

Russia Attacked by Masons! Aliens! Americans!

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Many educated and highly placed Russians tend to see sinister enemy plots behind the international financial crisis, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growing protest movement. Wherever we turn, from informal conversations to official pronouncements and state-controlled television programs, Russians are told that the Pussy Riot performance and the international reaction to the verdict against the group were part of a coordinated campaign designed to undermine Russian values and bring down the state.

The list of evil forces typically blamed for these events includes the U.S. State Department, Israeli intelligence and a vaguely defined "global financial elite." This raises a question: Why do people tend to attribute significant events to the evil machinations of others?

In his famous essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," published in 1964, U.S. historian and journalist Richard Hofstadter lists the postulates that formed the credo of Americans who believed in conspiracy theories. According to these theories, a conspiracy

took over the entire U.S. political system, pushing the country into the Great Depression and driving the subsequent economic policies of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. They believed that Kremlin agents had infiltrated the United States and were working against traditional American values to ruin the state. Not only was the Kremlin the culprit behind the Great Depression, but it was also believed to have manipulated U.S. international policy following World War II and organized student protests in the 1960s, the sexual revolution and the general breakdown of traditional morality in the country.

The anti-Communist paranoia was a serious factor in U.S. politics: Thousands of people lost their jobs during the witch hunts waged by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s. The ultraconservatives continue to dominate the Republican Party, although China now seems to have replaced Russia for them as the main source of evil in the world. During the several years I lived in the United States, I often met people who sincerely believed there was an international conspiracy against U.S. interests.

Conspiracy theories have existed at all times and in all countries. For example, Western European ecclesiastical and theological circles in the late 18th and early 19th centuries blamed the French Revolution on the "Illuminati," an all-powerful and mysterious sect that they believed had gained influence over the European intellectual elite and ruling circles. Masons, Catholics, Jesuits, Illuminati, international bankers, Christians, Jews, Communists and aliens all have played the same role at different times and in different countries that many Russians now ascribe to the U.S. State Department.

The popularity of conspiracy theories is growing steadily in today's rapidly changing world. Psychologists point to several factors to explain this. The main reason is that a conspiracy theory paints a straightforward and uncomplicated picture of the world that offers simple answers to complex questions.

In reality, though, many events that affect our lives are, by their very nature, unpredictable. A good example is the Arab Spring, which caught the United States, whom many accuse of complicity in the resulting turmoil, completely by surprise. The same is true of the Soviet collapse, which as late as the mid-1980s seemed impossible to most U.S. analysts.

It is psychologically discomfiting to be faced with uncertainty and a lack of simple explanations for events. Conspiracy theories impose a sense of order on the chaos. They leave no room for chance, for plain human stupidity or for the fact that most people are forced to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

Of course, belief in a conspiracy makes it impossible to formulate reasonable predictions about the future, but it can help to easily explain almost every event of any significance. Just try to argue with a staunch supporter of any conspiracy theory — whether they believe in "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," that outside forces are behind Pussy Riot, that the Holocaust never happened or that the U.S. government actually did have contact with extraterrestrials — and you will quickly realize that none of the arguments or solid evidence you produce will convince your interlocutor that his theory is flawed.

This is why belief in conspiracies is irrational and more closely resembles religious dogma that requires no logical proof for acceptance. According to British philosopher Karl Popper, conspiracy theories are similar to ancient pagan beliefs. He writes: "The belief in the Homeric

gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups: sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer." Just like membership in a religious cult, belief in a conspiracy theory may give a person a feeling of superiority over the "naive majority" — that is, over those who do not share the same belief. In some cases, such a belief serves as the basis for uniting people in sects, in "interest groups" or political movements. In this way, it satisfies an important psychological need.

I am not saying that conspiracies do not exist. Of course, there are states, organizations and influential individuals who pursue their own interests without always making them public. It has always been this way. States interfere in one another's affairs; transnational companies, investment banks and hedge funds try to manipulate stock markets; and some of us scheme against co-workers or fall victim to such intrigues.

In the end, however, most events in the world occur despite conspiratorial designs, not because of them. Most people find it too difficult to acknowledge this truth, creating fertile ground for belief in conspiracy theories. In fact, governments frequently try to co-opt that sentiment by creating imaginary enemies — both domestic and foreign — whom they claim are responsible for all the country's misfortunes.

Russia is certainly no exception to this rule. In the era of mass media, almost all authoritarian regimes have adopted this strategy, and even a few democracies. That means Russians will go on hearing about a fifth column, the exclusive Bilderberg Club of influential political and industrial leaders, and the global financial elite for a long time to come. The main thing is to understand where these myths come from and why people are so willing to believe them.

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