

Conspiracism in contemporary Russia

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Since the fall of the USSR, conspiracist propositions have been increasingly on the rise in Russia, in particular since the first years of the 21st century. Some have even been advanced by individuals or groups close to the seat of power (Yablokov, 2018). This increase has reached its greatest intensity in the last few years with the outbreaks of the conflicts in Syria and especially in Ukraine, which have greatly loosened the restraints on anti-Western utterances on the part of Putin's regime or those close to it. Despite this, the origins of Russian conspiracist beliefs, which generally tend to be extremely anti-American, are much older and are to be sought in the fall of the USSR (see section 'Humiliation and nationalism in post-Soviet Russia'). For the past 20 years, one of the principal theoretician of this conspiracism has been the ultra-nationalist Aleksandr Dugin, who is active within the sphere of power (see section 'The role of Aleksandr Dugin'). In parallel with Dugin's activities, the Russian State has set in place a propaganda structure using a precise form of 'storytelling' (see section 'The composition of a "storytelling"'), which implicitly reveals the objectives of Russia's foreign policy (see section 'Propaganda actions directed at Western countries').

Humiliation and nationalism in post-Soviet Russia

A fundamental political obsession of Russia's current outlook on the world is the 'humiliation' that Russia supposedly suffered during the 1990s, a feeling which is broadly shared by the present-day Russian elites and which is expressed through several rhetorical motifs. The disintegration of the USSR followed by the movement towards globalization in the 2000s engendered considerable social anxieties among Russians, anxieties that were exacerbated by the perception of the United States as the great victor in the ideological struggle. This perception fostered the emergence of a highly dynamic discourse with several characteristics.

The first was the image of a Western conspiracy by which the destruction of the Soviet Union had supposedly been brought about. The fact is that the decline of the USSR was induced by certain fundamental structural problems, but these were not what caused its breakup. The disbanding

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of the Soviet Union was the result of a process of negotiation between Russians, Ukrainians and leaders of other Soviet republics. Archives opened since have, in fact, shown that the United States in particular tried to slow the rate of disintegration for fear of flare-ups of violence and the dispersal of the Soviet nuclear arsenal into numerous different hands (Plokhy, 2014).

The second factor contributing to the Russian sense of humiliation was the supposed ‘promise’ that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance would not be extended to the borders of Russia itself, a promise of which there is absolutely no mention in any archived document or in any international agreement. Such a promise, had it existed, would have disregarded the will of certain of the newly sovereign states to join the alliance and the allies’ right to admit them (Sarotte, 2014), but at the same time it has functioned as a recurrent argument that feeds into a fantasy of encirclement.

The third factor is Western military intervention, in particular in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Libya, which has been used to justify in return the annexation of the Crimea. The final humiliating factor is effectively the economic, political and moral corruption of the Yeltsin years which Westerners allegedly benefited from and which Vladimir Putin supposedly brought under control. The contrast between these two periods (that of Yeltsin and that of Putin, a key element in the Russian regime’s self-directed discourse) is largely illusory, if only because Putin came to power as a defender of Yeltsin’s interests (as the head of the secret services then as signatory of a decree protecting Yeltsin from any judicial investigations) and in that one class of oligarchs has simply replaced another (Rakhmanova, 2014).

This form of discourse which explains all international events as being interlinked and arising out of an intention to humiliate Russia finds a ready conspiracist echo in a country in which the tradition of social science research is very weak. Due to the persistent weight of Marxist ideology in the USSR, the development of any critical thought was very limited and, at the end of the Cold War, it was much easier for numerous specialists in the social sciences to pass from the study of historical materialism to the exposing of imaginary plots fomented by the United States against Moscow in the context of global ‘geopolitical’ confrontation. One of these theoreticians is Aleksandr Dugin.

The role of Aleksandr Dugin

Born in Moscow in 1962, Aleksandr Dugin gained a doctorate in the history of science and in political science and is currently considered the main ideologue of the Russian New Right. Since the beginning of the 1990s, he has formed close links with anti-American far-right movements in the West. He should equally be seen as the principal exponent of Neo-Eurasianism, a geopolitical concept currently in vogue in Moscow (Chaudet et al., 2007). Nevertheless, his brand of Eurasianism differs markedly from that of émigré Russian thinkers of the 1920s.

Dugin is a former office holder of the National Bolshevik Party, to which he belonged from 1994 to 1998. After leaving that party, he became the driving force behind the historico-religious association Arctogaia.¹ At the beginning of the 2000s, he drew close to Vladimir Putin with the creation of the Eurasia movement, which became a political party in April 2001, having made the choice of seeking public respectability. The Eurasia party changed in November 2003 into the International Eurasianist Movement whose ‘Governing Council’ included a certain number of personalities such as the Minister of Culture Vladimir Sokolov, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Victor Kalyuzhny and the presidential counsellor Alsambek Aslakhanov among others. Over the same period, Dugin also became responsible for the ‘Centre for Conservative Studies’ of Lomonosov University, the state university of Moscow. Despite these involvements, he continued to share a number of themes with the West European far-right, which moreover still recognizes

him as one of their own; he has been, for example, the Russian correspondent for the neo-rightist journal *Nouvelle École* since 2009 (Laruelle, 2001, 2007).

Dugin's thinking is strongly influenced by the Slavophile ideas of the Russian Orthodox Church, which considers Moscow to be the 'Third Rome'. Within a complex and sometimes confusing style of thought, Dugin has combined a variety of unorthodox elements ranging from the esoteric to political philosophy and passing by way of conspiracist propositions (Dugin, 1992). Diverse components of geopolitical principles along with references to the notion of 'Empire' are detectable in his thinking, as well as more specific references to Karl Haushofer, Ernst Niekisch, Carl Schmitt, Jean Thiriart, Jules Evola and also to René Guénon, several of whose texts he has translated into Russian, notably the 1927 book *La Crise du monde moderne* [The Crisis of the Modern World] in which Guénon laid out his basic ideas and which Dugin translated in 1991. In the same year, he devoted a television programme to that French philosopher.

These heterogeneous references take on certain coherence when bound together by the theoretical glue of a supposed humiliation of Russia by the Americans. Conspiracism is, in fact, quite prominent in Dugin's elaborations of his ideas,² firstly not only through his apprehension about the 'subversive' role of the United States, but also through his rejection of a globalization which might lead to the evolution of a 'unipolar' world. In the 1990s, he developed the notion of 'conspirology', a pseudo-scientific term designating a theoretical construct arising out of investigation and aimed at unmasking conspirators, hence effectively a conspiracy theory concealed beneath an outer varnish of critical methodology.

Neo-Eurasianist discourse accords an important place to conspiracy theory understood as a form of ideology in the sense of the denial of the real: it provides a key to understanding the world and its changes (Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2012). The whole sum of Dugin's output is structured by the idea that the United States, and more broadly the nations of the West, is fundamentally hostile towards Russia. Indeed, 'To be Russian means to be anti-American, or why we do not like the United States' is the explicit title of a chapter in one of his books (Dugin, 2006a: 339–342).³ His ultra-nationalist, conspiracist and anti-Western utterances gained noisy attention in significant Russian media during the Crimean crisis (Laruelle, 2015).

Indeed, his conspiracist and anti-American propositions have been broadcast on Russian media, notably television and radio, since the end of the 1990s. In 1998, he became an advisor to the President of the Duma for strategic and geopolitical matters, a function which he continues to fulfil. He has had a non-negligible influence on Russian political parties and politicians and on army officers. His ideas are also developed in his books, whose translations into French are published only by far-right-wing publishers, and all of which have emerged from the nationalist revolutionary movement, known for its fundamental anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism: *La Quatrième théorie politique: la Russie et les idées politiques au XXI^e siècle* [The Fourth Political Theory: Russia and Political Ideas in the 21st Century] (2012) and *Pour une théorie du monde multipolaire* [Towards a Theory of a Multi-Polar World] (2013b) were published by Ars Magna, with the remainder, *Le Prophète de l'eurasisme* [The Prophet of Eurasianism] (2006), *La Grande guerre des continents* [The Great War of the Continents] (2006b) and *L'Appel de l'Eurasie. Conversation avec Alain de Benoist* [The Appeal of Eurasia. Conversation with Alain de Benoist] (2013a) published by Avatar. Dugin is not only the author to put forward a conspiracist and anti-Western vision of international relations, but also certainly one of the most significant in view of his access to the corridors of power in Russia and of his visibility in the media.

The making of a 'storytelling'

One of the key elements in the Russian war of information, and hence of anti-Western conspiracist propaganda, is to be found in the influence of 'political technologists' on Russian political life

since the collapse of the USSR: a group of manipulators offering their services to the highest bidder who manufactures perfectly composed political stories for the benefit of their political champions, which stories go well beyond the process of ‘storytelling’ existing in Western societies. Under the regime of Vladimir Putin, the main way in which this process has evolved has been that the Kremlin now holds the monopoly over these practices by attaching to itself the services of these political technologists, including the most notable of them, Vladimir Surkov.

The skill of these political technologists consists in the manipulation of information technologies, creating virtual dramas, in the literal sense of the term, since they exist only on television, and in influencing the dominant voice on various social media. But these mini-dramas exist only because they are held together by a unifying meta-narrative which gives a meaning to all the events. In 1996, this narrative was that of ‘Yeltsin confronting the Communists’ followed by that of ‘Putin against the Chechens’ after the latter’s rise to power in 1999–2000, then ‘Putin against the oligarchs’ in 2003–2004, ‘the return of Russia’ in 2007–2008 and finally ‘conservative values’ since 2012. To a very large extent, politics in Russia happens in a virtual world and consists of providing the appearance of concern around an issue by broadly manipulating the frames of reference for the expression of citizen opinion (Wilson, 2005).

To achieve this, control of the media is essential and it is significant that the main incidences of violence against journalists always occur when a change in the meta-narrative is taking place. It is fundamental to understand that the essential function of these political technologies is to abolish the distinction between truth and falsehood and to present obvious falsehoods as ‘alternative points of view’. From this perspective, present-day Russia and its political technologists are extremely postmodern in that they are erasing the difference between myth and reality that characterized modernity (Pomerantsev, 2014).

As one of the principal political technologists, Sergei Markov, explained in 2007: ‘Public opinion changes, it does not disappear but is progressively artificially created [...]. Public opinion is more and more being generated by computers which do not have their own opinions since they depend on the programmes entered into them. Every interest group contends for the right to enter its own programme’ (Wilson, 2014: 23). The justification for this ultra-cynical attitude is that Russia can only produce on a small scale what the West is generating on a large scale. It is certainly clear that Western democratic regimes are facing problems of civilian disenchantment, the emergence of politico-administrative oligarchies and the diminution of independence of the media. But these problems are due to the decrease in authority of political regimes: they do not, as in Russia, constitute the fundamental nature of these regimes. This is all the more so because the main myth of the Russian regime, which consists of presenting Vladimir Putin as the good Tsar charged with disciplining the malevolent boyars in order to re-establish Russian power, is a vast hoax.

From the beginning, this myth was based on three ideas: that the Caucasus would be pacified, that Russia was an emerging economy full of potential and that the authority of the State would be restored through the establishment of a ‘power vertical’ (*vertical vlasti*). Unfortunately, the Caucasus today is far from being at peace, with the failure of the Russian policy of coercion being patent there (the region has completely disappeared from political discourse, whereas it was at the heart of the dominant discourse at the beginning of the 2000s); the economic system, based on hydrocarbons, corruption and how close businesses were to the sources of power, is not turning Russia into a great emergent economy, but rather into a country in decline (Ledeneva, 2013); and the power vertical, which, in fact, removes any responsibility from even senior functionaries who are reduced to waiting for orders from above, is a failure which led Putin himself to admit in 2011 that 80% of presidential decrees are not applied by the regions. To mask these failures, the recourse to political technology is systematic and embraces a variety of methods which serve as a basis for the Russian war of information abroad. In this, conspiracism plays its part. Effectively, the

authorities regularly adopt on their own account the idea derived from the Cold War of the ‘hand of the foreigner’, meaning the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency and American banks, behind any internal contestation of their regime.

As has been already mentioned, the fundamental goal of political technology, which is a weapon in the war of information, is to abolish the difference between truth and falsehood, offering instead only a variety of ‘points of view’ whose values are held to be equivalent. A good example of this type of practice is the disputing by a spokesperson of the Russian government (June 2015) of the American moon landings in 1969, a use of the classic rhetoric of conspiracy theories in this regard.

But most of all, the war of information is a concept which, in fact, extends to cover a latent control of the processes governing the dissemination of the adversary country’s economic and cultural information, incorporating a form of informational aggression. Putin defined the concept in 2012 as ‘a matrix of tools and methods intended to achieve foreign policy objectives without the use of force but through the use of information and other levers of influence’.⁴ The concept emerges in Russian official documents such as the national security strategy and in military doctrine. These documents project a hostile world (an image coherent with the humiliation fantasy) in which Russia is subject to potential aggressions of all sorts and so must defend herself by attacking her adversaries (notably the Western nations) before they attack her. The war of information is perceived as adapted to the situation in which Russia thinks she finds herself *vis-à-vis* the Western states: neither peace nor overt warfare with armed force, but a state of permanent conflict necessitating the use of alternative means in order to weaken the will and capability of the opponent (Franke, 2015). Information warfare is thereby an integral part of Russian grand strategy, implying action as co-ordinated as possible between military and civil agencies and directed against the designated adversaries of Russia, meaning essentially the NATO countries, in the continuity of the conspiracist discourse around her ‘humiliation’ in the 1990s.⁵

Propaganda actions directed at Western countries

To undertake these, Russia has various means at its disposal. The first is the control of media with international diffusion: *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News*. The former is a channel notorious for its conspiracism, inviting guests with the irksome habit of seeing Mossad and CIA plots everywhere, even though it seeks outwardly to be the Russian equivalent of major international news channels like CNN or Al-Jazeera. Its telecasts, however, have only limited reach; but on the other hand, it has obvious success on the internet: it was the first news channel to have surpassed a billion views on YouTube. Its editorial stance, adapted according to the national audiences it is directed towards, combines both the promotion of conservative commentators (who fit perfectly with the new political line of the Kremlin) as well as so-called ‘alternative’ voices (useful in that they serve to criticize governments in place), together with ‘investigations’ intended to satisfy an audience predisposed towards conspiracy theories (Bronner, 2013), for example, a ‘news report’ explaining how the CIA created the Ebola virus. *Sputnik News* is the new name of the channel *The Voice of Russia* and its positioning is similar to that of *Russia Today*, also with a strong presence on the internet. In the pure tradition of political technology, the essential thing is not that the facts be true; it is, on the contrary, a matter of creating an alternative reality highly critical of a nation’s ‘system’, thus corresponding to the anticipations of certain categories of Western populations disillusioned with their own particular political systems.

The second tool is the setting up of a ‘troll factory’, whose existence was the subject of documented investigations by the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. Its trolls are paid to work all day to deluge with comments the on-line sites of Western newspapers, judiciously chosen Facebook groups and Twitter. Their directives change depending on events and the current interests of the

Russian authorities. One day, it may be a question of stoking rumours according to which NATO is preparing to invade Russia. The next day, it may be posting a large number of images, videos and comments calling Barack Obama an ‘uncouth ape’ for chewing chewing-gum while on a visit to India, and so on. Journalists have equally shown that Russia has created thousands of Twitter robots whose sole task is retweeting and bringing attention to news rated important by the Kremlin. The mass effect produced by the multiplication of the same piece of news on a variety of platforms contributes to creating the ‘politics of the virtual’ which is the objective of political technology.

The final tool is the construction of a network of conspiracists and/or political militants (on the left and on the right) who are favourably disposed towards Moscow and her positions. Thus, among the first category, *Russia Today* became associated with Thierry Meyssan and his Réseau Voltaire. *Russia Today* has also provided a platform for American conspiracists such as Alex Jones or Webster Tarpley, who consider that 9/11 was an ‘inside job’. Among the second group can be found, to cite but two examples, Aymeric Chaupade, a former official of the French National Front who has contested the origin of the 9/11 attacks and who urges a rapprochement with Russia, and Alain Soral, who provided a preface for the translation of one of the works of Aleksandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, and who is an active member of Dugin’s network. One can also find in pro-Kremlin networks several organizations guided or directed by far-right militants which serve as a channel for Putin’s propaganda: for example, the Mouvement Novopole or the Collectif France-Russie, both directed by André Chanclu, a former member of Ordre Nouveau, a neo-Fascist movement dissolved in 1973; or Alexandre Latsa who holds joint French and Russian nationality and lives in Russia, where he is a commentator for *Sputnik France* and is close to National Revolutionary circles.

For its part, the network of far-right militants constituted by Aleksandr Dugin has also played an important role in the promotion of Russian conspiracist attitudes. In effect, this network has the particularity of being made up of individuals who strongly reject liberalism (whether philosophical or economic), the United States and Western values. They are drawn principally from the ranks of the New Right or from Revolutionary Nationalism, such as the website *voxxr.com*. All those associated with this network support the Russian annexation of the Crimea, repeating the themes of Western aggression, or at the very least, Western responsibility for the crisis.

The Russian war of information, through the deliberate use of conspiracism, plays on the deep concerns of large sectors of Western society: a feeling of having been abandoned by the elites, the search for ‘alternative’ news in the face of what is perceived as a conspiracy of silence by the traditional media and their collusion with political leaders, or the explicit or implicit belief that occult forces are controlling the world (the CIA, the Bilderberg Group, the Freemasons, etc.). The people who read the speculations of Alain Soral and his partners in *Égalité & Réconciliation*, or those of Thierry Meyssan, *Mécanopolis* or the *Boulevard Voltaire* are likely to be susceptible to Russian propaganda, which functions by the same mechanisms: loose combinations of carefully presented genuine news, falsehoods and slanted interpretations; a constant stream of hints and innuendos serving to create a sense of collusion; flattery of the readers, outwardly denied but effectively leaving them unable to establish any hierarchy of reliability of the sources and the attribution of all the world’s ills to a single cause (which for Russian propaganda means the Americans). Faced with this mechanism, it is not enough to bring attention to the numerous falsehoods of the Russian propaganda, even though it is useful to do so.⁶ In effect, this propaganda functions in reality to promote a coherent and organized political plan, based on authoritarianism, the exclusion of minorities and on conservative values. This alternative political project can appear seductive for populations which have been rendered fragile and have become disillusioned by the failure of Western societies to provide them with sufficient opportunities and material and symbolic satisfactions.

The information war, as practised by Russia, is thus perfectly adapted to its principal target: the disillusioned fringes of Western societies that are ready receptacles for ‘alternative’ or ‘dissident’ news easily within their reach on the internet and that are ready to believe any news item to the extent that it is critical of a ‘system’ which is both attributed fantastical powers and is loathed. The ultimate aim is to modify the socio-political structure of Western societies by encouraging the emergence and eventually the arrival in power of conservative populist political movements with ideological tendencies close to those which are dominant in Russia. Such political transformation would allow the trans-Atlantic security structures to come under fundamental challenge, to the greater benefit of Moscow.

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Notes

1. Initially a publishing house established in 1990, Arctogaia became a cultural association whose aim was the study of religious traditions, history and the cultures of different nations from a perennialist point of view (i.e., in the sense espoused by the French esoteric philosopher René Guénon 1886–1951), with a predilection for Eurasian cultures and religions (Sedgwick, 2006: 304–305).
2. It is diverting to learn that the conspiracist Dugin took part as a researcher in a colloquium on conspiracy in 1992. However, at that time, he was still unknown in the West.
3. In effect, the transposition of an article which appeared in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in March 2003, which reiterates the clichés of the regime with regard to the United States (a decadent, pornographic, money-grubbing, globalist nation, etc.) and contrasts them with the conservative values of Russia (order, tradition, spirituality, sense of sacrifice, etc.).
4. ‘Vladimir Putin’s Global Orwellian Campaign to Undermine the West’, *The Week* 9 May 2015.
5. Russia effectively identifies NATO and its member countries as adversaries in its doctrinal documents.
6. The website *russialies.com* offers a very complete and useful compilation of Russia’s numerous and successive untruths about the situation in Ukraine.

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