

Pussy Riot as agent provocateur: conspiracy theories and the media construction of nation in Putin's Russia

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This article studies the impact of conspiracy theories on post-Soviet Russian nation-building through the analysis of how the Pussy Riot trial was constructed by the Russian media. Conspiracy theory as a phenomenon is defined as a populist tool for relocation of power among different political actors, which creates identities and boosts social cohesion. This interpretation of conspiracy theories helps investigate how the media constructed the image of Pussy Riot and their supporters as a conspiring subversive minority, which threatened the Russian nation. The ability of conspiracy theory for swift social mobilization helped the authorities to strengthen the public support of its policies and model the Russian nation as ethnically and religiously homogeneous.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; Pussy Riot; Russian politics; nation-building; Russian media

Introduction

The mass protests that erupted in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections in December 2011 mark a watershed in the political history of post-Soviet Russia. For the first time since 2005, when protest against social welfare reforms took the form of mass demonstrations, large-scale social unrest became a notable feature of political life. Rallies against electoral fraud showed that such protest had the momentous potential to challenge the Kremlin's authority and change the balance of power between the Kremlin and opposition. In response, the Kremlin launched an aggressive media campaign which depicted the rallies as a part of the Western plan to undermine Russian statehood. 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." Given the fact that in today's Russia television remains the main source of information, it has become the Kremlin's favorite tool for disseminating conspiratorial explanations of events, deployed to ensure social cohesion and provide the Kremlin with public support ("Otkuda rossiane uznaiut novosti" 2013).

After the presidential elections in March 2012, conspiracy theories representing the Russian nation as infiltrated by foreign enemies started to occupy an especially prominent place in television programs. Striving to promote an image of the Russian nation as united

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and with the majority supportive of the regime, pro-Kremlin politicians and journalists juxtaposed this to a “conspiring” minority within the nation. This social polarization was aimed at generating massive public support for Putin, which seemed to have been eroding in the previous months. As Oxana Shevel has argued, prior to this, the Kremlin’s nation-building agenda had been strikingly ambiguous. This equivocation had allowed the political leadership to pursue pragmatic goals by shifting the terms of official discourse pertaining to boundaries and membership of the Russian nation (Shevel 2011, 179–202). It is our contention that Putin’s return to presidential office in 2012 marked a significant change in official discourse on national identity. As the controversy around the Pussy Riot performance has demonstrated, from 2012 onwards Russia’s political leadership and the state-aligned media started to promote an image of the Russian nation as Orthodox and conservative, abandoning alternative nation-building models.

The incident in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February 2012, at which five women from the female punk rock band Pussy Riot attempted to perform a song condemning an alliance between the Patriarch and Russian political authorities in the Kremlin, became a timely event for the Kremlin. The state-aligned television channels created an overarching interpretation which portrayed the incident as an attempt on the part of Russia’s enemies from the West to destroy the Orthodox religion and thus deprive the Russian people of their identity. This reading of the Pussy Riot performance became a crucial landmark in the process whereby the media presented the Russian Orthodox Church as the main marker of Russian identity and the key force binding Russian people.

Following Mark Fenster’s definition of conspiracy theory as a populist theory of power, this article will examine the media coverage of the Pussy Riot affair within the context of the anti-Western conspiratorial discourse of Putin’s Russia which, it will be argued, has been used throughout the 2000s as a pivotal tool of nation-building policies (Fenster 2008, 84–90). It will be further argued that this conspiratorial reading of the Pussy Riot performance marked the beginning of a Kremlin-sponsored campaign to foster national cohesion, which in turn utilized conspiracy theories as a vehicle of social cohesion to guarantee the survival of Putin’s political regime.

The first part of the article will be devoted to the theoretical approach to studying conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia. Conspiracy theories are regarded as a tool deployed to redistribute power between political actors; anti-Western conspiracy theories are conceptualized as a product of populist discourse; and traditional marginalization of conspiracy theories is avoided. This reading of conspiracy theories will allow us to analyze the media coverage of the Pussy Riot performance as a method of shifting the balance of power between the Russian authorities and the opposition. The final part of the article examines the debates around national identity that were triggered by the Pussy Riot performance to explore and identify the role played by anti-Western conspiracy theories in the politics of nation-building in Putin’s Russia.

Theorizing conspiracy theories

Over the last two decades, scholars in the field of Russian studies have made several attempts to explore the conspiratorial discourse of post-Soviet countries. Most scholarly attention has paid to the prominent post-Soviet conspiracy theorists, such as the public intellectual Aleksandr Dugin and the mathematician Anatolii Fomenko, whose pseudo-historical approach treats Russia’s historical past as falsely depicted by Western subversives (Laruelle 2008; Sheiko and Brown 2009; Umland 2010). However, the topic of conspiracy theories *per se* has mostly remained on the margins of research in the social sciences, rarely

being studied systematically. Depicted as a structural element of nationalist discourse, conspiracy theories are often merely mentioned, to demonstrate the ideological peculiarities of the discussed concepts, rather than analyzed. Such an approach misses the opportunity to conduct a thorough analysis of the origins of the phenomenon and the roles played by particular conspiracy theories in given socio-political contexts.

This gap was partly filled by the recent special issue of *Russian Review* dedicated to the study of conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space. In the introductory article Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012) suggested that conspiracy theories in post-Soviet space should be examined within the broad context of conspiracy culture spread in other countries. The authors argued that conspiracy theories are a product of anxiety over the lost control of reality, which in post-Soviet conditions of the collapsed state makes conspiratorial logic a useful element of interpreting the world. Moreover, weak democratic institutions deny many people the opportunity to make sense of political developments which reinforces their feeling of powerlessness and contributes to the emergence of conspiracy theories. While highlighting some major aspects of conspiracy thinking, this short introduction to the topic only tentatively addressed the main gaps in the scholarship. In the same issue of *The Russian Review* Marlene Laruelle (2012) and Richard Sakwa (2012) explored the tropes of conspiratorial discourse on the domestic and international political levels. These publications notwithstanding, the role of conspiracy theories in the politics of post-Soviet countries, and especially in Russia, merits further consideration and, most importantly, requires a theoretical framework capable of clarifying the importance of conspiracy theories.

For the abovementioned goal to be attained, a methodological frame of analysis needs to be developed. This will draw on scholarship undertaken in the USA, where for more than 50 years conspiracy theories have been an object of scholarly research. Irrespective of the political, economic and social differences between the USA and Russia, the methodological apparatus elaborated over those decades is applicable to the Russian case, as I shall demonstrate.

“The people” vs. “the Other”: conspiracy theories as a populist theory of power

The extraordinary sweep of conspiracy theories in the 1990s in all spheres of public life in the USA demonstrated that conspiracy theories had more social functions in modern society than simply as a “tool for crackpots” to comprehend the world. In contrast to previous perceptions of conspiracy theories either as a “paranoid style” of political thinking or as a political tool to achieve economic and political goals, by the late 1990s a new interpretation of conspiracy theories had emerged (Hofstadter 1996; Berlet and Lyons 2000). This conceptualization suggested that conspiracy theories could be a defining trope of rational thinking, or a portal “through which social phenomena were discussed” (Bratich 2008, 6).

The latter approach addresses issues in a manner that seems to offer the most nuanced framework for the study of the conspiracy theories, enabling an understanding of their functions. At the centre of the approach lies the assumption that a conspiracy theory can constitute an important “creative response” to social changes and an “everyday epistemological quick-fix to often intractably complex problems.” Identified in such terms, scholars are able to avoid the inevitable marginalization of conspiracy discourses (Knight 2000, 8). As Fenster argues, conspiracy theories can serve as “a means to rally support [...] and to condemn opponents,” and at the same time function as a tool of delegitimizing opposition “by branding their beliefs as paranoid” (Fenster 2008, 10). Thus, this new approach is based on the recognition that conspiracy theories can become an important device for the reallocation of power between

different political actors and an efficient element in political strategies to expose the inequities of a political, economic and social order.

Acknowledging the possibility that conspiracy mythmaking can be an efficient political strategy inevitably leads us to a discussion of the forms which are used to appeal to the centers of power in order to urge it to redistribute its resources. The prevailing method of vocalizing conspiracy theories on a political level is through the use of populist rhetoric, and this allows Fenster to conclude that conspiracy theory is a populist theory of power (84–90). 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 powerful ability of conspiracy theory to express fears and, thus, foster the gathering of “the people.” However, since the existence of conspiracy theories, especially today, is not confined to authoritarian regimes, Fenster defines conspiracy mythmaking as an “ideological misrecognition of power relations” which may occur in any political system (89).

Fenster’s argument is built on the broad interpretation of populism introduced by Francisco Panizza and Ernesto Laclau who argue that populism is

a mode of identification available to any actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary. (Panizza 2005, 4)

The important feature of this conceptualization is its antagonistic division of society into two camps; this creation of a political frontier helps to maintain the political category of “the people” by introducing the common problem in the form of demand (Laclau 2005a, 83, 224). “The people” united on the basis of popular demand oppose the “Other,” the power bloc; this represents the typical juxtaposition of “Us” versus “Them.” According to Laclau, society is divided into two camps: “the power” and “the underdog.” “The underdog’s” appeal is based on popular demands and its role is to challenge the social order and gain power, thereby fulfilling popular demands (Laclau 2005b, 37–38). In doing so, populism also performs the function of gathering different elements of society into a new identity (Laclau 2005a, 93–101). Accordingly, this reading of populism does not deny its presence in a democratic society; on the contrary, it can manifest a necessary challenge to the existing democratic order when the latter fails to address certain cutting-edge issues.

This interpretation of populism has an obvious connection to the functions of conspiracy theory. The invention of “the people” in its various forms (depending on a given “demand”) very often requires a clear and persuasive image of the “Other” that can efficiently be provided by the conspiracy narrative through the generation of a fear of a foreign or internal deception and subversion. This “communicative” function of conspiracy theory plays a significant role in political discourses, creating political identities. In addition, such discourses also address concerns about the inequities of a social system and occasionally pose a positive challenge to the existing social order (Fenster 2008, 89–90). As we shall see, this understanding of conspiracy theory can fruitfully be deployed in an analysis of the Russian case of conspiracy mythmaking and its place in domestic politics.

Conspiracy theories in post-Soviet nation-building: the West as the ultimate conspiring Other

Fenster’s understanding of conspiracy theories provides a useful set of instruments with which to analyze the Russian case of conspiracy mythmaking. First, by enabling us to abandon the traditional reading of conspiracy theories, as the easily dismissible paranoia

of cranks, it serves as an efficient precondition for studying the role of conspiracy fears in the process of nation-building and the formation of national identity. The emergence of nation-states that created sovereign peoples and, thus, established a path to democracy set conditions for populism. The populist rhetoric, in turn, enabled politicians to discursively divide the social into two camps in search of “the Other” to correspond to “the people.” In other words, it is only possible to name the people by naming its “Other” (Panizza 2005, 6).

In the case of Russian national identity, the ultimate “Other,” historically, has been the West, often imagined as “a single undifferentiated entity [...] regarded either as a positive model for Russia to emulate or as a negative example to be rejected,” that has served to define the borders of national identity and its place in world history (Tolz 2001, 70). In this context, fears of anti-Western conspiracy arise as a part of the so-called “ressentiment” that was born from the recognition of the discrepancy between Russia and its ideal, the “West,” and which operated to demonstrate Russia’s equality or superiority to it (Greenfeld 1992, 234). In the mind of a typical Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as an ultimate and insidious “Other” seeking to undermine the progress of the Russian nation to its glorious future. The appreciation of conspiracy theories as a pivotal instrument for the construction of national identity helps us to investigate the division of social politics within the domestic arena and to explore the genesis and discursive maintenance of Russia as “the actor” of world politics (Neumann 1999, 37).

Second, when used to analyze domestic politics in post-Soviet Russian society, this approach enables us to explore the creation of political identities and the struggle for power within the country. The acknowledgment that conspiracy theory is an inherent feature of the popular political discourse of most societies, even democratic ones, allows the post-Soviet Russian political process to be understood as a set of specific “demands” that reflect the vital issues of transitional society. Employed by various Russian political actors to explain the immense change and complexities of economic and social relations, domestic developments, international relations and cultural processes, the language of conspiracy offers a symbolic resolution to the issue of responsibility for problems and reflects an attempt to oversimplify the nature of events (Knight 2000, 32). This approach makes it possible to account for the fact that virtually all the main actors in political life in post-Soviet Russia have employed the rhetoric of conspiracy: it enables them to strengthen the basis of legitimacy in competing with each other for public support and the resources of power.

This reading of anti-Western conspiracy theories in Russia aids investigation of a close connection between the construction of national identity and the realization of domestic political goals. Even though throughout the post-Soviet era the Russian political leadership has expressed support for the construction of a civic nation through fostering national cohesion, the results of this process are ambiguous. The nation-building agenda has always been closely connected with domestic politics, which made the discourse on national identity a powerful, yet highly politicized, tool of social mobilization. Often, however, the elites’ political goals contradicted the plans of building a civic nation. The political establishment in the post-Soviet period usually utilized the rhetoric of national cohesion to gain short-term political advantage. At the same time, the issues of nation-building have never been regarded as a top priority unless they have been directly linked with other aspects of the political agenda.

For instance, the social unrest triggered by the results of the parliamentary elections in December 2011 was framed by the authorities as a part of the Western plot to undermine Russia. This simplistic interpretation of the unprecedented civic activism pursued a

twofold goal. First, anti-Western conspiracy theories reinforced ideas of Russia's difference from the West and of Russia's national greatness, which the West was allegedly attempting to destroy. Second, by spreading conspiratorial notions, politicians loyal to the Kremlin aimed to delegitimize the demands of the opposition for fair elections on the grounds that, according to the statements of the officials, the opposition's actions were controlled by foreign entities.

Given the fact that Putin's regime is very sensitive to public opinion, it is likely that it was the popular identification with Orthodox tradition which made Orthodoxy a powerful political resource in the campaign. According to the Levada Centre polls, in December 2011, 76% of Russians identified themselves as Orthodox ("Rossiiane o religii i tserkvi" 2012). It is likely that this strength of support for Orthodox beliefs led pro-Kremlin officials to draw on a narrative of conspiracy against the Russian Orthodox Church during the elections in order to reinforce the basis of Putin's public support. In a television interview broadcast on 7 January 2012, Patriarch Kirill stated that it was the strong faith of the Russians that led their enemies and ill-wishers to hate them. The Patriarch thereby offered a particular interpretation of the series of anti-government rallies that had taken place in December 2011 ("Patriarkh Kirill: Poias Bogoroditsy dal velikuiu nadezhdu" 2012). The subsequent involvement of Kirill in the Kremlin-sponsored campaign against the protests made him a regular object of oppositional criticism, of which the Pussy Riot performance became the most controversial episode.

The Case of Pussy Riot

On 21 February, 2012, five women from the female band, Pussy Riot, attempted to perform a so-called punk-prayer entitled *Mother of God, Drive Putin Away* (*Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni*) in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Almost two weeks afterwards, three members of the band were arrested and the authorities charged them with criminal activities. This incident eventually acquired more publicity than all the scandals that had emerged in the spring of 2012 in relation to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Apart from the active support of the Kremlin on the eve of the presidential elections, in 2012 Patriarch Kirill appeared at the centre of several scandals. First, Kirill became involved in a lawsuit during which journalists discovered that he owned an expensive flat in the centre of Moscow. Kirill wanted his neighbor, Iurii Shevchenko, to pay compensation of about \$670,000 for the dust in his flat which occurred as a result of renovation works in Shevchenko's apartment. Later, bloggers found Kirill wearing an excessively expensive watch, which was unsuccessfully deleted from the photo on the official website (Schwartz 2012). Given the claims being made about the Church leader, the performance of Pussy Riot appeared as yet another controversy that aimed to draw attention to Kirill's hedonistic secular lifestyle. Pussy Riot's performance was initially treated as "hooliganism." However, its political significance gradually grew. The performance of the young artists soon escalated into a large-scale affair which, according to the state-aligned media, posed a major threat to Russian statehood.

Numerous interviews with politicians and pro-Kremlin intellectuals as well as television programs began to depict Orthodoxy as the key element of Russian identity, the Russian state and a basis for Russian greatness ("Chto stoit za aktsiei 'Pussy Riot' v Khrame Khrista Spasitelia" 2012; Gavrov 2012). By April 2012, the official reading of the incident had acquired a distinctive conspiratorial character, which was actively disseminated in the media. On 3 April, Kirill stated that the Russian Orthodox Church had become a victim of an "information war" (*informatsionnaia voina*) which included the Pussy Riot performance

and the scandals which involved him personally (Sopova 2012). This date became a turning point in the broad-spread media campaign against Pussy Riot, which transformed a minor incident involving an alternative art performance into the major news story of the year.

From April 2012 onwards, the narrative of a war against the Orthodox Church dominated the speeches of pro-Kremlin intellectuals and Church representatives, who interpreted public criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church as part of the conspiracy of the West against the Russian nation. The Patriarch himself insisted that the Church was the essential element of national self-identification and, historically, that it has always been the first target for Russia's enemies and invaders ("Za Pussy Riot vstupilis' deiateli kul'tury" 2012). Sergei Markov, a prominent pro-Kremlin intellectual, further developed Kirill's words by stating that there were powerful forces at work both within and outside the country which wished to deprive the Russian people of their mission in global history and which sought to destroy the Orthodox Church as "a depository of Russian national identity" (Nadezhkina 2012).

In the state-aligned media the Pussy Riot incident had been framed as a repetition of the attacks on religion carried out by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution, in which many priests were persecuted and murdered, and churches were closed. Arkadii Mamontov, a *Rossia* channel journalist and active defender of the Church in the Pussy Riot scandal, called the actions of Pussy Riot a "relapse into neo-Bolshevism" thus alluding to the possibility of new anti-Church pogroms (Kashin 2012a).

These references and allusions surfaced repeatedly in television programs throughout the period of the Pussy Riot trial, which ran from April to October 2012. To demonstrate wide-spread public support for the Church, the Moscow Patriarchate decreed that prayer services be held in defense of the "desecrated relics," including both the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and 30 icons, which, according to the clerics, had been recently attacked by vandals (Rozhkov 2012). The desecrated icons served as an evidence of the anti-Church menace and linked the current anti-Church actions with the repressions of the Soviet period. On 22 April, prayer services were held in all major Russian cities; these served to demonstrate that the great majority of Russian people stood behind the Church against the hostile minority, whose aim was to destroy the unity of the nation. In his address before the services, the Patriarch evoked the unique multicultural spirit of Russia, but stressed that the attack on the Orthodox Church threatened the unity of the entire Russian nation (Patriarkh Kirill 2012a).

These prayer services, widely covered by the major television channels, were envisaged as an embodiment of "the people," who shared the Orthodox faith and supported the Patriarch as well as the federal authorities. Supporters of the Church were described as pious, loyal to the government and uninvolved in recent political activities. The audience in the television coverage of the Pussy Riot case was regularly depicted as a homogenous Orthodox community in which any variety of opinions was downplayed.

At the same time, major television channels provided a common conspiratorial interpretation of Pussy Riot as puppets who strove to split the nation apart (Baranov 2012). Journalists and public intellectuals utilized different terms to stress the otherness of the members of Pussy Riot. They were defined as witches, blasphemers and provocateurs, while their supporters, who shared their liberal values, were depicted as alien to the Russian nation ("Besy" 2012; "Poedinok s Vladimirom Solov'evym" 2012). On 6 April, in the introduction to the documentary entitled *Hystera Aenigma*, broadcast by the major television channel *NTV*, the commentator asked "Why are gays demanding that the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour be demolished?" The response to the query came from a representative of the Moscow's gay community, Nikolai Alekseev: "Yes, that is

true.” In fact, Alekseev’s answer was a result of a massive editorial cut which gave the impression that the LGBT community in cahoots with Pussy Riot did indeed seek to destroy the cathedral. The rest of the documentary continued in this conspiratorial vein and presented the members of the band as sexual perverts and immoral persons who were ready to trigger a revolution in Russia (“Hystera Ænigma” 2012).

This distinction between the “Orthodox majority” (*pravoslavnoe bol’shinstvo*) of “the people” and the “minority of perverts and liberals,” depicted as “the Other,” played an important role in developing the notion of Russian identity through the mediated conspiracy discourse. By means of an aggressive media campaign, the spokespersons of the Church, pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists put a great deal of effort into establishing the notion of a threat to the nation that came from internal subversion by a conspiring “fifth column” within Russia. Mamontov’s trilogy of talk-shows, entitled *Provocateurs* (*Provokatory*), created an overarching conspiratorial narrative for the case.

On 29 April, the state television channel *Rossia-1* broadcast the first episode of Mamontov’s weekly talk-show *Spetsial’nyi korrespondent*, which articulated the major conspiratorial narrative of the battle for Orthodoxy and the nation against the “blasphemers” (*koshchunitsy*) who were supported by the “West.” The documentary opened with scenes from the 22 April collective prayer service and in the course of the film referred to the alleged conspiratorial origins of the performance. By posing the question “What shall we do, people?” (*Chto delat’ budem, liudi?*) to the viewers and the studio audience, Mamontov performed a discursive division of the nation (“Provokatory” 2012a). “The people,” represented in the studio by an Orthodox nun, the press-secretary of the Moscow Patriarchy, Vladimir Legoida, several actors, journalists and academics, claimed that Pussy Riot had attacked the Church and attempted to destroy the Russian nation.

Criminal investigators who participated in the program showed the audience the Canadian residence permit of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, one of the members of the band, with a view to linking her to the intelligence services of a foreign country. Nikolai Starikov, a highly popular author of anti-Western conspiracy theories against Russia, commented on the alleged connection between Pussy Riot and foreign intelligence by saying that the women from the band had become puppets in the hands of those “who promoted globalization.” Starikov stressed that if the “blasphemers” were allowed to desecrate Russian sacred heritage (*relikvii*), “we shall cease to be a nation” (“Provokatory”). Almost all participants agreed that the Russian Orthodox Church was under attack and that the Pussy Riot performance had been used to test the ability of the Russian people to defend national values. Starikov’s claim that Pussy Riot was connected to sinister external forces clearly displayed the conspiratorial character of the discourse around the trial. The omnipotent character of the forces and their simultaneous anonymity conformed to the stereotypical vision of the world as seen through the eyes of conspiracy theorists.

The links between the Orthodox Church and the authorities were downplayed in the program. The guests constantly emphasized that the main target of the “war” was the Church as the keystone of the nation. The program’s discussion thus reflected, to use Laclau’s terms, the “demand” of the period, which required that power be relocated away from the critics of the Church who considered it too closely connected with the authorities. Laclau has associated populist demand with a claim to the particular needs of a subject or a group of subjects in society (Laclau 2005b, 37–38). As the Church leaders had been criticized by the opposition for their overt hedonism and their relationship with the authorities, the Kremlin needed to defuse these tensions and relocate attention onto the subversive nature of the Church critics. The conspiratorial interpretation of the Pussy Riot incident, widely disseminated through the media, allowed its members to be linked

to an allegedly subversive “fifth column” of liberals with corrupt values, who were supported by the West. As Mamontov contended in the report:

They wanted to disrupt society, to divide it and split [it]. That is what the organizers of this horrible provocation wanted to achieve. They hold nothing sacred. They did not manage to triumph in December-January and so decided to attack the most sacred thing which the people have – the Church. (“Provokatory”)

This unequivocal account of the conspiring and atheist “Other” was aimed at promoting the cohesion of Russians as a single nation which professed Orthodoxy. However, the most important link was that drawn between the political protests held in response to vote rigging at the parliamentary elections in December 2011–March 2012 and the incident in the Cathedral. The proclaimed atheism of the opposition which supported Pussy Riot could thus be deployed as a strong argument against the opposition and in support of the religious character of Russian national identity.

The decision of Moscow’s court on 19 August 2012 to sentence three members of the band to two years in prison took the media campaign against Pussy Riot to a new level. From August onwards it was possible to identify two distinctive currents in the conspiratorial narrative purveyed by television coverage of the Pussy Riot case. As previously, the state-aligned channels followed the initial line of the campaign and defended the Church. Kirill’s statements in August and September 2012 and their media coverage followed the line of emphasizing the fundamental role of the Church in the preservation of the Russian identity. On 9 September, during a service commemorating the bicentenary of the Battle of Borodino, Kirill drew a parallel between the Napoleonic invasion in 1812 and the current anti-Church scandals. He stated that the invaders had desecrated churches and sawn up crosses in an attempt to destroy the Russian spirit (Patriarkh Kirill 2012b). The Patriarch’s mention of the sawn-up crosses worked to connect the alleged barbarism of the French with the incident that had taken place in Kiev in August 2012. *Femen*, a Ukrainian feminist group, publicly sawed a cross in half in the centre of Kiev in support of Pussy Riot (“Femen Activists Cut Down Cross in Kyiv” 2012). This incident, which was followed by a number of similar incidents in Russia, served to promote the idea of a fully-fledged “war” against the Church.

On the same day as the Borodino address, *Rossia*’s weekly newscast, *Vesti nedeli*, entitled *The attack on the Church*, broadcast an interview with Kirill in which he claimed that the Pussy Riot case was a well-planned act of reconnaissance (*razvedka boem*) (Kiselëv 2012). This framing of the Pussy Riot performance as an act of reconnaissance evoked fears of foreign subversion. In this context, both the members of the band and their supporters were represented as part of a bigger plan to overthrow the Russian government by attacking the very foundation of Russian nationhood. The repeated emphasis on alleged linkage between foreign intelligence and Pussy Riot served to highlight how dangerous the band members were for the Russian nation and for the Church as its main pillar. Furthermore, at this stage of the trial, Pussy Riot started to be perceived not only as a threat to the Church but also as a threat to the legitimacy of the authorities’ actions. This shift in interpretation significantly changed the media coverage of the story and brought a new theme into the conspiratorial narrative of the case.

As the trial of Pussy Riot provoked more domestic and international debate, the manner in which the pro-Kremlin media conceptualized the performance also underwent certain notable discursive changes. Numerous world celebrities as well as foreign political leaders expressed support for the members of the band and criticized the Russian authorities. This international reaction to the trial further helped pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists interpret these external critical remarks as a part of the plan to discredit

the Russian authorities and to undermine their legitimacy. The Kremlin's concern about the legitimacy of the Pussy Riot trial became a top-priority task especially when the Moscow court sentenced the three members of the band.

Several influential participants in the Church campaign made statements contending that the roots of the Pussy Riot case could be traced back to Putin's disagreement with the USA regarding military intervention in Syria. They also suggested that the wide-scale campaign of criticism against the Kremlin could be connected to the conflict with the opposition within the country, which began during the 2011 parliamentary elections. For instance, Mamontov argued that the Pussy Riot controversy had been initiated to make Putin vulnerable to critique because of his position on Syria (Kots and Iakovlev 2012). In turn, Dugin claimed that those 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 (Dergachev 2012). This shift in perspective to politics in the Pussy Riot case, from religion, where it had been before, demonstrated that the main challenge for the Kremlin at that time became the impact of the controversy on the image of the Russian elites both within the country and abroad. This change in perception of Pussy Riot also marked the following two episodes of Mamontov's *Provokatory*, the program which became a trend setter of conspiracy mythmaking regarding the performance in the forthcoming weeks.

The second episode of *Provokatory*, broadcast on 11 September 2012, was mostly devoted to discussion of the role of Boris Berezovskii, a political émigré and oligarch, in the Pussy Riot case. Several guests on the show testified that Berezovskii was preparing to stir unrest in Russia by attacking the Church ("Provokatory" 2012b). However, the program gave nearly equal weight to the issue of the origins of the international controversy which was explained by the work of *BellPottinger*, a British public relations company. This idea was put forward by William Dunkerley, a self-proclaimed media expert from the USA, in his article in a popular loyal-to-the-Kremlin daily *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (Dankerli 2012).

The show also included an interview with Paul Craig Roberts, a former official in the Reagan Administration and a controversial writer, who stated that the members of Pussy Riot had been used "to demonize the Russian government for standing up to Washington's intention to destroy Syria" (Roberts 2012). Dunkerley's and Roberts' remarks were aimed at giving credibility to the conspiratorial notions spread by Russian journalists and public intellectuals. The presence of experts from the West with similar ideas to those from Russia provided journalists with a pseudo-objective appearance, as though they were presenting how events were seen from abroad, which would help counter any possible critical opinions from domestic viewers. In general, in comparison to the first episode of the show, the program broadcast on 11 September was mostly aimed at explaining the global repercussions of the case and left the topic of the war against the Church as a secondary theme.

This conceptual difference was more evident in the third episode of the show, broadcast on 16 October. Mamontov's documentary and the ensuing discussion were devoted to the origins of the Pussy Riot performance. The band's closest supporters were accused of having profited financially from the international campaign in support of Pussy Riot. As Mamontov contended, the organizers of the performance wanted to become rich and famous by undermining Russia's position on the international arena. Pussy Riot supporters within the country were depicted as greedy, two-faced "liberals" who worked in close cooperation with the geopolitical enemies of Russia in Washington ("Provokatory" 2012c). The whole controversy was depicted as a new form of "information warfare" against Russia, which widely utilized the Internet and non-government organizations

within the country. This conspiratorial narrative was mostly aimed at depicting Pussy Riot as part of a wider group of Russian opposition. Particular stress was placed on cooperation with the West to undermine the legitimacy of the Russian opposition in its standoff against the Kremlin.

At the same time, the perception of the Church shifted from being the object of the attack to being a peacemaker able to mediate conflicts between social groups in Russia; in turn, these groups were represented as having been set against each other by the Pussy Riot performance. An episode concerning two young people who tried to set a Church on fire but repented was evoked to demonstrate that the Orthodox Church was capable of providing reconciliation. Although this image was significantly different from that of the persecuted Church at the beginning of the campaign, it served to neutralize the criticism of the Church's complicity in the guilty verdict against Pussy Riot.

The rapid development of the Pussy Riot case within a short period allows us to draw several conclusions regarding the manner in which conspiracy theories were used to boost national cohesion in post-Soviet Russia. The debates on the state-aligned television channels concerning national identity and framed by anti-Western conspiracy theories systematically reflected the political challenges which the Kremlin faced and helped boost public support for the Kremlin's actions. The vagueness of the nation-building agenda allowed the authorities to interpret the criticism of the regime as an ultimate threat to the nation thus connecting together the two seemingly unrelated issues. The notion of the conspiracy of "the West" and, in particular, the alleged American aspiration to undermine Putin's regime, served to mobilize "the people" in support of the government against the "Other," represented by supporters of Pussy Riot within the country. Fostering the idea of Russia's distinction from "the West," pro-Church and pro-Kremlin participants of the Pussy Riot controversy followed the main narrative of the presidential campaign of 2012 describing the conspiratorial origins of political developments which were taking place in the country during the period of the trial.

In this context, the Orthodox Church played a supporting role by promoting Orthodoxy as the key element of Russia's national identity. Being actively involved in Putin's presidential campaign to promote the cohesion of his supporters, Patriarch Kirill and his aides had employed conspiratorial language even prior to the eruption of the Pussy Riot controversy. Working hand-in-hand with the orchestrators of Putin's electoral campaign in 2012, leaders and representatives of the Church started to utilize a discursive division of the nation. They represented Russian society as divided between the anti-religious, anti-state, pro-Western minority and the vast and loyal majority of Russians who professed Orthodoxy and supported the authorities.

Adapting Laclau's idea of demands as the basis of populism, the need to protect Orthodoxy from the criticism at the first stage of the Pussy Riot case could be considered as the core demand of the Church and political authorities, used to downplay the scandals around the Patriarch (Laclau 2005b, 37). Anti-Western conspiracy theories about the information war against the Church played a pivotal role in bringing together the fragmented groups in Russian society to support the Church and in undermining the legitimacy of its critics. Diverse participants in the rallies at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on April 22 were presented by the media as virtually united as the Orthodox Russian majority of "the people" supporting the Church and the country (Kashin 2012b). This image was disseminated by all major television channels in order to promote the idea of the unity of Russian society against the "destructive forces" of the West. This element of the campaign demonstrated a clearly populist approach chosen by the authorities to utilize the anti-Western conspiracy theories as a binding tool of social cohesion.

However, in the final stages of the court proceedings, the Orthodox aspect of the campaign faded away, emphasis instead falling on the political importance of the story and its conspiratorial origins located abroad. The narrative of Orthodoxy under threat was replaced by the attempts of public intellectuals and politicians to justify the policy of the Kremlin against an opposition it described as dangerous and alien to the country. Hence, the artificially created majority of the “Orthodox people,” perceived as the core of the Russian nation, once again became a tool for achieving political goals at the hands of the Russian political establishment, in an operation that sidelined any concrete steps toward facilitating an actual national cohesion.

The media campaign against Pussy Riot carried out by the state-aligned television channels also helped to establish a basis for further political action by the Kremlin and to sustain public support for this. The image of Pussy Riot created by the media included several ideological markers which helped to define “the conspiring Other” and “the people.” These markers were used in the post-electoral period in new campaigns against various social groups, a step that promoted further polarization thus giving the Kremlin a chance to regain the control over the country. The representation of Pussy Riot as sexual perverts working in cahoots with homosexuals, as militant atheists and as blatant antagonists to Putin helped, for instance, the implementation of a homophobic campaign in 2013. This was actively supported by the state media and reached a peak in the introduction of a law prohibiting the propaganda of non-traditional forms of sexuality among young people. This campaign, amid other political measures, highlighted the turn to the celebration of so-called “traditional values” (*traditsionnye tsennosti*) of Russians, which were, allegedly, inherited from their ancestors (Putin 2012). Newly introduced federal laws as well as numerous television programs are part of this drift toward radical conservatism, aimed at giving the impression that Russia is under siege by its enemies. The campaign seems to have had an impact. A sociological poll carried out in November 2013 by the Levada Centre showed that 78% of Russians believed that Russia has enemies (“Rossiiane o vragakh” 2013). This feeling of a society besieged by its enemies, an image actively supported by the state-aligned media, is above all generated through conspiracy theories. Hence, despite their long-term destabilizing potential, at the beginning of Putin’s third presidential term, conspiracy theories turned into the major instrument of social cohesion and the construction of national identity.

Conclusion

The wave of conspiracy panics which framed Putin’s third presidential term helped discursively unite the fragmental groups of Russian society into a vague social category depicted by the state-aligned media as Putin’s “majority” (*Putinskoe bol’shinstvo*). The spread of fear of alleged Western subversion carried out by opponents of the Kremlin has served as the main tool of social cohesion. This has led to the legitimate claims made by the opposition for fair elections being delegitimized, and the opposition portrayed as a fifth column within the body of the nation.

Fenster’s interpretation of conspiracy theories as a populist theory of power helps us to understand the mechanism of the discursive division of the social within the country which has been performed by the Russian state-aligned media in an especially aggressive way since March 2012. The confrontational division of Russian society into “the people” and “the conspiring Other” closely connected with the West promoted an image of a loyal majority of Russian citizens who opposed a tiny minority backed by the powerful West. The communicative effect of conspiracy theories provided the authorities, on the one

hand, with the necessary discursive tools to delegitimize their opponents in order to strengthen the basis of public support. On the other hand, anti-Western conspiracy theories have become a key instrument for boosting national cohesion within the country. The notion of the “conspiring West” competing with Russia for economic wealth and political power in the world has helped create the boundaries of national identity. A particular focus on the USA as the ultimate competitor with Russia for dominance in global politics has shaped an image of “the Other” which is so important in determining “the people.” Hence, in contrast with previous years, a rapidly changing political environment compelled the Kremlin to waive, at least temporarily, the ambiguity of official nation-building discourse and opt for a religiously and ethnically defined Russian nation.

The Pussy Riot affair became a focal point in debates about Russian identity and it highlighted the instrumental character of conspiracy theories and their major significance for domestic politics. Conspiracy theories about the ultimate threat of Pussy Riot to Russian identity were used to link supporters of the band with protesters demanding fair elections. 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. The corpus of anti-Western conspiracy notions used in the debates around the Pussy Riot affair set the parameters of domestic politics during Putin’s third term and helped counter-balance the anti-Kremlin claims of the opposition.

At the same time, conspiracy discourse played a pivotal and twofold role in defining Russian national identity. On the one hand, this discourse was used by the Kremlin to determine the difference between the members of the national community and the constitutive Other excluded from the nation. On the other hand, the instrumental and populist utilization of Orthodoxy, widely represented as an essential element of Russian national identity, allowed the reinforcement of conspiracy fears in society and turned them into a major driver of domestic politics. This heightened profile of anti-Western conspiracy theories during Putin’s third term could be explained by the high capacity of conspiracy theories to promote social cohesion. However, the perspectives of these policies run the danger of generating a boomerang effect which could bring the country to the edge of a major internal conflict in the near future.

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