Plots against Russia: Conspiracy, Sincerity, and Propaganda

Eliot Borenstein[*]

Keywords
apocalypse; russophobia; conspiracy narrative; rumors; Putin

After spending enough time on the Russian Internet, flipping channels on state television, leafing through extremist newspapers, or simply reading the latest action-packed potboilers, it's easy to come to the conclusion that Russia is under siege, from within as well as from without. The country's apparent enemies include jihadists, Communists, oligarchs, the CIA, the FSB, Georgians, Ukrainians, a rainbow coalition of "color revolutionaries," homosexuals, Harvard University, and let's not forget the Jews (because trust me, no one else has). The building blocks of conspiracy may change (or, more likely, simply increase in number), but their possible combinations and permutations are limited only on the level of small details.

If it seems that I'm picking on Russia, I hasten to point out that anyone with a Facebook friend who watches Fox News can testify that my own home country, the United States, is hardly immune to syncretic conspiratorial thinking. After all, that country has, on two separate occasions, elected a gay Kenyan Muslim black separatist socialist secular antichrist (proving yet again that for a black man to succeed in America, he has to overachieve). The fact that he was succeeded in office by a man who praises Alex Jones's *Infowars* and *The National*

[*] Parts of this chapter have been published already in Eliot Borenstein: *Plots against Russia. Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Copyright © 2019 by Cornell University.

Enquirer while hyping the non-existent threats of voter fraud and murderous illegal immigrants speaks for itself.

So Russia is not alone when it comes to conspiracy. Indeed, we could see the growth of conspiracy theory in both Russia and the United States as yet another manifestation of a decades-old rivalry: which country can outperform the other in conspiracy theory production? The rise of conspiratorial thought in the United States is a well-studied, and sadly relevant, phenomenon, and I talk about it a bit in my book.[1] Russia's multiple brands of conspiracy are far less familiar on a global level, but the country has not been idle: for at least fifty years, Russia (along with the Russophone diaspora) has been a reliable provider of conspiratorial narratives, overfulfilling virtually any conceivable paranoid plan with Stakhanovite zeal.

I use the hackneyed Stakhanovite metaphor advisedly, since it has been decades since Russia could be accused of the hyperproduction of anything besides oil. Or at least, of anything tangible. Here I recall Mikhail Epstein's marvelous essay, "Labor of Lust,"[2] in which he demonstrates that any failure to produce factories, heavy machinery, and weapons on the scale demanded by the various five-year plans was easily remedied by a proliferation of images and texts (i.e., discourse) *about* factories, heavy machinery, and weapons. In the symbolic realm, Russia and its precursor, the Soviet Union, was a powerhouse of productivity, an indefatigable manufacturer of simulacra and simulation.

Known Unknowns

Conspiracy, however, is not mere simulation. It takes all the various mythemes available to it and turns them into a persuasive narrative; that is, conspiracy is a kind of discursive *bricolage*. Even this formulation is not entirely satisfactory, since it looks at conspiracy on too large a scale. The basis of all the mythemes and tropes that form a conspiracy theory is a much more fundamental substance: information. Conspiracy is a disease of information, and a communicable disease at that. A better word, though, would be disorder, if it weren't for the fact that conspiracy's relation to information is to take what is *dis*-ordered and express it as a surplus of order. It is a disorder of signal to noise, in which all noise is construed as signal.[3]

1 See Borenstein 2019: 76–84 and 237–41.

2 Epstein 1995.

3 I am referring to Umberto Eco's instructive explanations in Eco 1976: 18–47.

Conspiracy does what centuries of crackpots' failed attempts at perpetual motion machines could not: conspiracy fights entropy without increasing entropy. Operating according to an inversion of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, conspiracy concentrates all information into an increasingly orderly system. Trying to define "conspiracy theory" is a thankless and ironic task. Thankless, in that there is a vast body of literature on the subject that must be addressed. Ironic, in that the term "conspiracy theory" is so familiar as to be part of *common* knowledge, while the philosophy of the conspiracy theory is based on the idea of *hidden* knowledge. We know a conspiracy theory when we see it, but what we know is that it is an argument that there is something we don't know because we can't see it. It is the unknown that we know everything about.

Conspiracy takes on its form and character in direct relation to a given society's information ecosystem, that is, to the media/cultural habitat that can facilitate and/or restrict the circulation of information. In Russia over the last fifty years or so, we find three particular information ecosystems that give rise to three distinct phases of conspiracy theory: the first is late socialism, the second is roughly coextensive with perestroika and the Yeltsin years, and the third is today's era of Putinist conservatism and the rise of social media. Unlike so many patterns that Slavists are used to seeking and finding in modern Russia, these phases are not characterized by rupture; indeed, the very syncretism that is so fundamental to conspiratorial thought admits no rupture, to the extent that it admits no contradiction. Though conspiracy's approach to information is anti-entropic, its development is usually expansionist and hegemonic: everything fits, and every seeming contradiction can be turned into another confirmation. In the American context, Michael Barkun shows us the confluence of initially separate conspiracy theories into one master conspiratorial narrative whose complexity would put *Foucault's Pendulum* to shame: any good conspirologist knows that the Elders of Zion and the Freemasons are actually working with both the lizard people who dwell within our hollow earth and the gray-skinned aliens who are somehow never satisfied, no matter how many anal probes they perform on unwilling abductees.[4] (Apparently, anal probes are like potato chips: you can't stop at just one.)

4 Cf. Barkun 2013.

Rumor as Currency

Late socialism functioned as a petrie dish for conspiracy theories, providing the ideal conditions for their development. First, we must acknowledge that there was no need to invent conspiracy whole cloth. It is Tsarist Russia that bequeathed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (n.d.) to the world at large, though, in one of Russian culture's perpetual ironies, even this native product turned out to have been initially taken from France, like Neo-Classicism or *salat oliv'e*, and Russified to near-unrecognizability. Added to this semi-native heritage is the lesson that the *Protocols'* pedigree teaches us: conspiracy theories cross national boundaries with the greatest of ease, which means that the entire European heritage of conspiracy theory was at late socialism's disposal.

Yet it was more than just this heritage that made late socialism such an amenable home for conspiracy theory. The Brezhnev era was marked by any number of shortages of this or that consumer good, but what was truly in short supply was information. The state media and government famously restricted access to news and cultural production. Though the USSR's official ideology was, of course, communist, its approach to information was decidedly mercantilist: information was a scarce resource to be conserved, if not hoarded, and the State jealously guarded its stash of information like a dragon sitting on its treasure trove of gold.

But the absence of gold encourages the development of alternative currencies. The paucity of reliable information, and the nakedly partisan nature in which information was presented, not only facilitated skepticism about official pronouncements, but also left a knowledge vacuum easily filled by speculation and rumor (far from hard currency, but it was all that people had). If we follow through on my currency metaphor one last time, facts were Deutschmarks, while conspiracy is Bitcoin.

Again, the effects of information deprivation went far beyond the national boundaries; in the West, Kremlinology thrived on a paranoid, conspiratorial epistemology that combed over every word in *Pravda* and every movement in state funerals for something on which to construct an often shaky hypothesis.

It is this skepticism that shows the weakness of the cold war propaganda model of mass culture: in response to the clear limits of official information, Soviet subjects of late socialism did not simply accept everything they heard uncritically, just as most of them did not become anti-Soviet dissidents. Rather, the assumption that people are being lied to produced an entire genre of what might be considered urban folklore, or at least urban folk knowledge: alternative theories about what's really going on, and who is really in charge. Engaging in this sort

of speculation did not necessarily entail adopting an anti-Soviet subject position. Quite to the contrary: casual, everyday conspiricism could even be viewed as *defining* the late Soviet subject position. The assumption that all leaders and bureaucrats are self-interested liars is certainly cynical, but by no means revolutionary, in that its challenge is not to the utopian ideology of the regime (a better future through communism) but to the utopian anthropology that justifies it. Late socialist casual conspiracy turns its skeptical eye on human nature far more than it does on this or that political system.[5]

The situation evolves with the dynamics of glasnost and *chernukha* (that is, pessimism, naturalism, and muckraking): while the policies of glasnost purported to fill in the "blank pages" of history, these pages had never been truly blank.[6] The facts had been known or suspected, or speculation had filled in the gaps. Glasnost functioned on the boundaries of revelation and confirmation, since what was brought to light was never entirely unknown. Rather, it is the fundamentally melodramatic ritual of exposure (*razoblachenie*) that endowed the disclosure with meaning and power. It is not that the truth could "set you free"; the truth *itself* was set free, released from the confines of conspiratorial epistemology.

Yet glasnost, rather than sounding conspiracy's death knell, gave it a new lease on life. The exposure of the hidden truth may have meant the end of specific secrets, but it ultimately confirmed the prevalence of secrecy and the validity of conspiratorial epistemology. What could be a more valid response to all this than to ask, "Who knows what else they're keeping from us?" which is the antecedent to the biggest conspiratorial meme of Putinism, "Who is beyond this?"[7] This is particularly understandable given the pendulum swings of Soviet-era reforms, dating back to Khrushchev: partial truths were doled out during the Thaw, only to be elaborated under Gorbachev, but the slow, multi-step process of revelation was not conducive to the belief that the "whole truth" had been disclosed.

Mass Culture as Information Warfare

So late Socialism encouraged a kind of casual conspiricism, and glasnost's confirmation of decades of government lies and omissions only intensified the distrust that lay behind conspiratorial thinking. But there were already more com-

5 For an overview of the role of conspiracy theories under Stalin, see Rittersporn 2014.

6 Cf. Borenstein 2007.

7 "Кто за этим стоит?"

mitted versions of conspiricism ready for more widespread adoption with the changes in the media in the perestroika and post-perestroika eras. More committed conspiricism directly challenged the regime of power/knowledge that constituted late Soviet ideology. Here we have right-wing dissident counter-narratives, complete with their own myths of origin. For the sake of brevity, let me simply mention two of the more important conspiratorial narratives floating about at this time.

Each of them is a variation on the theory that the United States has been conducting covert operations to destroy the Soviet Union/Russia by subverting public morals and destroying Russian culture. As so often happens with conspiracy theory, there is an undeniable grain of truth here: after all, was not the very existence of Radio Liberty an open attack on official discourse? (Which renders RT, the former Russia Today, a long-delayed attempt at striking back.)

The most elaborate version of this narrative was developed in emigration, but made its way back to Russia in *samizdat*: the writings of Grigorii Klimov. In both his non-fiction and his novels (which were intended to be read as fictional glosses on hidden truth), Klimov warned his readers about the sinister "Harvard Project" (*garvardskii proekt*). The Harvard Project gives the anti-Semitism of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* a pseudoscientific veneer, updating them with the preoccupations of the Cold War (mind control, the American threat) and contemporary sexual panic (predatory homosexuals and militant lesbians), and reinforcing the religious dimension by approaching Biblical texts and confessional differences in terms of genetics and evolution. The beauty of Klimov's formulation is that it is both Soviet and anti-Soviet: the Cold War enemy is truly a threat, but both America and the Soviet Union have been controlled by Jews from the very beginning. Klimov developed an all-purpose demonology that gives the appearance of rigor while actually being extremely flexible. The result has all the hallmarks of the most baroque conspiracy theories to attract attention in the West, such as Lyndon LaRouche's assertion that the Queen of England is an international drug kingpin working with the Rothschilds. Klimov finds his enemies slightly closer to home: for decades, Russia has been under siege by a cabal of genetically defective Jews and homosexuals (virtually synonymous in Klimov's lexicon), plotting the country's downfall from behind the ivy-covered walls of Harvard University.[8]

Somewhat surprisingly, a close cousin to Klimov's theory actually found its way into an officially published work of Soviet fiction: the anti-Soviet brainwashing campaign that would eventually take the name "The Dulles Plan." Rem-

8 Cf. Klimov 1998a, Klimov 1998b, Klimov 1998c, Klimov 1998d.

iniscent of both Klimov's novel *Imia moe—Legion* (*My Name Is Legion*, 1998) and Verkhovenskii's speech in Dostoyevsky's *Besy* (*Demons,* 1872), the broad contours of the plan first appear in Iurii Dol'd-Mikhailik's 1965 novel *I odin v pole voin* (*I Am the Only Soldier in the Field*), but reach a much broader audience when attributed to an SS Officer in Anatolii Ivanov's miniseries *Vechnyi zov* (*Eternal Call*)

> When the war ends, everything will work itself out. And we will throw everything we've got, everything we own: all the gold, all the material strength on turning people into idiots! The human brain, people's consciousness are all capable of change. After we seed chaos in them, we will imperceptibly switch out their values for false ones and make them believe in these false values! How, you ask? How?! …
> We'll find like-minded people: our allies and our helpers in Russia itself![9]

Though this particular line of thought would only be christened "The Dulles Plan" in 1993, it already provided a broad framework for understanding the Cold War in terms of conspiratorial melodrama, while still casting the relations between opposing sides in terms of symbolic exchange.

One of the most striking things about the text of the Dulles Plan is its obsession with popular culture. The Dulles Plan is as much media theory as conspiracy theory, a perhaps unintentional example of an outdated model that assumes propaganda works as intended, and that audiences are helpless to resist.[10] Consistent with Soviet policies that carefully restricted access to media, culture, and information, the Dulles Plan can only make sense if culture is understood in narrow, quasi-biological terms. The Dulles Plan is based on an implicit definition of media and consumer, emphasizing media's nutritional content. While some forms of cultural production are, quite simply, good for you (the classics, for instance), there are others that are not merely innately harmful, but whose entire purpose is moral or ideological harm. The audience, meanwhile, is totally pas-

9 «Окончится война — всё как-то утрясётся, устроится. И мы бросим всё, что имеем, чем располагаем: всё золото, всю материальную мощь на оболванивание и одурачивание людей! Человеческий мозг, сознание людей способно к изменению. Посеяв там хаос, мы незаметно подменим их ценности на фальшивые и заставим их в эти фальшивые ценности поверить! Как, спрашиваешь? Как?! …
Мы найдём своих единомышленников: своих союзников и помощников в самой России!»

10 The Media Effects School or Hypodermic Model, most recently resurrected in by Pomerantsev 2014.

sive. The media consumer is, essentially, an open orifice receiving all input indiscriminately.

Compare this with the conspiratorial mania that characterized the Stalin years: certainly, censorship was strict and propaganda was unrelenting, but the crimes of which alleged conspirators were accused were not restricted merely to anti-Soviet agitation. "Wreckers" were sabotaging industrial projects, and spies and internal enemies were engaged in assassinations and attempted murder.[11] The Dulles Plan turns out to be perfect for both the Cold War and its aftermath; violence and subversion are now entirely discursive.

Equally important is the Dulles Plan's focus on youth. By positing nearly all forms of popular youth culture as dangerous (something the Plan shares with moral panics throughout the modern world), the Dulles Plan weaponizes the generation gap. Young people are not merely strange and perhaps impertinent (the perennial complaint about "kids today"), they are the victims and perpetuators of warfare against everything the country stands for.

It is the combined focus on media and youth that ensures the Dulles Plan's longevity. The structure of cross-generational misunderstanding can endure even as the content of youth culture changes (as Americans with long enough memories will recall, the evolution of popular music is also the story of successive moral panics, from jazz to rock to hip hop). The generation vilified by the Dulles Plan in its early days is now the generation that could find itself appalled by its own children's culture.

If we borrow the language of Putin's third term, the Dulles Plan is all about values. Thanks to the Plan, conspiracy is a culture war. Or, to once again borrow from today's terminology, information war.

Selling Russia

The Dulles Plan's formalization in 1993 points to the second phase of the informational ecosystem I have mentioned: perestroika and the 1990s. This ecosystem gives us the opposite extreme from that of late socialism: we move from information deprivation to information overload. Here we are dealing with a more recognizably postmodern condition (recognizable, because it is the version of the condition that has long obtained in the West). This new embarrassment of informational riches could have served to debunk conspiratorial thinking entirely, but in fact the opposite occurred: revelation after revelation about the

11 See Rittersporn 2014.

hidden crimes and corruption of the Soviet Union served as confirmation of a paranoid mindset. This is when conspiratorial thinking moves from the underground to the mainstream.

I do not wish to dwell on this period as much, because it is also the version of conspiracy with which we are probably most familiar. In *Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture,* I argued that in the 1990s, everyone learned the language of crime.[12] Today I would add that they also learned the language of conspiracy (which, like that of crime, was a subcultural language that was now given unprecedented popular exposure). As in the West, conspiracy provides the basic framework for thrillers and action stories (the heroes are inevitably fighting those who plot against Russia), often using a conspiratorial framework that seems to be stripped of its conventional ideological content (the heroes fight organizations that *look* like right-wing visions of Jews and Masons, but are not *called* Jews or Masons). In the 1990s as conspiratorial narratives are now free to combine and recombine like viruses swapping genes, they tended to revolve around one of the dominant paradigms of the post-Soviet era: catastrophe. With catastrophe, conspiracy manages to be both a myth of origin and a prophecy of the future: here is how our secret enemies brought us to our knees, and here is how they are planning to utterly destroy us in the coming days. Just as Engels brackets all of human history between a primitive communitarian lost Eden and an eventual communist Golden Age, so, too, does Yeltsin-era conspiracy enclose modern Russian history with identically catastrophic origins and endings.

We see this with the evolution and eventually replacement of the Harvard Project. The Harvard Project reaches its apotheosis in a trilogy of novels by Sergei Norka that combine Klimov's ideas with the structure of a thriller, the establishment of an actual Inquisition in Russia, and the country's salvation by a "Dark Horse" who looks very much like Vladimir Putin.[13] From this point on, though, the Harvard Project, once its own independent force for xenophobic paranoia, is superseded by the Houston Project. Or, to be more precise, it is subsumed: annexed, like a disputed discursive peninsula, by a larger, neighboring narrative with quasi-imperial ambitions. This produces a peculiar imaginary geography, where Harvard and Houston (two names rarely uttered in the same breath) coexist on opposite sides of a shared border. For the early Putin era, though, this game of imaginary topography is actually prophetic: ideas (Harvard) are trumped by oil (Houston). Not to mention the fact that Putin's first terms in

12 See Borenstein 2007.

13 Norka 2000, Norka 2004a, Norka 2004b.

office coincide with the presidency of a former Texas governor. An imaginary, evil Texas is the perfect straw man to petrify a petrostate.

The Houston Project, while as much a flight of fancy as the *Protocols* or the Dulles Plan, appears to share one of the few saving graces of the Harvard project: it is not the result of plagiarism. In fact, it seems to be entirely unsourced. Appropriately enough for a digital phenomenon, it may not even have a clearly defined original. Searching for the "Houston Project" reminds us of the beauty and complexity of conspiracy as a viral Internet phenomenon: no one really owns it. As a result, its manifestations and elaborations vary wildly.

Compared to the Houston Project, both Harvard and Dulles look like underachievers. It is with the Houston Project (as elaborated by General Petrov and his many imitators) that conspiracists really start thinking big. Harvard and Dulles conceive of the apocalypse as local event: the end of Russia may as well be the end of the world (if you live in Russia), but otherwise, who knows? The Houston Plan loops around to global annihilation while never losing sight of the centrality of Russia.

The Houston Plan goes back to the conspiratorial well (no, not anti-Semitism; that particular poisoned well was already tapped out by the Harvard Project): the cabal of multinational schemers who *really* run the world. The renewed emphasis on the cabal is the result of a Western import. By the beginning of the twenty-first- century, many of the more popular English-language conspiratorial tracts are translated and published in Russia. John Coleman's *Conspirator's Hierarchy: The Committee of 300* (1992) is repeatedly referenced in Houston and Houston-adjacent conspiratorial writings; as the title suggests, it describes the machinations of our true overlords. Many of Coleman's tropes were then picked up by RT, the Russian English-language television channel that has provided a home for the lunatic fringe.

Thus Russian conspirators and Western conspirators end up speaking the same language, constantly referring to the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Bilderberg Group. The Bilderberg Group is an elite club whose secrecy has sparked a predictable set of claims as to their true activity, and whose leaders (the "Olympians") are conspiring to corrupt the world's youth along the lines laid out in both the *Protocols* and the Dulles Plan.

The Houston Project is predicated on one of the obsessions of post-Soviet political culture: the fate of Russia's natural riches. The Project's plan to destroy Russia as a state by dismembering it into dozens of tiny statelets is, at first glance, nothing more than a resource grab, supported by numerous fictitious quotes by Western leaders. Since 2006, the Russian media and blogosphere have been claiming that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright lamented the injus-

tice of Russia's share of the world's oil and mineral wealth (Siberia should therefore be under international control). Albright herself has denied saying any such thing, while Putin has managed to have it both ways ("I'm not familiar with this quote by Madame Albright, but I know that such thoughts wander through the minds of certain politicians").[14] This fake with Albright's "quote" is part of a perfect feedback loop, reinforcing both the rapaciousness of Americans (and particularly the Clinton administration, responsible for the bombings in Serbia) and the greatness of Russia itself. And its way was paved by the Houston Project.

For the Houston Project, the expropriation of Russian resources is only the beginning. The real goal of Western conspirators is far more evil, and also a much more primal threat to blood-and-soil notions of Russian identity. The Houston Project makes literal one of the primary metaphors of national betrayal: that Russia is being bought and sold. Now the truth comes out: the West is plotting to take the Russian land itself. Why?

It seems the West wants to move to Russia. It turns out that Moscow isn't just the Fourth Rome; soon, all of Russia will become the next Mt. Ararat (even though the first one is practically a neighbor). When the rest of the world succumbs to ecological catastrophe, only Russia will remain habitable. This scenario is the result of yet another mutation in Russian conspiracy theory. Just as the Houston Project is packaged as the next, more detailed iteration of the Harvard Project, its detail is drawn from yet another set of sources. Much of the content of Houston Project is filled by the growing lore accruing to a powerful local, Russian conspiracy called "Zolotoi milliard" (The Golden Billion).

Russia as Post-Apocalyptic Real Estate

First put forth by A. Kuz'mich (the pen name of Anatolii Kuz'mich Tsikunov) in a book called *Zagovor mirovogo pravitel'stva: Rossiia i 'zolotoi milliard'* (*The World Government Conspiracy: Russia and the Golden Billion*, 1994), "Zolotoj milliard" was quickly popularized by the prolific Sergei Kara-Murza and has become a staple of contemporary Russian conspiratorial thought.[15] "Zolotoi milliard" represents a real change in the Dulles/Harvard rhetoric of conspiracy, in that it is based less on (bad) social science than it is on (bad) natural science.

In a refreshing change from what is familiar to followers of American conspiracy and right-wing discourse, "Zolotoj milliard" takes the prospect of eco-

14 See Smolchenko 2007.

15 Cf. Kara-Murza 2004.

logical change seriously. So seriously, in fact, that most of the plans of the "world government" are predicated on looming global disaster. The coming cataclysm is not just a matter of climate change or even the depletion of fossil fuels; "Zolotoi milliard" is a nightmare vision of overpopulation. It weaponizes Malthusianism. The "milliard" ('billion') in its name refers to an imagined, ideal population for a sustainable planet; the "zolotoe" ('golden') part describes the class dynamics on which the conspiracy is built. The developed world is maneuvering to a point where one billion people (the wealthier people from the wealthiest part of the globe) populate the planet. It is not the meek, but the rich who shall inherit the earth (which makes some sense, since they have the most experience with inheritance).

"Zolotoi milliard" also has the attraction of an uncompromising Russocentrism. If the only inhabitable territory left on the globe were in, say, Africa or Australia, the theory would be far less compelling. Russia would be destroyed, but only as part of a larger story of calamity. "Zolotoi milliard" tells the opposite story: it is the God-given right of Russia to survive the apocalypse, but the West is conspiring to steal Russia's very destiny. Here the power and desirability of the Russian land are reinforced precisely by the covetousness of the enemy, and the struggle against this plot can be yet another heroic tale of the defense of Russia from invasion.

"Zolotoi milliard" gathers together many of the most important tropes of benighted, post-Soviet Russia (the need to defend the country's natural resources from a rapacious West, the West's demoralization of Russia's youth, destruction of Russia's economy, and destruction of public health) into one compelling narrative, a story combining historical touchstones (the Great Patriotic War) with science and pseudoscience. It also builds on and sustains the hostility towards population control encountered throughout the Russian media in the Putin era, in which the distribution of condoms is a clever Western plot to bring down Russian birth rates. This idea is often reinforced by an unsourced, but frequently repeated quote from Margaret Thatcher, that "Russians should be reduced to 15 million." All of this can be summed up in a phrase that is common to Russian extremist discourse, and made more mainstream by the conflict in Ukraine: "The genocide of the Russian people"[16] In a Russocentric world, there could be no ending more catastrophic than that.

16 «геноцид русского народа»

Russophobia Begins at Home

Which brings us to the supremacy of Vladimir Putin. If under Yeltsin conspiracy became a common language, under Putin (particularly since his return to office after Medvedev), conspiracy is a meta-language. One of the many brilliant moves of Putin and his supporters is to coopt the language of conspiracy and falsification so thoroughly that all symbolic exchange of truth value collapses into false equivalencies. As the 2012 protest movement captured video after video of suspicious election activity, police brutality, and corruption (i.e., uncovering a state conspiracy to claim power through unlawful means), state television responded with charges that the falsification itself has been falsified. Here I should note the contrast between the way conspiratorial accusations used to be handled in the U.S., and the way they are handled in Putin's Russia. In the States, the guiding principle before Trump was not to engage, because engaging simply feeds the beast (hence the long months before Obama's final, anti-climactic release of his long-form birth certificate). The Kremlin's response is to engage at all costs, because feeding the beast is in the regime's best interest.

Two television documentaries in the wake of the protest movement highlight this new dynamic. First is the three-part mockumentary *Rossiia: polnoe zatmenie* (*Russia: Total Eclipse*)[17] which, though broadcast on NTV, looked exactly like a typical muckraking NTV documentary. Here the director gives a seamless facade of utter seriousness as he takes the familiar tropes of the last few decades of conspiracy theory and claims to expose their actual truth. One part tells us about the secret cabal of homosexuals who control the media; another exposes the genetic basis of fascism; and all of them repeatedly invoke the Dulles Plan as established fact. This deliberate confusion of fact and fancy is itself the perfect commentary on today's media environment, in which truth claims can be so easily faked that fiction may as well be fact, and fact fiction.

Most notorious is *Anatomiia protesta* (Anatomy of a Protest).[18] Here we discover that every move made by the protest movement has been funded by the U.S. State Department and Georgian plutocrats, while every instance of police brutality is simply a "provocation" designed to produce the appearance of police brutality as a weapon against the regime. Even the footage of ballot stuffing turns out to be footage of a pre-election ballot-casting exercise, reconfigured by the treacherous protesters as evidence of vote tampering.

17 Cf. Loshak 2012.

18 Kisliakov et al. 2012.

At this point, conspiracy reaches total semiotic overdrive, as well as becoming the perfect state of total simulation: everything becomes conspiracy, including the attempt to expose conspiracy. The whole MH-17 airline disaster is a clear example of what happens when conspiracy moves from the margins to the center, to be embraced by the state and the media. The large-scale conspiracy theories can be invoked or alluded to, but their main purpose is to serve as an available backdrop or heuristic device when constantly accusing one's opponents of being the tools of evil Western governments hell-bent on Russia's destruction. The mindset of conspiracy becomes reflexive, a continuous loop both based on and reinforcing a sense of anti-Russian hostility.

Are there plots against Russia? Absolutely. But they should be a source of Russian pride rather than anger, since they are such a reliable and useful domestic product. In 1979, before the advent of cell phones, there was an American horror movie about a babysitter being threatened on the phone, only to be told by the police (over the phone) that the calls are not coming from far away; the killer is right there, because (to quote the movie's tag line) the "calls are coming from inside the house." So it is with anti-Russian conspiracies. The plots against Russia are being hatched within Russia itself.

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories have been a perennial feature of Russian culture for more than a century. This prevalence is related to the vexed status of information in the Soviet and post-Soviet world, starting with the nakedly partisan presentation of the news in Late Socialism. Since World War II, Russia and the Soviet Union have undergone three different periods of conspiracy theorizing, corresponding to three distinct informational ecosystems: the first, under Brezhnev, was predicated on information as a scarce resource, supplemented by rumor and speculation. The second, starting in Perestroika and continuing through the 1990s, responds to the sudden surplus of information, when competing narratives challenge and one claim to truth and validity. Finally, in the Putin era, conspiracy theorizing is coopted by the regime itself.