations.* In some cases, victims attempted to sue conspiracy theorists (as was done by some opposition leaders depicted as accomplices of foreign powers in the previously mentioned “Anatomy of Protest” film). Such cases rarely end successfully.
2. *Delegitimizing the accusers.* Some opposition members claim that pro-government conspiracy theorists try to divert public attention from their own nefarious affairs, such as corruption and election fraud. Some in turn accuse top officials of serving the interests of foreign countries by using Russian financial reserves to support their economies, allowing NATO to have a transshipment point in Ulyanovsk, or making concessions to foreign countries that could contradict Russian national interests. Sometimes even liberal opposition members make these kinds of accusations.
3. *Using irony,* especially farcical confessions intended to deprive such allegations of their seriousness. Alexei Navalny often makes such confessions in his blog. Similarly, after the opposition was blamed for receiving money from foreign

sponsors, some protesters brought posters to the U.S. Embassy and State Department officials saying they were owed money.

4. *Disassociating oneself from the accused in the conspiracy.* Soon after the December 2011 post-election demonstration on Bolotnaya Square, the Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov called it an “orange leprosy,” while Igor Lebedev, head of the Liberal Democratic faction in the State Duma, added that the protests had been arranged by U.S. intelligence.

However, none of these methods helped opposition members neutralize the conspiracy theories directed against them. The overwhelming information superiority of government supporters allowed them to conduct massive brainwashing techniques, while the voices of their opponents were poorly heard. The spread of the fear of Russian destabilization, inspired by the latter’s foreign enemies, likely is an important factor in Putin’s victory in the presidential elections of 2012.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories in the 2000s fell on the fertile ground of the Soviet “besieged fortress” mentality, a widespread perception that the troubles of the 1990s resulted from external enemies’ intrigues, and the pervasiveness of conspiracy thinking in the circles of security and defense officers that gained great influence during Putin’s era.

But Putin and his high-ranking subordinates began to actively use conspiracy theories about external enemies only in the middle of 2000s, after the series of color revolutions in post-Soviet states. At first, such allegations were directed against politically active NGOs. They were aimed at shutting off uncontrolled sources of funding and organizational support for liberal opposition activists. It is remarkable that accusations directed toward opponents of the regime were habitually devoid of specifics—no “external enemies” or their “domestic accomplices” were actually named, though the United States and its close allies were typically implied.

In the election campaigns of 2011-2012, Putin and his team resorted to conspiracy theories on an unprecedented scale, not only to disempower their opponents but also to rally their supporters. Largely because of the regime’s overwhelming information superiority, this tactic proved successful, becoming one of the most important factors in the regime’s electoral success.