

# Conspiracy Narratives in Russian Politics: from Stalin to Putin

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In order to silence the resistance, the Soviet Union under Stalin kept the population in permanent fear and uncertainty by recurrent purges of innocent citizens, ‘Old Bolsheviks’ and Red Army commanders, thus terrorizing the entire population. Similar conspiracy narratives are used under Putin. In order to keep his grip on power, after the Beslan massacre, Putin’s administration discourse hints at the operation of an international conspiracy of states using terrorism as an instrument to weaken Russia.

*Look, Ivan Kuzmich, if you can, for our common good, every letter that comes to you in the post office, incoming and outgoing, you know, slightly open and read: does it contain some reports or just correspondence? (Nikolai Gogol, Revizor [The Government Inspector])*

## Introduction

It is the view that whatever happens in society – including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages – are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups. This view is very widespread, although it is, I have no doubt, a somewhat primitive kind of superstition. It is older than historicism (which may even be said to be a derivative of the conspiracy theory); and in its modern form, it is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions. The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies were responsible for the vicissitudes of the Trojan War is gone. But the place of the gods on Homer’s Olympus is now taken by the Learned Elders of Zion, or by the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.<sup>1</sup>

## Conspiracy Theories: Definitions

While it may be hard to come to an agreed definition of conspiracy theories, there is some consensus on their basic features. As one well-established definition, a conspiracy theory can generally be counted as such if it implies an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to

conceal their role from the rest of the society. Within a conspiracy theory, every act and actor is understood in terms of the conspiracy, and all events are connected to a single plot and group of plotters, with neither contingency nor unintended consequences imaginable. A conspiracy narrative can also be defined as a hermeneutically closed arrangement of material to explain national misfortunes and to provide some sort of scapegoat assignment of responsibility. Conspiracy is a style of thought that reduces complex reality to a set of readily understandable black-and-white, us-and-them, propositions, and thus offers both causal explanation and attribution of guilt.

John Heathershaw identifies conspiracy theories according to their attempt to provide ‘a complete explanation of a significant military, political or economic event as being secretly planned and directed by a single agent or group of conspirators’.<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theories possess an important communicative function by helping to unite the audience as ‘the people’ against the imagined ‘other’ represented by the secretive ‘power bloc’. Its usage in the populist rhetoric of authoritarian and fascist regimes is, therefore, logical due to the conspiracy theories’ powerful ability to express fears and thus foster the gathering of the so-called ‘people’. According to Vladimir Shlapentokh,

the theoretical analysis of fear is a social construction, influenced by the ‘hard facts’ of society, i.e., the economic developments, the political and social processes, as well as the ‘soft facts’ of society, i.e., ideological trends, the character of information available to ordinary people, and the acts of various political actors to use fear as a propaganda tool to obtain their desires.<sup>3</sup>

Fear has been and will be a powerful weapon in political and ideological struggles. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are also an expression of a contradictory engagement with politics. While popular conspiracy theories often seem at first sight to be highly political, concerned with the machinations of state power, secret services, multinational conglomerates, and so forth, they actually produce political passivity by displacing the citizens’ desire for political significance into a signifying regime in which interpretation and a narrative of conspiracy replace meaningful political engagement – a simulation of political engagement that ultimately leads nowhere. Thus, the strengthening of national consciousness and solidarity is achieved by creating external threats, and by silencing internal criticism.

### **Conspiracy Theories in Soviet Political Culture**

The endless webs of conspiracy forged in Stalin’s paranoid mind make Russia a rich territory for conspiracy theories, leading to spy-mania and the fear of encirclement by enemies. Stalin acted throughout his reign as if the country were in a state of war, or a state of emergency. In fact, the Soviet spy-mania of the 1930s reached its apogee in the mass bloodletting of the Great Terror, which Khrushchev famously described as a result of Stalin’s ‘pathological suspicious personality’ and: ‘Everywhere and in everything he saw “enemies”, “two-facers” and “spies”’.<sup>4</sup> By that time, the majority of the Soviet population accepted the official doctrine that they were threatened by a

major conspiracy of spies and saboteurs in the pay of foreign secret services. For instance, in every factory, NKVD officers lectured workers on the dangers from covert imperialist agents in their midst.<sup>5</sup> Such views testified to the continued influence of Soviet ideology and culture that had traditionally linked dissidents to foreign intelligence agencies, as well as an innate inability to accept responsibility for any misdeeds. Official ideology said that aggressive capitalist robbers were preparing to invade the worker's paradise. The weight of catastrophism was quite high. Indeed, catastrophism, in terms of 'capitalist encirclement', as well as the spy-mania mentioned before, was an essential element of Soviet propaganda and politics before and after the Second World War. Dissidents and nationalists were depicted as 'CIA' and 'Zionist' spies and/or 'bourgeois nationalists' with links to Ukrainian émigrés who harboured Nazi war criminals.

### **Lysenko's 'New Genetics Theory'**

In July and August 1948, a session of the Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences was held in Moscow, where Trofim D. Lysenko declared that genetics was a fascist doctrine, practised by 'worshippers of Wall Street'. He insisted that Michurianism, based upon the notion that acquired characteristics can be inherited, was the true science of evolution. He claimed he could transform nature – spring wheat into winter wheat, wheat into rye, and so on – to enable plant varieties to survive the bitter climate of the USSR.<sup>5</sup> Lysenko wielded absolute power in Soviet biology research until Stalin's death in 1953, and he was responsible for losses in Soviet agriculture that have been calculated at billions of roubles. The Soviet scientists were instructed by the party leadership 'to overtake and surpass' Western science, an issue illuminated by the Lysenko controversy. In his recent work *Stalinist Science*, Nikolai Kremontsov has attributed Lysenko's rise to power to the exigencies of the Cold War – the necessity to differentiate Soviet from Western science.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conspiracy Theories in post-Soviet Political Culture**

In the current Russian context, conspiracy theories offer the means for glossing over the ruptures in Russia's recent history, and they contribute to create an alternative, seamless and coherent narrative of the self – whether at the level of national history, institutional history, or individual life-story. Potentially, they also provide justifications for the stifling of civil society in Russia today. And even the debates over the interpretation of the 'Mongol yoke' and its role in engendering Russia's 'backwardness' relative to Europe have contributed to turning historical narratives into mirrors of contemporary interrogations on Russian identity and the nature of the state.

### **The Collapse of the Soviet Union**

Drawing on these notions, conspiracy theories became a principal element of Russian society thinking 20 years ago as a reaction to the sudden and inexplicable collapse of

the Soviet Union. However, while in the 1990s it was a matter of opinion, in the last decade or so proponents of such a worldview have come to firmly occupy a semi-official point of view. This created a 'fortress Russia' mentality: a distraction from Russia's real domestic problems. Those theories find fertile ground in a situation where history is not only being rewritten, but has gone through a series of rather sharp reversals.

In fact, it might be argued that all of this is compounded by the way in which the very end of the Soviet Union was and is presented by all, but mainly the most fervent liberal, opposition politicians, as a plot to undermine Russia's status as a world power. Even a large part of the Russian elites, including Yeltsinian 'liberals', had no hesitation in presenting these events as a plot hatched against the Great Russian Power. The most widely asked question on Russia's censored television talk shows is, 'Who benefits from this?' 'This' could be anything: the Arab Spring, world economic crisis, or EU currency problems. Once one hears the question asked, the answers become certain: America, the 'world financial oligarchy' (read: the Jews), the Bilderberg Club, the Trilateral Commission,<sup>7</sup> or George Soros.

### **Putin and Conspiracy Theories**

These aspects could lead us to Putin claiming that the collapse of the Soviet Union was 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' in his 2005 address to the Parliament, just as Tsar Alexander III said that Russia has not had and cannot have any true friends and allies except its own infantry and artillery.<sup>8</sup> Exposure to the realities of the outside world may have caused some mellowing on this point: it is difficult to argue at the same time that the West is rapidly declining that it is the most powerful threat.

Xenophobia and spy-mania are part and parcel of those Soviet conspiracy theories that have re-surfaced in Russia as they were in the former USSR. Western NGOs are accused of subverting the Russian state and are therefore 'un-patriotic'. The FSB (Federal Security Service) is reviving KGB-style tactics and rhetoric to defeat this alleged conspiracy. For example, a constant theme of conspiracy theories has been that 'outside forces' sponsor all protests in the country. The 2006 Russian law on NGOs, restricting foreign funding on the grounds that foreign funding is controlled by Western (especially US) intelligence agencies is deeply grounded in Soviet political culture. Further, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko by polonium-210 poisoning in London in November 2006 prompted an outburst of conspiracism, including the view advanced by Andrei Lugovoi, the main suspect, that, in reality, Litvinenko was a British agent.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from this, the oil and gas windfall greatly improved the country's economic situation and strengthened the Kremlin, a process that reached its climax in 2006 and 2007 with a series of speeches by President Putin. He made it clear that he believed that the most outspoken domestic critics of the state were serving foreign masters, having sold their loyalty to foreign governments that sought to undermine Russia's independence.<sup>10,11</sup> At the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007,

Putin criticized the 'unipolar world' promoted by the West as a world of 'one master, one sovereign', where the legal system of one state, 'first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way' and is imposing its economic, political, cultural, and educational policies on other nations. When speaking at a campaign rally of the United Russia party shortly before the parliamentary election of December 2007, he poured contempt on the critics of the regime: 'Those who oppose us need a weak, sick state, a disoriented, divided society, so that behind its back they can get up to their dirty deeds and profit at your and my expense'. Putin also added that 'Unfortunately there are jackals inside the country that sponge off foreign embassies'.<sup>12</sup>

Putin's strong desire for unity in Russian society has led him to regard any fundamental opposition to the political regime as reflecting disloyalty to the nation. Given the predominance of former intelligence officials in the Kremlin, and the increasingly confrontational rhetoric that emanated from Russian officials in Putin's second term, the elite's approach to the West apparently resembled that of the Soviet era, where the West was viewed as the main enemy trying to weaken the Soviet Union and overthrow its regime, as Putin articulated in several of his speeches in 2008.<sup>13</sup> Resurrecting the spectre of the Western antagonist out to 'tear Russia apart' has also served the internal function of appealing to the Russian population's support during the succession process as Putin was getting close to the end of his second mandate. Suggesting that Western governments and NGO's wanted to interfere with Russian elections and its sovereign transition was part of a carefully managed process that left very little to chance in the run-up to March 2008. Putin and Medvedev contended that Russia was a democracy, and yet they did everything they could to emasculate democratic procedures. During the March 2008 presidential elections the Kremlin prevented international organizations from monitoring the elections. At the same time, Putin accused the European monitoring group of having stayed away following instructions from the US Department of State.

Therefore, Russian President Vladimir Putin has crushed the development of institutions that respect the difference between fact and fiction. And, after a century of intelligence-insulting propaganda, the Russian people have been conditioned to roll their eyes at claims of objectivity. All major television channels broadcast documentaries and news reports about an alleged connection between foreign intelligence services and the leaders of the Russian opposition, thus aggressively promoting a discursive division of Russian society into 'Us' and 'Them'. Nowadays, television remains the main source of information in Russia (88% of the Russian population use television news as their prime source of information, 65% regards the news reporting as objective, and 51% trust television as an information source).<sup>14</sup> What the Russian viewers see on state-aligned television is strongly shaped by the Kremlin. It has thus become the Kremlin's favourite tool for disseminating conspiratorial explanations of events, deployed to ensure social cohesion and provide the Kremlin with public support.

The rapid succession of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, from late November 2004 to January 2005, and nationwide mass protests in Russia itself in early 2005, had

galvanized the opposition and shaken the Putin regime. In order to avert a ‘velvet’ scenario before the election cycle of 2007–2008, the Kremlin’s political technologists produced a torrent of xenophobic and conspiratorial propaganda, which attributed the upheavals on Russia’s borders to Western incitement and vilified the Russian opposition as marionettes. Yet most of the Kremlin’s counter-measures were directed at the appeasement of the domestic political landscape: the subjugation of opposition institutions, the consolidation of elites under the banner of a state ideology, and the mobilization of support through organizations such as *Nashi*.<sup>15</sup> The result was a ‘preventive counterrevolution’ which, in the words of Ivan Krastev, the Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, ‘marked regime-change in Russia’.<sup>16</sup> Russian FSB Chairman Nikolai Patrushev accused the US of backing democratic revolutions in the CIS, the Commonwealth of Independent States,<sup>17</sup> and warned the Russian State Duma that ‘Our opponents are steadily and persistently trying to weaken Russian influence in the CIS and the international arena as a whole. The latest events in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan unambiguously confirm this’.<sup>18</sup> The latter claims reappeared in full force in the wake of mass protests against the Duma election results of 4 December 2011, which were framed by the authorities as part of the Western plot to undermine Russia, and also during the presidential campaign of early 2012. In fact, in his emotional victory speech on 4 March 2012, Putin hinted at dark – and in the context of official discourse as a whole, quite clearly Western – forces aimed at toppling him.<sup>19</sup>

#### **The Beslan Massacre: September 2004**

The terrorist operation against the Beslan school was planned by Shamil Basayev and led by Ruslan Khachubarov (‘the Colonel’). It was launched from a makeshift forest camp two kilometres away from the village of Psedakh in the Malgobek region of Ingushetia, only a few dozen kilometres from Beslan. The terrorist gang that gathered in the forest tract was united by kinship ties, personal traumas and histories of violence including terrorizing each other.<sup>20</sup> Shamil Basayev himself was not present in Beslan. According to one of the terrorist survivors, the gang consisted of 33 terrorists, most of them Osetians, some Ingush and Chechens. It is hard to determine whether Beslan was ever conceived as anything other than a suicide attack. Some of the terrorists were clearly ignorant of the nature of the operation. The federal parliamentary commission on the Beslan attack established on 20 September 2004, chaired by Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council Alexander Torshin and released in December 2006, listed 23 identified terrorists, all citizens of the Russian Federation and coming from Ingushetia (16), Chechnya (6) and North Ossetia (1). It concluded that two of the terrorists were foreign, although it was unable to definitely identify them (Ref. 20, p 11).

The most significant act of the North Ossetian Parliament on 10 September was the establishment of its own parliamentary commission to investigate the events at Beslan. Chaired by Stanislav Kesaev, deputy head of the North Ossetian People’s Assembly, their report was officially released in November 2005. The report pointed out that the

vast majority of the terrorists were from Ingushetia, and it concluded with a symmetrical phraseology that acknowledged the Kremlin storyline while criticizing it:

Without disputing the international nature of terrorism as a reality ... we consider it important to warn against an excessive globalization of the problem, and an attempt to silence the existing 'Chechen problem', both in certain actions of the federal authority in the Caucasus and the actions of extremist forces. (Ref. 20, p. 12)

Consequently, Putin's administration responded to this criticism with talk of conspiracies. Both Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov described the terrorists as mere 'puppets' of the external enemies of Russia. Putin frequently expressed admiration for Bush as a counterterrorist leader. But, at the same time, Putin's administration discourse also hinted at the operation of an international conspiracy of states using terrorism as an instrument to weaken Russia (Ref. 20, p. 14).

Addressing the Russian public on TV on 4 September 2004, after the Beslan School massacre, Putin said:

We showed weakness, and we were trampled upon. Some want to cut off a juicy morsel from us while others are helping them. They are helping because they believe that, as one of the world's major nuclear powers, Russia is still posing a threat to someone, and therefore this threat must be removed.<sup>21</sup>

On the normative level, Putin increasingly rejected what he saw as Western-imposed values and challenged the notion of universal norms, emphasizing the importance of Russia's national values, culture and interests. Vladislav Surkov, then deputy director of the presidential administration, stated that the enemy was 'at the gate'. Although he was focusing on terrorism, he established the context in which such terrorism worked by depicting international groups who continued to live with 'Cold War phobia', who considered Russia an adversary and who had both the aim and the means of bringing about Russia's destruction.<sup>22</sup> This paranoia was heightened by the 'colour' revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Tuathail (Ref. 20, p. 30), answering the commentators of his paper on the Beslan affair, wrote:

I am grateful to Dmitry Gorenburg for supplementing the lecture with his excellent account of the political context of Beslan ... His observation that Western efforts to weaken Russia were a perennial Putin theme raises the issue of conspiratorial reasoning in geopolitical discourse.

Nationwide interviews by FOM, the Public Opinion Foundation, from 11–12 September 2004 found that, remarkably, respondents are more likely to lay responsibility for the Beslan tragedy on foreigners (49%) rather than on Russian citizens (35%). Although many see Chechnya as a source of the terrorist threat, they nevertheless believe that without an outside impulse the Chechen militants would not have taken any action (Ref. 20 p. 11). Some respondents are even inclined to blame the Beslan kidnapping on Western secret services, which they say used aggressive Islam and instability in Chechnya to cause disorder in Russia. In fact, 59% of the respondents connected the Beslan tragedy to the actions of some 'foreign countries' and, among those, 25% blamed the US. By the end of September, the Levada Center recorded that 45% of Russians answered 'probably yes' and 'definitely yes' when asked 'Is there a

worldwide conspiracy against Russia?’<sup>23</sup> The explanation of such answers from the Russian public can be found in the inoculation theory that believes that conspiracy theories are thought to provide psychological comfort for those that believe in them by assigning clear responsibility for unpleasant, complex events beyond their control.

In the aftermath of Beslan, the Kremlin intensified its efforts to consolidate its power over the mass media, the provinces, and corporate Russia. The Beslan attacks were widely seen as crucial events in this shift from ‘Western-liberalist’ hegemony to what Russian observers sometimes call ‘Russian democracy’. The tragedy of Beslan became the turning point both for domestic politics and for Russian foreign policy. At that moment, the overall message from the Russian authorities was one of greater self-confidence. As part of its domestic strength, Russia began to present itself as a great power in the international system which was able to defend its position and interests.

### The ‘Dulles Plan’ and the Dissidents

The most common of Russian conspiracy theories concerns the mythical so-called ‘Dulles Plan’. The Dulles Plan is a text ostensibly authored by CIA Director Allen Dulles at some point in the 1940s, outlining grandiose plans to destroy the Soviet Union. The text has been widely cited and reproduced in Russia over the past three decades, but an original source has never been identified, and the provenance of the text is murky. Certain sections are almost identical to passages from a 1981 Soviet novel, Anatolii Ivanov’s *Eternal Call*, where many of the lines now attributed to Dulles are spoken by a fictional SS officer. The Dulles Plan text also bears a strong resemblance to a passage from Dostoevsky’s *Demons*. In his memoirs, published in 2004, retired Major-General Sidorenko describes the Dulles Plan as the ‘ frankest’ statement of how the Western special services planned to achieve their aims towards Russia. He cites the opening lines of the Dulles Plan text in full:

We shall throw everything we have – all the gold, all the material might and resources into making the people into fools and idiots. It is possible to change the human brain, the consciousness of people. After sowing chaos there [in Russia], we shall imperceptibly replace their values by stealth with false ones and shall force them to believe in these false values. Thus we shall find like-minded people, our own helpers and allies in Russia itself. Episode by episode, the tragedy will be played out, grandiose in scale, of the death of the most intractable people on Earth, of the definitive, irreversible dying out of its self-consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Recent *chekist*<sup>25</sup> claims that Soviet dissent was a Western-funded phenomenon represent a re-activation of late Soviet discourses which, as of the detente era, sought to link human rights to security, not democracy. The ex-dissident Vladimir Bukovskii has identified this linkage, citing an Andropov report that recommended that this should be explained to West European communists:

It would be desirable at a convenient moment to conduct [...] high-level conversations with French and Italian comrades [...] to explain to them that the struggle with so-called ‘dissidents’ is for us not an abstract question of democracy in general, but a vitally important necessity for the protection of the security of the Soviet state.<sup>26</sup>



### A Second Chance

The rise to power of the Andropov generation of chekists offers a kind of ‘second chance’ for history. Their rise represents a restoration of the ‘organic’ flow and continuity of Russian history, following the temporary rupture caused by the aberration that the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods implied. If a second crisis is to be averted, however, it will be essential that this time the enemies are recognized in good time and the chekists heeded, especially the chekists who are the chief target of the enemy’s plot to destroy Russia. This is the thrust of one article written by leading FSB public relations official and poet Vasilii Stavitskii, declaring that media criticism of the FSB was backed by ‘someone’ in the West intent on destroying the young Russian democratic state, which the FSB was striving to defend:

Someone very ‘wise’ in the West has skilfully used a campaign in order to devastate the power structures. [...] Often the media, especially the Western media, pour buckets of filth on a daily basis over those who at the price of their own lives are striving to defend the young democratic state [...] The impression is created that someone very ‘wise’ again wishes through the hands of journalists to suffocate the new democratic state.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the better-known conspiracy theories narrated around pivotal events in the past two decades include the stories surrounding Vladimir Putin’s rapid ascent to power, notably the idea that the FSB was behind the apartment bombings in Moscow during the summer of 1999, triggering the second Chechen campaign, which in turn launched Putin as a politician. Many of these conspiracy theories have their origins in official discourse, such as the Kremlin’s insistence at the time that the disastrous accident which led to the sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* and the death of its crew was due not to bad maintenance, but to the fact that it had been rammed by a NATO submarine illegally in Russian waters.

### The Pussy Riot Affair

On 21 February, 2012, five women from the female band Pussy Riot attempted to perform a punk-prayer entitled ‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Away’ in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Almost two weeks later, three members of the band were arrested and charged with criminal activities. It should be noted that their church protest was widely criticized as offensive to believers, although they did not disrupt a service, and their song, while vulgar, targeted church–state ties and not religion itself. The campaign against Pussy Riot became a media-constructed event utilized to polarize society in the post-electoral period. It served as a bridge between a conspiratorial propaganda campaign against the West, embarked upon to ensure Putin’s victory, and the anti-opposition campaign in the aftermath of the elections. Leonid Storch compares public reaction to the Pussy Riot case with debates around the Beilis case a century ago:

A central theme in the criticism directed against Pussy Riot was anti-Western rhetoric. Asserting that the West supported Pussy Riot’s actions, the critics portrayed the performance as an attack on the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and

on Russian statehood. In the ideological components of the anti-Western campaign against this punk group, a parallel emerges between the Pussy Riot case and the Beilis trial held a hundred years earlier in terms of social antagonism and the appraisal of liberal values.<sup>28</sup>

Most scholarly attention has been paid to prominent post-Soviet conspiracy theorists, such as the public intellectual Aleksandr Dugin who claimed that those that were hostile to Pussy Riot were in fact resisting the imperialist aspirations of the USA and wanted to prevent the establishment of a pro-American regime in Russia.<sup>29</sup> At the end of 2000, Patriarch Aleksei II blamed the West for the moral degradation of young people, with its powerful ‘corruption industry’ bringing pornography, sexual liberation and social decay. He described this as a ‘planned bloodless war’ carried out with the aim of destroying the Russian people.<sup>30</sup> In fact, a sociological poll conducted in November 2013 by the Levada Center showed that 78% of Russians believed that Russia has enemies.<sup>31</sup> This feeling of a society besieged by its enemies, an image actively supported by the state-aligned media, is generated through conspiracy theories. Hence, despite their long-term destabilizing potential, at the beginning of Putin’s third presidential term, conspiracy theories turned into a major instrument of social cohesion and the construction of national identity.

‘Television determines the agenda,’ says Valery Solovei,<sup>32</sup> in his hour long talk at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO):

The methods that I am talking about create a world view, something that’s called a ‘reality’. A reality is created for us. If we see this reality the way it is brought to us by television, then we act in accordance with this reality. [...] Chaos is the key word. [...] All of it is done to create a stable association in our minds: Ukraine is chaos. It is an old mythologeme – Chaos as a protoplasm from which the gods will then create the world. And what is Russia then? Russia is Cosmos, it is order, and it is the foundation of peace and stability. [...] If you watch Russian TV you will see that Russia has no problems other than the adaptation of Crimea. We have no inflation, no decreasing incomes. We do not have any of the typical big-city problems. Russia has none of that. Everything is all right in Russia. What is it? It is called the manipulation of the agenda.

Russian leaders are apt to deflect their population’s attention from the growing number of difficulties at home by shifting attention onto others, such as neighbouring Georgia or Ukraine, or to clamp down even more on the slightest possible threats to their control inside Russia. Russia’s current leadership – corrupt, revisionist and insecure as it is – will likely decide that perpetuating the image of the United States as a threat is important to maintaining the Kremlin’s grip on power. In this regard, Vladimir Kara-Murza,<sup>33</sup> a senior policy adviser at the Institute of Modern Russia, claims that the Kremlin propaganda holds that it was the US State Department that organized the 2011–2012 anti-Putin rallies across Russia – the largest pro-democracy demonstrations since 1991. ‘Perhaps the most heartless and cynical example of [the Kremlin’s] propaganda,’ writes Kara-Murza, ‘is the recent law banning adoptions of Russian orphans by American citizens, which Putin called an “adequate” response to passage by the US Congress of the Magnitsky Act, which banned corrupt Russian officials and human rights violators from visiting or owning assets in the US.’<sup>34</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The Soviet Union's purges of the 1930s and 1950s provoked numerous debates about their purpose, scale and mechanisms. Stalin's regime had to maintain its citizens in a state of fear and uncertainty, and recurrent random purging provided the mechanism. Robert Conquest emphasized Stalin's paranoia, focused on the Moscow show trial of 'Old Bolsheviks', and analysed the carefully planned and systematic destruction of the Communist Party as the first step toward terrorizing the entire population. The purge of the Red Army and Military Maritime Fleet removed three of five marshals, 13 of 15 army commanders, eight of nine admirals, 50 of 57 army corps commanders, 154 out of 186 division commanders, 16 of 16 army commissars, and 25 of 28 army corps commissars. The Communist Party leadership was also purged – 93 of the 139 central committee members were put to death.<sup>35</sup> The Great Purge of the 1930s was the main reason for the Soviet army's ineffective response to the German attack on 22 June 1941, which caught the Soviet military completely off guard, and with its forces not positioned to respond effectively to the attacks. In its confusion, the Soviet high command issued contradictory orders, and Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin hesitated before ordering decisive action. In the meantime, German forces advanced quickly across the Russian countryside. In little more than a week, by 1 July 1941, the Germans had pushed 300 to 500 km into Russia and captured the major cities of Riga and Dvinsk in the north, Minsk in the central region, and Lvov in the south.<sup>36</sup>

In Post-Soviet Russia, the Kremlin's use of conspiracy theories illustrates the framing of post-Soviet politics and the widespread use of 'administrative resources', and 'political technology'. It may, however, be not just an instrumental attempt to mobilize support and delegitimize the democratic movement in Russia. As Konstantin Eggert has rightly pointed out, beyond the political usefulness of the 'fortress Russia' metaphor that underpins this kind of thinking, there is a danger that Russian leaders may themselves become entrapped in conspiracy thinking. And beyond this, the propensity of the Kremlin to using conspiracy narratives, especially in situations where it sees its own grip on power in jeopardy, might hint at a sense of fragility and lack of control, even when the image of state power and state control over all spheres of public life is a core part of official discourse.<sup>37</sup>

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