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CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN PUTIN’S RUSSIA
The case of the ‘New World Order’

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Introduction
On 17 January 1991, U.S. President George Bush gave a televised speech in which he announced the military operation in Iraq:

We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order – a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations. When we are successful – and we will be – we have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfil the promise and vision of the UN’s founders.

(Bush 1991)

The speech was meant to symbolise the end of the Cold War and reflected the new state of global affairs in which the U.S.A., as sole superpower, should play a bigger role than it had done in the past. Yet Bush’s messianic claim for the United Nations has been perceived by some Americans with great suspicion: In their view, for the first time in decades, their leader admitted his participation in a global conspiracy aimed at building a New World Order which would strip the U.S.A. of sovereignty and put it under U.N. control. These ideas, which had been brewing for some time amongst the American far right, seemed to receive confirmation after Bush’s speech (Barkun 2006: 62).

In the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev’s democratic changes had dramatically undermined the decaying political regime, and its collapse in 1991, just a few years later, opened the gates to a variety of conspiratorial ideas. Among these, the notion of the New World Order quickly found its supporters and spread through various communities within the Russian conspiracy milieu (see Bratich 2008). Within the post-Soviet Russian context, the notion of a global order, with one centre of power, echoed concerns over the incontestability of the leadership of the U.S.A. in the world and its challenge to Russia’s place in international affairs. Since 1991, various concepts of the New World Order conspiracy have been developing across the Russian political spectrum and successfully conquering, on the one hand, so called patriotic, pro-Kremlin authors, and, on the other, far right antisemitic activists critical of Kremlin policies.
This chapter analyses the evolution of the New World Order conspiracy theory in post-Soviet Russia: It aims to provide a comparative analysis of the theory both in the U.S. context and in that of post-Soviet Russia, in order to highlight the peculiarities of the post-Soviet Russian conspiracy culture, and to consider its functions in Russian politics and society. I argue that the astonishing popularity of these ideas lies in the very nature of the New World Order conspiracy theory, which has turned out to be equally popular in the U.S.A. and in Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War.

As Barkun argues (2006: 64), the concept of the New World Order attained a particular popularity in the 1990s due to the convenience of bringing together diverse conspiracy theories into one metanarrative structure. The grand plan of the one world government is capable of including all events that are of interest to conspiracy theorists, and it allows for the shifting of focus from global politics to the domestic agenda. In the Russian context, this means that the New World Order conspiracy theory is able to explain the collapse of the regime in 1991 as an act carried out by a powerful external force, and to make sense of a new reality in which millions of people lost their jobs, savings and even lives.

Second, as Timothy Melley observes, conspiracy theories are a manifestation of agency panic: ‘the intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy and self-control, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been “constructed” by powerful external agents’ (2000: 12). The sense of losing agency in the Russian context overlapped with the collapse of statehood, national identity and existing social institutions, which affected millions of Russians. At the same time, politicians and intellectuals projected their anxieties about the loss of international influence and increasing dependence on Western financial help onto the sinister global power brokers (the so called mirovaia zakulis, i.e. the global cabal).

The popularity of the concept can also be explained by the convenience it has provided for various political and social actors in Russia. The accusation of working for the New World Order is a powerful tool with which to strip the opponent, either on the left or the right of the political spectrum, of political legitimacy. The possibility that one was inadvertently working for foreign plotters fed the suspicion of subversion popular in the Cold War period, and so helped to perpetuate the rich conspiracy culture that already existed in the Soviet Union.

Intriguingly, opponents of the regime often used the same claim to delegitimise the Kremlin’s actions and to mobilise supporters against its current policies. The claim that the president or the government were implicated in a plot against the people has provided a prevailing idea among the far-right with which to interpret the Kremlin’s domestic activities.

**New World Order conspiracy: An overview**

In 1991, the Reverend Pat Robertson, a businessman and a priest, published *The New World Order*. Robertson explained that several think tanks (such as the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations) and U.S. political leaders had brought the country under the control of a group of highly influential individuals. Behind that group, Robertson saw the shadow of the Illuminati – a secret society founded by Adam Weishaupt in the eighteenth century in Bavaria. The Illuminati were disbanded in 1784, but an imagined Illuminati order had supposedly outlived the founding organisation. Robertson claimed that the shadow of the Illuminati could be found behind all of the biggest political events since the eighteenth century: Revolutions, financial crises and wars (Porter 2005).

Robertson’s take on the Illuminati was based on a premise that they were atheists, and that this was a clear sign of their work with the devil. The Christian fundamentalist ideology promoted by Robertson saw human history as a battle between God and Evil, in which the U.S.A.
would be the saviour of the world. This messianic role on the part of the U.S.A. in global history is one of the pillars of U.S. conspiracy culture. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, U.S. exceptionalism encouraged individuals to look for some malign plot aimed at destroying the nation, and bred distrust in both the government for failing to realise its prophetic role, and in random actors who were supposedly intent on diverting the U.S. leadership from the path of Christianity and freedom (Goldberg 2001). For that reason, the active involvement of the U.S.A. in foreign affairs, and its membership in international organisations and trade deals, dealt a blow to American isolationism, led to further loss of independence, and opened the gates to the country’s foes.

The twentieth century was the most crucial historical period in this respect: The U.S. promotion of global democracy and its standoff with the ‘atheist’ Soviet bloc provided a clear, dualistic view of the world that is a traditional feature of conspiracy theories. As Paul Boyer demonstrates, the narratives of the Cold War were successfully appropriated by the discourses of American Christian fundamentalists who perceived the Soviet Union as the Antichrist (Boyer 1992).

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the fear of being infiltrated by communists was key to the U.S. far right. The era of McCarthyism demonstrated how keen conspiracy theorists are on show trials. One can find a lot in common between General Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinskii’s public accusations against Stalin’s enemies and Joe McCarthy’s ranting about the communists who infiltrated the State Department (for more on the Soviet campaign against ‘people’s enemies’, see Harris 2016). In the time of the Cold War, these two cultures of conspiracy – American and Soviet – have officially been fed by the official ideological premises of fighting against the ideological rival. Robert Welch, the leader of the far-right John Birch Society, presented communist Russia as the embodiment of the global power of the Illuminati, ‘a gigantic conspiracy to enslave mankind, an increasingly successful conspiracy controlled by determined, cunning, and utterly ruthless gangsters, willing to use any means to achieve its end’ (Welch 2016). This plan included the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, the Bilderbergers and the U.N. as steps towards the creation of a global government. These organisations were seen as promoters of socialism in the capitalist U.S.A., which were meant to destroy its foundations. The ultimate goal of the plotters was the creation of ‘totalitarian socialism’, which would achieve total control of the world population (Cooper 1995).

Political figures such as Henry Kissinger, as well as presidents from both parties, were presented as both promoters of the global plot against the U.S.A., and as ragdolls in the hands of faceless plotters, famous bankers such as the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers. Furthermore, the Federal Reserve system was supposedly in the hands of the plotters and so was helping to keep U.S. citizens in a state of financial slavery. By means of deflation and inflation, the plotters intended to destroy the ‘God-given, inalienable, “self-evident” right to private property’ (Epperson 1990). As Gary Allen (2013) described it, the international financial elite (‘the Insiders’) took control of the U.S. financial system, jeopardised U.S. isolationism by means of the country’s involvement in the League of Nations and ensured that the Bolshevik government in the Soviet Union was a constant threat to the U.S.A.

Ironically, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not bring fears of a global conspiracy to an end. On the contrary, these fears reached an intergalactic level (Icke 1999). On a more mundane level, Bush’s famous remark, which placed ‘new world order’ and the U.N. in the same paragraph, became the starting point in a hunt for more evidence of a developing conspiracy against the U.S.A. As Barkun notes (2006: 64), the New World Order conspiracy became a convenient umbrella concept when discussing U.S. domestic politics and the country’s growing socio-economic problems. It was old enough to allow the claim of legitimacy in
the public sphere, and yet vague enough to make possible a combination of critiques of financial elites, the globalisation of economy, international organisations, philanthropic foundations and active U.S. involvement in conflicts beyond its borders.

It was precisely the U.N. and its potentially bigger role in solving conflicts in the post-Cold War era that concerned many in the far-right U.S. milieu, since the proliferation of such big international organisations was a clear example of the stripping of the U.S.A. of its sovereignty and military power:

Our nation is plunging headlong toward ‘convergence’ and the eventual ‘merger’… Our nation – along with the other nations of the world – is being steadily drawn into the tightening noose of ‘interdependence’. Our political and economic systems are being intertwined and are increasingly being subjected to control by the United Nations and its adjunct international organizations. Unless this process can be stopped, it will culminate in the creation of the omnipotent global governance and the ‘end to nationhood’.

(Jasper 1992)

In the post–Cold War era, the New World Order theory has evolved into a sharp and aggressive criticism of the global political and financial elite that supposedly uses all means available to accomplish its plan to destroy ordinary people. Climate change and vaccines are presented as the next step towards the extermination of 80 per cent of the population and its replacement with robot technologies (Jones 2007). The populist criticism of modern capitalism made by conspiracy theorists combines moral criticism traditional to Christian fundamentalists with secular criticism of political and financial institutes. The rise of antisemitism both in Europe, the U.S.A. and Russia poses new challenges for the scholars to deal with this hatred on a global scale (see Judaken 2008; Taguieff 2004; Yablokov 2019). Terms such as ‘diaboligarchy’ provide the perfect context for the ultimate rejection of elites and opens the floor to all manner of speculations that would be accepted by various ideological communities (Kay 2011). Thanks to the rapid development of communication technologies, the spread of ideas from the U.S. conspiracy culture has allowed European and Russian conspiracy theorists to perceive, reconsider and reproduce these ideas, giving them a local twist.

Post-Soviet Russian conspiracy culture: Enemies within and outside

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has brought incredible changes to the post-Soviet Russian culture of conspiracy theories. The abrupt end of the state came in December 1991, when then president of Russia Boris Yeltsin and his colleagues from Ukraine and Belarus signed the Belovezha accords (see Plokhy 2014). However, the trauma of the collapsed state became the foundation of the conspiracy culture that is centred on the notion of the lost state greatness and the assumption that the West (namely the U.S.A.) is behind the Soviet collapse.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the notion of the Soviet collapse and the alleged agents of the West became a useful populist tool of power relations (Fenster 2008) among the nationalist opposition and the ruling Kremlin elites. The Kremlin ruled by Yeltsin was seen as the agent of the U.S.A., whose goal was to destroy the population and abandon Russia’s natural riches and military prowess to the U.S.A. The opposition successfully benefitted from the neoliberal economic reforms initiated by Yeltsin for Russia’s economic recovery. The outcome of these reforms was mass poverty and the loss of jobs among millions of Russians who shared negative attitudes to Yeltsin’s policies. Consequently, many of those who have been affected by the
reforms became the support base of anti-Western conspiracy theories aimed at Yeltsin. The high point in this battle became the attempt to impeach Yeltsin in 1999 by accusing Yeltsin of destroying the Soviet Union and letting a small ‘cabal’ of 200 rich families loot the economy and destroy those remnants of the population that remembered prosperous life in the Soviet Union (Iliukhin 2017). The impeachment failed, but the attempt to use populist conspiracy theories in the parliament caused serious panic among the Kremlin elites (Yablokov 2018). As a result, in the 2000s, the notion of anti-Western conspiracy theories was turned into the key instrument of the governmental tool box to put the opposition under control.

Anti-Western conspiracy theories became part and parcel of Putin’s authoritarian turn: Both domestic and external opponents from 2004 onwards started to be seen by the pro-Kremlin elites as plotters that aim at destroying Putin’s regime. The wave of colour revolutions in the post-Soviet states in the mid-2000s have put into question the safe transition of power from Putin to his successor in 2008. As a result, the Kremlin initiated the campaign to search for internal enemies allegedly connected to the West. These ‘enemies’ included Russian liberal opposition and Russian nationalists – the two groups that were in power to question Kremlin’s control of the state. After the 2008 transfer of power to Putin’s successor, Dmitry Medvedev, the scale of political paranoia in the country went down slightly but became useful again when the Kremlin faced two major political challenges: The wave of street protests in 2011–2012 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The former required an aggressive response to suppress the opposition and the people who went to the streets expressing their dissatisfaction with the election’s outcome have been branded ‘puppets’ in the hands of the West. The latter demanded popular mobilisation to support the Kremlin’s fairly illegitimate actions abroad and hence all resources were used to achieve at least rhetorical unity within the nation. Anyone who opposed the annexation of Crimea has been automatically excluded from the community of ‘true, patriotic Russians’ and his/her loyalty to the state was put into question.

What is important is how the Kremlin supported and developed anti-Western conspiracy discourse in the 2000s. Across various platforms (television, book publishing, Internet), various speakers and authors emerged who constantly reproduced anti-Western conspiracy theories. No matter what their ideological background was, many speakers had enough chances to be incorporated into the Kremlin propaganda machine and spread their very own interpretation of the Western plot against Russia (Yablokov 2018).

The ‘Mondialists’ come to Russia

Aleksandr Dugin, who is widely accepted as Russia’s leading conspiracy theorist of the post-Soviet period, published an article in 1992 entitled ‘The ideology of the world government’. He argued that Mondialism – the French synonym of the New World Order – is based on the Western capitalist view of the global economy, promotes multiculturalism and embraces the eschatological expectation of the messiah coming to this world (Dugin 1992a). Dugin’s article was a development of a previous publication. One year before, he published ‘The great war of the continents’, a conspiratorial manifesto that described a Manichean division of the world between the forces of the land and the sea, which he claimed had been shaping global history for centuries (Dugin 1991). Curiously, he found the inspiration for these ideas abroad.

In 1990, he made a trip to France, which proved to be an important step towards exploring the European far right and enabled him to make useful contacts with philosophers and activists, from whom he learned much about foreign conspiracy cultures (Clover 2017: 175–205). Dugin’s interest in the French far right most probably explains how he learned about the New World Order and also shows the limitations of his knowledge of the U.S. conspiracy scene. In
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his article ‘The paradigms of conspiracy’, he refers to the ‘mondialist’ conspiracy theories and mentions predominantly French authors who see the threat of global government behind the U.S.A.

Americanism is the starting point of mondialism, because it is precisely the USA which became the strategic and ideological center of post-industrial neo-capitalism, and it is there that the ideological implications of capitalism reached their logical end from the cultural and economic point of view.

(Dugin 1995)

For Dugin, the global financial elite that promotes globalisation and the creation of single state entities (like the E.U.) is related to pro-U.S. politicians who form the world in accordance with U.S. views of a liberal economy. At the same time, Dugin argues, due to the decrease in religious beliefs, Christian fundamentalist theories of the New World Order are ‘rather rare’. That certainly is not the case with U.S. conspiracy culture, in which Christian fundamentalism is one of the two main strands of the New World Order conspiracy theories (see Boyer 1992; Barkun 2006).

In the context of the collapsing Soviet bloc, the conspiracy theories critical of the U.S.-led New World Order seemed the most appropriate to Dugin, because they reflect the growing dominance of the U.S.A. in global affairs. Perestroika and Gorbachev’s reforms were interpreted by Dugin as the successful realisation of the malicious plan that turned life upside-down with radical liberal reforms. The ideological core of these reforms – individualism and the technocratic approach – are the basis of the changes that the New World Order plotters want to spread across the world (Dugin 2005).

The second issue of the magazine Elementy (‘Elements’), published in 1992, was devoted to the crisis in Yugoslavia and interpreted it as a rebellion against the New World Order and politicians promoted by global plotters:

Instead of the peaceful entrance of the Eastern bloc to the New World Order, especially when the USSR was led by shameless mondialists and other supporters of the global government … nations woke up … and rebelled against Utopia, against the new global seduction, against the End of History.

(Dugin 1992b)

The role of the Balkans in defining Russia’s great status in world politics was crucial after 1991 (Samokhvalov 2017). Thus, the U.S. participation in the conflict in the Balkans in the early 1990s that followed a unilateral decision to invade Kuwait has been framed by Dugin as the first step towards the occupation of Russia, and the destruction both of Russia’s statehood and its great power status. Any further attempts on the part of the U.S.A. to challenge Russia’s power in the post-Soviet space were read in a similar way by Dugin: The U.S.A. was building the New World Order to realise its global plot against Russia (Ganapolskii, Dugin 2008).

Dugin’s efforts to transplant European conspiracy culture to Russian soil have in many ways been successful and have laid the foundation for further explorations of the concept by Russian conspiracy theorists. Yet, linguistic issues (his lack of English language proficiency) limited his ability to draw a more detailed picture of the globalist plans. He vigorously promoted globalist conspiracy theories in works that the Kremlin found useful in the late 2000s. Nevertheless, Dugin did not manage to monopolise the market, and Russia’s conspiratorial scene was soon filling up with numerous authors who enriched Russian conspiracy culture with U.S. ideas of the New World Order, and at times used them against the ruling political and financial elite.
In search of Khazaria: The antisemitic undertones of the concept

In the early 1990s, Russian conspiracy culture was a repository of many antisemitic concepts. The rapid economic reforms of the 1990s, which left many people poor and disillusioned, created a fruitful ground for conspiracy mythmaking. Many observers were concerned that Russia might become the site for new grand anti-Jewish attacks, and criticised politicians for their lack of policies against the far right (Gitelman 1991). Following U.S. Christian fundamentalists, who saw the Jews as being behind the New World Order, Russian conspiracy theorists perceived the ruling elite of Russia in the 1990s as a sort of the Zionist occupational government (Bartlett, Miller 2010). Many of the leading business tycoons in the 1990s were, indeed, of Jewish origin, and this provided an argument to support antisemitic conspiracy theories and helped frame the economic reforms as a malicious plan to destroy Russia (Gidwitz 1999). This conspiratorial rhetoric in many ways helped explain the social and economic crisis post-1991 and promote the populist division of the country between the people, on the one hand, and the foreign elite imposed on the nation by the world government on the other.

It is curious to see how quickly antisemitic conspiracy theories adopted the concept of a New World Order and turned it into a new Jewish plot against Russia. Certainly, the turning point in the plotters’ success was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia’s integration into Western financial and political networks, which followed the 1991 disaster, allegedly opened the gates to Jewish conspirators and put Russia under the power of the secret cabal of the Jerusalem temple. For example, Vladimir Putin’s invitation to turn Moscow into a global financial centre was interpreted unambiguously as the end of Russia’s sovereignty (Katasonov 2013).

According to Oleg Platonov, the leading propagator of these theories, the satanic nature of the New World Order destroys Christianity and the moral values of spiritual people. Platonov argues that the first attempt to extinguish religious morality was made by Adam Weishaupt and the Illuminati in the eighteenth century, and since that time the plotters – the Jewish financial moguls – have been working to create a single global government. In the twentieth century, nation-states and the Christian values of the Europeans were replaced by the Zionist principles of Talmud and the power centre has shifted to financial Jewish families such as the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers (Platonov 2014: 14). It is no surprise that Platonov discovers the power centre in the U.S.A. and, following Dugin, calls the New World Order ‘mondialism’. Platonov warns of the electronic control of the population through biochips and personal tax numbers, which he interprets as evil signs. The U.S. political leadership, puppets in the hands of the plotters, supposedly promotes artificial intelligence and super powerful computer technologies to achieve global control over people.

Among the fiercest Russian conspiracy theorists are the Church representatives who infused traditional religious antisemitism into the concept of the New World Order. In the 1990s, Metropolitan Ioann Snychev accused Jews of now running the global government that they had supposedly been planning for 2000 years (Snychev 1996). The fact that Russia experienced socio-economic and political problems after 1991 was explained by the messianic role the Russian state and its Church had played in global history:

Russia, which was historically formed as the repository of Christian values, today is the main obstacle [to the destruction of religions and nation-states]. Not a single religious denomination, aside Orthodox Christianity, has sufficient spiritual power for successful resistance … [to the] architects of the “new world order”.

(Snychev 1996)
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Traditional anti-Jewish conspiracy theories popular among Russian far-right nationalists have often been incorporated into the idea of the ‘Jewish state of Khazariia’ – an imagined country that symbolises the Jewish conspiracy against the Russians. The idea of Khazariia has been in a process of development for 200 years, since the nineteenth century; and in the post-Soviet period it has been successfully adopted by anti-Western conspiracy theorists. It was inspired by the medieval state of Khazariia, located in the south of present-day Russia; the elite of the state professed Judaism and had a certain influence on the state of Kievan Rus, the heyday of which was in the eleventh century. Khazariia disappeared more than 1000 years ago, but, in the minds of many Russian far-right nationalists, this ‘invisible’ Jewish state continues to wage war against the Russians and their religion (Shnirel’man 2012).

In her book Invisible Khazariia (2011), Tat’iana Gracheva skilfully merges antisemitic and anti-Western conspiracy theories, in many ways repeating the Soviet propaganda tricks that saw Zionist actions behind U.S. policies. She explains that the goal of the New World Order is to eliminate Russia’s statehood and the moral principles of religion, traditional family and social equality that bind Russians together. These principles define Russia’s sovereignty and the global political agency that helped the nation survive. In contrast, the plotters seek to introduce same sex marriage, non-religious life principles and the cult of money. Gracheva claims that Russia’s ruling elite, as well as many ordinary citizens, are paralysed by the propaganda of the West.

A peculiar detail of Gracheva’s assertions is that she turns the U.S. conspiracy tradition of the New World Order upside down. In the Cold War period, Christian fundamentalists in the U.S.A. described the Soviet Union as Gog, a biblical representation of the Devil, who was intent on waging war against Christianity. This demonisation of the country’s ideological opponent served as a powerful tool to keep the Christian fundamentalists mobilised (Boyer 1992: 115–52). Yet, Gracheva suggests that those evangelists who compared the Soviet Union to Satan were themselves being used as tools by Jewish plotters who wished to destroy the Soviet Union by means of a nuclear attack (201). She argues that, in the Bible, Gog and Magog had no nationality, were cosmopolitans and also had no faith in God, but the people trusted them as they perceived them to represent the oldest of the nations on the planet (206). Behind this description can be seen a clear antisemitic stereotype of the Jews, while Israel is depicted as the locus of power that controls the U.S.A., which is Russia’s main adversary.

The reason for Khazariia’s war against Russia is supposedly to achieve revenge for the destruction of the old Khazar state by Christian Russian tribes. The global Khazar state spreads its control through transnational companies; its cosmopolitan citizens have no nationality, just like the biblical Gog and Magog. Russia, however, is a completely different type of state, one which cherishes its spiritual values, territory and sovereignty; moreover, its citizens respect the authorities and have patriotic feelings towards the motherland. According to this line of thought, the destruction of Russia’s statehood is the only way in which the global Khazar state can complete its project and realise the New World Order. The Khazars have united all of the states of the West, which have become the sole global subject of international affairs: Capitalist, satanic and faithless.

A clearly antisemitic perception of the New World Order is shared by many more authors among the far-right nationalist groups in Russia. The ease with which antisemitic authors have appropriated the new ideas shows how swiftly Western concepts can be used to criticise the West itself. Yet, the most popular combination of anti-Western ideas can be found amongst pro-Kremlin intellectuals, who have also rapidly transformed the idea of the New World Order, which originated in the U.S.A., to criticise the U.S.A.
Sovereignty in question

In the early 1990s, when Dugin published the issue of *Elements* that was concerned with the New World Order, he included an interview with Sergei Baburin, a nationalist politician and a long-time deputy in the Russian parliament. Baburin shared an idea that was popular at the time among the Russian far right:

After the collapse of the bipolar world the USA strives to become the sole global dictator, the only superior judge in international affairs. Do other nations need that? I am not sure. Moreover, the planetary dictatorship will eventually destroy the USA.

*(Sokolov 1992)*

Fifteen years later, these ideas have been repeated almost word by word by the top-ranking politician in Russia:

The unipolar world that had been proposed after the Cold War did not take place either. The history of humanity certainly has gone through unipolar periods and seen aspirations to world supremacy…. However, what is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making. It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within.

*(Putin 2007)*

Criticism of the unipolar leadership of the U.S.A. by Russia’s political leader does not just stem from the trauma of Cold War defeat; it also points to the irritation felt by the Russian elites following U.S. involvement in the domestic politics of the post-Soviet countries (Ó Beacháin, Polese 2010). The range of regime changes in the states that the Kremlin considered to be its own sphere of influence put into question the stability of Russia’s political regime. Consequently, the pro-Kremlin intellectuals invented the notion of Russia as a sovereign democracy that had to resist U.S. attempts to rule the world and make up its own rules for the game. Moreover, the West, and the U.S.A. in particular, have been depicted as states driven by the interests of various elite groups, some of which share pro-Russian attitudes while others are anti-Russian. The most important issue here is the ability to construct criticism of U.S. policies by focusing on particular groups of interests among the U.S. elite. In this context, the Kremlin has managed to legitimise conspiracy theories as a valid tool with which to understand U.S. policies towards Russia, and that has helped to infuse elements of the New World Order conspiracies into Russian political discourse. That, in turn, has helped many authors of conspiracy theories to tailor their views to the political mainstream and to use foreign ideas to reinforce the notion that Russia is encircled by enemies (Yablokov 2018: 79–111).

A comparison of two works about the Soviet collapse, both written by ex-K.G.B. officers, provides an instructive example. These are Viacheslav Shironin’s *Agenty perestroiki* (1995, ‘Agents of perestroika’) and Igor Panarin’s *Pervaia Informatsionnaia Voina* (2010, ‘The first information war’). The former is based on classic Cold War ideas about the war between intelligence services. The latter, written 15 years later than Shironin’s book, argues that the Committee of 300, the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations waged war against the Soviet Union by organising subversive campaigns.
A close inspection of these two works indicates the impact that U.S. conspiracy theories about the New World Order had on Russian conspiracy culture. Shironin’s ideas are mainly concerned with subversive U.S. activities aimed at global domination. He portrays Russia as a key adversary of the U.S.A., with the latter attempting to undermine the former through a highly sophisticated combination of intelligence operations. Shironin’s analysis is thus reminiscent of Soviet propaganda, and its main features can be traced back to the popular culture of the Cold War period. Panarin’s work, in turn, is clearly influenced by foreign literature on conspiracy theories available in Russia at that time and could even be said to function as a Russian guide to Western conspiracy theories.

In the early 2000s, Russian publishers released two titles that have often been quoted in New World Order conspiracy theories. John Coleman’s *The Conspirator’s Hierarchy: the Committee of 300* (2000) and Daniel Estulin’s *The True Story of the Bilderberg Club* (2009); both provide detailed descriptions of the global plot. The availability of these works in Russian helped to familiarise Russian readers with the Anglo-American paradigm of the New World Order conspiracy. For instance, Panarin identified American banker David Rockefeller as a key mastermind behind the Soviet collapse; he also referred to the Committee of 300, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission as the main centres of anti-Russian conspiracy in the West (2010: 154–5). However, while these organisations do play major roles in the corpus of New World Order conspiracy theories, none of the works originally published in the U.S.A. about the New World Order specifically mention Russia.

John Coleman’s concepts of the New World Order serve as a means to interpret the lack of economic development in post-Soviet Russia. Though Putin is often presented in the patriotic literature as the defender of Russia’s national interests, he is also portrayed as part of the Western plot against Russia. Oleg Kotolupov (2017) writes in the far-right newspaper *Zavtra* (‘Tomorrow’) that the current ruling elites in Russia have promised the founder of the Russian state, Boris Yeltsin, that they will ensure that Russia remains under the influence of the West. The Kremlin’s strategy of economic development is supposedly aimed at the destruction of the country’s ability to prosper economically, and the West does not allow Russia to modernise its economy (Kotolupov 2017).

Russia’s entry into the World Trade Organization (W.T.O.) has been read by many conspiracy theorists as an extremely damaging act that has jeopardised Russia’s sovereignty and will eventually destroy the Russian economy. The question as to whether Russia should join the W.T.O. was debated for more than two decades and, when this eventually happened, it was interpreted as the country’s downfall. A prolific pro-Kremlin conspiracy theorist, Nikolai Starikov, protested against the W.T.O. at an early stage in his career, thereby increasing his popularity:

> The WTO is the embodiment of the world’s economic globalisation. The task of the globalisers is to bring all economies into this agreement. Without Russia’s involvement it is impossible to consider the process accomplished…. Imagine that someone will decide where we shall plant tomatoes and potatoes. We are not going to decide it, but an abstract man in Brussels and Washington will.

*(Starikov 2012)*

Starikov’s argument is very populist and is similar to arguments put forward in the E.U. countries and the U.S.A. from far-right populist politicians (Bergmann 2018: 117–19). Indeed, integration always poses a threat to individual agency (Grewal 2016: 28). In the case of Russia, these fears are tied to the economic reforms of the 1990s, which put the country under pressure
by foreign monetary organisations and caused the rapid impoverishment of millions of Russians. Starikov’s followers similarly explain Russia’s entry into the W.T.O. as the work of ‘foreign agents’ inside the Russian government. They aim to turn Russia into a colony of the West and exploit its resources under the cabal of the global government, which destroyed the Soviet Union and ‘enslaved’ Russia by means of foreign loans (Kolomitsyn 2011).

The high point of the New World Order conspiracy against Russia is the destruction of the Russian population. The methods of extermination are very similar to those put forward by the American authors of these theories. The Russians, like other nations in the world, will be exterminated through genetically modified food, the promotion of L.G.B.T. marriages that don’t produce children and through epidemics that would kill 80 per cent of the global population (Martinis09 2013). Again, Russia’s messianic role in the global battle against the plotters is to be the vanguard in resistance to the U.S.-led genetic modification of the world’s foods, and protection of its birth rate through anti-L.G.B.T. legislation and the promotion of ‘traditional family values’ (Tsar’grad TV 2018).

Russia’s sovereignty is highly dependent on high oil prices and the price of foreign currencies (first and foremost, the U.S. dollar) that also are subjects of conspiratorial mythmaking. Russia’s inclusion into the global political and financial networks is perceived as a sort of colonisation of Russia for economic purposes: The theory goes that this will eventually mean that the country’s sole function is to be a supplier of natural resources for the global financial oligarchy, and that it will completely lose the status of global superpower. As a result, Russia will be divided into several parts to enable the easiest extraction of natural resources: Oil, gas, timber and water (Subetto 2013). Starikov explains (2009a: 22–3) that global oil prices are set at small meetings of Anglo-American financial tycoons. Moreover, the internal cabal of liberal economists pushes Russia into the hands of the New World Order by keeping Russia’s savings in foreign currencies in foreign banks. Like his counterparts in the U.S.A., Starikov sees the Federal Reserve system of the U.S.A. as the centre of power in the globalists’ conspiracy (2009b).

Mikhail Khazin, a former adviser to Russia’s Presidential administration, and a prolific author of works on the imagined Rothschild-Rockefeller conspiracy against Russia, supports the idea that Russia should not be engaged in global financial markets, and encourages the decrease of Russia’s dependence on natural resources. He warns that the global plotters control Russia by oil prices, and through Russian members of financial elites that are highly integrated into the global financial elite and hence dependent on their decisions (Rychkova 2013). Other authors warn that Russia is being attacked by the New World Order by means of international agreements to protect the environment from global warming. Vladimir Pavlenko (2012) argues that these agreements allow foreign plotters access to the country’s riches and enable them to strip Russia of sovereignty. He claims that the Club of Rome, the Trilateral Commission and the U.N. control Russia’s oil and gas by means of the climate agreement. ‘The ecological chain of “control over natural resources – control over climate – control of food – control of people and spaces” has come to geopolitics’ and turned it into an instrument of the global oligarchic New World Order; ‘gas and other energy sources, including rare metals, forests, water and biological sources, will become a reason for the US military invasion of Russia’.

The focus on natural resources as the target of the New World Order in Russia is explained by the huge role oil plays in global politics. High oil prices, which were the key to Russia’s economic prosperity in the 2000s, and Russia’s inability to control these prices, have led to various conspiratorial interpretations that identified the U.S.A. as the centre of decision making. As demonstrated elsewhere, Russia’s superrich, all of whom are loyal to the Kremlin, as well as the Kremlin itself, find it hard to recognise that the financial source of their modern state is
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located in Siberia, is underdeveloped technologically, cannot compete with global economies and is also largely under the control of global markets that are hard to predict.

[Russian elites’] insecure sentiments easily mix with the conspiratorial, defensive, and person-centred understanding of how global markets and financial institutions operate. In contrast to its supposed function as harbinger of rationality and sobriety, the Russian public sphere is saturated by isolationism, misinterpretations of the global economy, and glorification of authoritarian policies.

(Ekkind, Yablokov 2017)

Conclusion

The notion of sovereignty as the way to protect the agency of the post-Soviet political elite has resulted in the perceived globalisation and technological domination of the U.S.A. being seen as a serious threat to the political survival of Russia’s elite. In post-1991 Russia, suspicion of the global political elite, which drives fear of the New World Order, has become a useful way of channelling criticism of unipolarity in international relations and has legitimised the Kremlin’s authoritarian policies. Yet, the heterogeneity of the concept and the active exchange of ideas have provided much leeway for authors to develop it in all possible ways. This can be used as a tool to back the isolationist policies of the Kremlin. However, at times that are critical for the regime, such as the 1990s, this theory can seriously tarnish the Kremlin’s public image and empower the opposition forces critical of the Kremlin’s actions. So far, the pro-Kremlin elites are extremely skilful in keeping control of the country. However, as a populist tool that helps redistribute power among all political actors, anti-Western conspiracy theories (including the New World Order conspiracy theories) could become an important factor in the future evolution of the political regime in Russia.

References

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