

External Interference Narratives in Russian and U.S. Politics CONSPIRACY THEORIZING MEETS WHATABOUTISM

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Conspiracy theories about covert external interference play significant roles in the political discourses of many countries worldwide. In Russia, conspiracy theorizing about U.S. clandestine interference is a long-time, long-term political trend currently being used to increase the legitimacy of President Vladimir Putin. In the United States, conspiracy theorizing framing Russia as a threat has been marginal throughout most of the post-Cold War period. However, since the recent U.S. presidential election, opponents of President Donald Trump have been framing Russian interference as a threat to the U.S. political system.

There is a danger of analysts and researchers being affected by political bias when sorting conspiracy theories into those that are justifiable (“good/warranted”) and those that are unsound (“bad/unwarranted”). I suggest that a better scholarly method is to distinguish between “short-term/tactical” and “long-term/strategic” conspiracies, especially when it comes to the many theories being peddled across the fraught U.S.-Russian relationship. In this regard, it is more likely that Russia might have made a recent *tactical* conspiratorial effort against the United States (to favor a preferred presidential candidate) than that it engaged in an outsized *strategic* conspiracy (to control the U.S. government).

The Study and Importance of Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy theory is typically defined as a non-conformist, non-mainstream [explanation](#) of an event referring to some secret actions of conspirators who, as a general rule, pursue illegal, criminal, and evil purposes. While conspiracy theorizing is usually represented as a flawed kind of thinking (a socially harmful activity), real conspiracies do periodically happen, and almost everybody occasionally resorts to some kind of conspiracy theorizing depending on the situation. Even the logic of some scholarly

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studies resembles conspiracy theories, such as pursuing hidden [linkages](#) between isolated events and then making argument selections in favor of preferred explanations. Taking these considerations into account, some Conspiracy Studies scholars try to distinguish between “acceptable” and “bad” conspiracy theorizing. This can be done, for example, by [highlighting](#) the phenomenon of “conspiracism,” which is the belief in the key and omnipresent role of conspiracies in the historical process. However, researchers can be estranged from the political views of the conspiracy theorists themselves, presenting an initial and inherent bias when the cases are collected and analyzed.

Resorting to conspiracy theories can play a range of important social functions. In times of political or economic troubles – when a situation goes out of control – they can help people make sense of reality by [providing](#) simple explanations for complex experiences and problems. In the context of a rivalry between a political regime and its opponents, conspiracy theorizing can empower regimes by mobilizing loyalists, and serve to disempower, marginalize, and scapegoat opponents. The other way also holds true, whereby the opposition can spread conspiratorial narratives to smear political parties and leaders. Finally, it is worth noting that conspiracy theory narratives can serve as a means of entertainment [provided](#) by the media and fiction writers.

Russian/Soviet and U.S. Comparative Historical Trends

Conspiracy theorizing is deeply rooted in both Russian and U.S. social thought traditions, though the Russian tradition is longer and more pervasive. Indeed, Russian conspiracy theorizing was influenced by isolationist sentiments to a much greater extent than America’s. During the Soviet Union, conspiracy theorizing was used as a powerful tool by the regime, serving not only to marginalize its opponents but also for the legitimization and mobilization of its supporters. Under Stalin’s rule, ungrounded accusations of spying for foreign intelligence services took or ruined the lives of a huge number of Soviet citizens. In the United States, shortly after the 1917 Russian Revolution, some influential U.S. politicians became suspicious about possible subversive Communist influences on domestic politics. This period, from 1917 to 1920, became known as the First Red Scare and a Second Red Scare occurred around 1947 and continued during the Cold War decades. These campaigns led to numerous dismissals, deportations, and public denigrations of alleged sympathizers of the Soviet Union. It should be noted that after the Stalinist period in the USSR and after the Second Red Scare in the United States, mutual conspiracist suspicions in both countries started to decline gradually, although suspicions and [whataboutist](#) sentiments continued from time to time.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, anti-US conspiracism was marginalized for some time but remained an accepted practice among influential Russian politicians and security service officers. In the Putin era, anti-American conspiracy theorizing increasingly became an important device for regime legitimization, mobilization of

supporters, and marginalization of opponents.² In the United States, conspiracy peddlers put aside anti-Russianisms in favor of alleged interference by others, including Jews (so-called Zionist Occupation Government theory) and globalists (so-called World Government theory, which supposes that the United Nations “occupies” the United States).

Russian Elections and Allegations about U.S. Interference

In 2011, Putin’s decision to run for a third presidential term after a four-year break triggered a large-scale, heterogeneous protest movement. It was directed against the pervasive corruption of top officials and the long-lasting monopolization of political power by Putin and his supporters. This protest movement led to numerous rallies and it decreased voting numbers for United Russia and Putin in both the parliamentary and presidential elections.

The Kremlin reacted to this movement by framing it as an attempt by the United States to orchestrate political outcomes in Russia (just as it did, the Kremlin alleges, in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan during the color revolutions). Washington was accused of using social media technologies to spur anti-governmental mass mobilizations and protest leaders were portrayed as paid U.S. puppets. NGOs that received foreign funding for any type of political purposes (election monitoring, human rights activities, etc.) became targets and were ultimately branded (legally) as foreign agents. After that election cycle, anti-Western conspiracy accusations were made by Putin’s regime to discredit its active opponents, legitimize itself as the only power able to resist foreign conspiracies, and rally supporters to be more active in backing their leader.

While trying to substantiate the government allegations during that 2011-12 election cycle, pro-Russian governmental sources emphasized mainly two points: 1) there was U.S. funding for NGOs in Russia that severely criticized the regime during the electoral campaigns (USAID and the NDI were [particularly mentioned](#) in this context) and 2) there were meetings between U.S. officials and Russian opposition figures [in Moscow](#) and in the United States (at the organizers’ expense). However, there is no convincing proof that the United States provided guidance to Russian oppositionists or that any direct funding of opposition figures, if it occurred, made a significant difference in the electoral campaign.

Allegations about the U.S. “behind-the-scenes” role in the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan movement was linked by Moscow to the methods and goals that the United States supposedly implemented in its work with the Russian opposition in 2011-12. The widely

² Also see: Serghei Golunov, “[The ‘Hidden Hand’ of External Enemies: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Putin’s Regime](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 192, 2012; Serghei Golunov, “[What Should Students Know about Russia’s Enemies? Conspiracy Theories in Russian Geopolitical Textbooks](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No 358, 2015.

cited [leak](#) of then Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's phone call with former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt contributed to the narrative put forward by Russian pro-governmental sources that the United States supported the Euromaidan and controlled who was eligible to join the new, negotiated, Ukrainian government. Indeed, framing the Russian liberal opposition and protesting Ukrainians as elements fully controlled by Washington made for a good cross-fit.

In the last few years, the United States has been systematically accused by Russian officials and state-sponsored media of interference in both Russia's domestic affairs and on the [international](#) scene. In December 2017, some unidentified senior U.S. administration officials were [told](#) that Moscow offered Washington a deal on mutual non-interference in internal affairs and elections, which, interestingly, would indirectly imply that Russia was involved in the 2016 U.S. elections. Perhaps two aspects were in play, that either Russia interfered as a form of Kremlin retaliation, or it did so as a way to halt supposed U.S. interference plans vis-a-vis the upcoming Russian presidential election of March 2018.

2016 U.S. Presidential Elections: Return of the "Russian Threat"

After languishing in the backyards of U.S. conspiracy theorizing discourses for a long time, the "Russian threat" became topical again as Trump rose to power. The range of accusations varied from mere pontificating to far-reaching assumptions that Russia managed to make the U.S. president their [puppet](#). There were (and are) narratives that Moscow is [trying](#) to demolish U.S. democracy and [subvert](#) U.S. sovereignty. Such conspiracy theorizing rhetoric—most often used by Democrats, though there are some Republicans who have spoken along these lines—likely has had a delegitimizing effect on Trump and his inner circle. There has certainly been an "explanatory" aroma in many of these narratives (seeking simple and self-justifying reasons for the perceived political catastrophe) rather than them serving self-legitimizing and mobilizing functions.

The key specific accusations concerning Russian interference included cyberattacks, massive online trolling, social media advertisements, online forum discussions meant to sway public opinion, and actual contacts between members of Trump's team and Russian officials and intermediaries. The accusations of Russia having organized cyberattacks on the Democratic National Committee and on state voter registration systems seem to be the most serious and grounded. Nevertheless, there is a lack of convincing evidence that any of these attacks shaped the outcome of the elections. While justifiably denouncing Russian cyberattacks as illegal and immoral, it should be born in mind that hacking itself is not an unusual kind of governmental operation. Over the last decade, it has been used by many states, including by the United States, which reportedly did it even [against](#) its own allies.

Employing internet trolls and ramping up social media influence campaigns is practiced by many actors worldwide, and such practices are not clearly prohibited in most countries, especially in those that protect free speech and a diverse media landscape. On a related note, there were strong conspiratorial insinuations in 2016-17 in the United States that the Russian media companies RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik were undermining U.S. democracy. However, this would indirectly imply that the U.S. media machines and political communication institutions were stunningly inefficient in the face of foreign narratives.

The argument about Russian connections with Trump's team is probably more vulnerable to whataboutist criticisms than the Russian cyber hacks. As mentioned above, during previous Russian electoral campaigns, U.S. officials in Moscow periodically tried to establish contacts with Russian opposition figures and some Russian NGOs involved in political activities were funded from U.S. sources. When the United States accused Russia of meddling, Putin made [whataboutist counter-accusations](#) saying that the United States has meddled in international politics in a similar way:

“Now, if this page is turned around, I'll tell you something that you should probably know... everywhere in the world, the United States actively interferes in the electoral campaigns of other countries. Do you not know this?”

It seems clear that more convincing evidence is needed to ascertain the facts of both the U.S. and Russian “political activities” in each other's countries.

Suggestions for Further Scholarship

As one way for researchers to handle conspiracy theories, particularly when discussing Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, it would make sense to distinguish between “tactical” conspiracy theories (implying short-term goals) and “strategic” conspiracy theories (implying long-term, highly ambitious goals). While strategic conspiracies—for example that South Korea and the United States are working to overthrow the North Korean regime—could really be on the agenda, most strategic conspiracy theories should be downplayed because they tend to be extremely overambitious in character. While tactical conspiracy theorizing can be both trustworthy and not trustworthy, strategic conspiracy theorizing is rarely trustworthy.

This approach differs slightly from the happenstance method of sorting conspiracy theories into those that are justifiable (“good/warranted”) and those that are unsound (“bad/unwarranted”), mostly because, again, this route has political bias attached. When applying this new type of dividing line to the matter at hand, one could say that the alleged Russian conspiracies/interferences can be viewed as tactical rather than strategic, which gives it a touch more legitimacy. More weight could be given to the idea

that Russia might have made a tactical conspiratorial effort with the limited goal of supporting a preferable U.S. candidate rather than to the idea that it engaged in strategic conspiratorial efforts to control the U.S. government and undermine U.S. democracy.

Hacking, propaganda, and secret contacts with state adversaries to win an election are relatively plausible conspiracy theories. Even if they are substantiated, the true extent of those activities may never be known, and, most importantly, if they took place, it may remain unknown if they affected the outcomes. How does one measure this last point? What is to be done about the whataboutisms when it comes to brushing off theories? International politics is full of cases when a targeted state resorts to the same conspiracy techniques by which it felt victimized. Finally, it goes without saying that the study of conspiracy theories is hard because even though they can be categorized to some extent, nobody really knows the true nature and extent of any of the clandestine state activities on which geopolitical conspiracy theories tend to feed.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories do not play equivalent roles in U.S. and Russian politics. In both countries, conspiracy theorizing has strong historical roots and is often used to delegitimize political opponents. In Russia, these functions are more prominent—conspiracy theorizing about U.S. clandestine involvement in domestic affairs is heavily used by the Russian regime and its media outlets. In terms of structure, there are some important differences between Russian and U.S. conspiracy narratives. Russian narratives emphasize alleged American subversive networking activities and financial support for oppositionists and NGOs. In the United States, theories focus on Trump-Russia connections, hacking attacks, and social media information warfare. Both countries have made similar accusations, that each has conducted types of digital and psychological warfare on the other.

Future comparative research on conspiracy theorizing in Russia and the United States could separate the mutual accusations of context-specific espionage and hacking (related directly to election cycles) from those that position the opposite party as executing nefarious long-term plans meant to subdue an adversary.