

Understanding the Infodemic of Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-2-83-104

Abstract

The article analyzes the QAnon phenomenon and the anti-vaxxer movement of COVID-19 deniers¹ as typological manifestations of conspiratorial “alternative rationality.” A number of hypotheses have been proposed: during a pandemic and a parallel infodemic, conspiracy thinking quickly becomes transboundary; all conspiracy theories share certain features; they are discursive (according to Foucault) and underlain by the question of power; growing public distrust of the government is one of the fundamental

¹ The term ‘anti-vaxxer movement of COVID-19 deniers’ used in this work refers to all kinds of individuals and entities advocating and expressing sentiments that differ from the official position of the WHO and the national authorities responsible for combating the COVID-19 pandemic. These transnational communities of people can be called anti-COVID/vaxxer/QR-Warriors (by analogy with culture warriors), and the manifestations of the new environment can be described as anti-vaxx-politics (the issue of anti-vaxx politicians has so far been addressed in journalistic, but not in academic works) (<https://www.codastory.com/newsletters/anti-vax-politicians/>).

reasons for the popularity of conspiracy theories. The article proves that the transboundary nature of information contributes to the global spread of conspiracy theories, but they cannot be universalized because they have local specifics in each country (region).

Keywords: conspiracy theory, pandemic, infodemic, alternative rationality, deep state, QAnon, anti-vaxxing, COVID-19 dissidence.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown that different groups, communities, countries, and civilizations determine the balance between freedom and security differently, drawing different red lines. They are difficult to define and they are poorly rationalized, but crossing them can dramatically destabilize the political situation, provoke a social explosion, and create or deepen a cultural split.

There are many quantitative studies that address the issue of positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and the rejection of rational behavior during a pandemic (wearing of masks, social distancing, vaccination) (see, for example, Oleksy et al., 2021; Romer and Jamieson, 2020; Biddlestone et al., 2020; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; Allington and Dhavan, 2020). Russian researchers have not overlooked this issue either (Samygin et al., 2020; Nestik et al., 2020) and have measured the relationship between belief in conspiracy theory and the expression of conservative values by social cynicism, faith in the justice of the world, trust in social institutions, and engagement in network communication. Mythologemes of medical conspiracy theories (Prilutsky, 2020), as well as the rise of conspiracy theories amid social fears gripping Russians and the impact of the media on public consciousness (Khokhlov, 2020) have been described in detail. The body of these studies is mainly socio-psychological and philosophical-cultural in nature.

This article explores the genesis of conspiratorial consciousness during a pandemic from the behavioral (Dutkiewicz and Kazarinova, 2017; Taylor, 2019) and system-political perspectives. Research focuses on the instrumentalization of public fears by politicians. Manifestations

of conspiratorial consciousness are analyzed mainly (but not entirely) through an umbrella conspiracy theory known as QAnon (Arkhipova et al., 2020). The article also studies how conspiratorial thinking is transformed into political action due to the transnationalization of this phenomenon, and examines local features of conspiracy theory, including in Russia (Yablokov, 2020). The article addresses the infodemics of conspiracy theories and the role of the international community in fighting them. The situation in Russia is investigated separately to show who benefits from conspiratorial public sentiments.

GENESIS OF CONSPIRATORIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Cognitive dissonance, anxiety on the verge of a panic attack, and a tide of unverified and false information swept the world in 2020-2021. Not only the proponents of a mythological or religious worldview took the existential threat directly, but also people with a secular and scientific mindset surmised some sort of apocalypse. Many public intellectuals announced the end of the world order, liberal globalization, and the “civilization of bluff” (Schwab and Malleret, 2020; Campbell and Doshi, 2020; Kapustin, 2020). The birth of a new world on the ruins of the old one, utopian or dystopian, was the best-selling idea that undoubtedly dramatized public opinion.

Amid mounting uncertainty, when traditional forms of rationality such as religion and social sciences less and less meet the needs of broad sections of the population, there is a growing demand for “alternative rationality” as well as for unconventional forms of religious and quasi-religious beliefs, quasi- and para-scientific forms of knowledge. The pandemic undoubtedly amplifies this trend.

The idea that fear can be a policy tool was born long before the COVID-19 pandemic (Robin, 2006). As the state and the market were gradually losing the ability to effectively regulate social relations, fear became increasingly suitable for “consolidating power relations, creating a new political dogma and super-ideology that incorporates all trends from populism to neoconservatism” (Dutkiewicz and Kazarinova, 2017, p. 10). It is not surprising, therefore, that “fearization” of politics prevailed during global upheavals.

The psychological health of people around the world turned out to be very vulnerable during the pandemic. For the first time, several generations of living people faced such a clear threat to their life and well-being, and a major change in everyday practices in a situation of almost global lockdown and an economic recession that followed. The feeling of anxiety and the psychological state during the pandemic have become one of the main objects of research. Of particular interest are longitudinal (covering several months) cross-national studies conducted by the universities of Groningen and Abu Dhabi as part of the PsyCorona project.² Interestingly, Russians in general were close to the world average in terms of such negative feelings as “loneliness” and “anxiety.” At the same time, according to the study, conspiratorial sentiments in Russia were about 10 percent higher than in other countries. People in Russia more often than the rest of the world think that they do not get enough information about real processes.

The pandemic and lockdown had a serious psychological impact on Russians. According to a sociological study conducted in the spring of 2020 (VTsIOM, 2020), the level of anxiety among Russians was comparable to that they had felt during the most dramatic periods in modern Russian history: October 1993, when troops were brought into Moscow and the parliament building was shelled, and the default in August 1998. Sociologists note that the focus of people’s fears shifted from the risk of infection to the financial consequences of the pandemic. Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions were made: 1) a negative federal news agenda causes massive cognitive dissonance; 2) the federal authorities are using a negative news agenda in order to boost the feeling of responsibility among people, but instead they are increasing their anxiety; 3) alternative sources of information are multiplying. The latter is a key point for us.

In conditions of increased nervousness, the perception and transmission of information becomes less adequate. In a state of anxiety and heightened emotions, the ability of people to recognize fake information decreases significantly, while their willingness to share (repost) it grows rapidly (Martel, Pennycook, Rand, 2019). This

² <https://psycorona.shinyapps.io/WebApp/>

explains the scale of and the speed at which fake information about the coronavirus, its prevention and treatment spread. The World Health Organization has dubbed this process “infodemic”: “An infodemic is too much information, including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak” (The First WHO Conference, 2020). The WHO’s conclusion followed statements by some European intellectuals, including Slavoy Žižek (2020) who spoke about major viral ideological epidemics, Jean-Luc Nancy (2020) who talked about a psychic epidemic of a linguistic virus generated by a biological virus, and Alain Badiou (2020, p. 70) who wrote that “the epidemic test seems to dissolve everywhere the intrinsic activity of Reason, and forces the subjects to return to the sad effects (mysticism, fables, prayers, prophecies and curses) that were commonplace in the Middle Ages when the plague swept the territories.”

So COVID-19 provoked a global “psychological pandemic” that manifested itself in the growth of quasi-rational forms of cognition (including conspiratorial sentiments) and sharp public opinion fluctuations. Moreover, the psychological pandemic outran the biological virus. Anxiety associated with a series of economic crises and the “erosion” of the middle class in the United States and partly in Europe, intensified by the epidemic, reverberated across Russia as well. The feeling of anxiety among Russians was further exacerbated by the deteriorating socioeconomic situation, political transformations negatively affecting public trust in government institutions, and the emotional escalation in the media against the background of negative geopolitical developments.

In a challenging psychological and worldview situation that has affected most countries, including in many respects Russia, a coherent picture of the world, both religious and scientific, and uniform approaches to explaining the key mechanisms of public life fade out. A world that is becoming more and more complex in all respects (political, economic, demographic) and less and less understandable and predictable, together with the habit of finding a rational, comprehensive and consistent explanation of social processes and establishing direct cause and effect relationships, generate demand

for alternative rationality. The infodemic and apocalyptic feelings are creating a new information reality that seriously destabilizes socio-political processes in the global world.

POLITICAL ASPECTS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Ontologically, a conspiracy theory is an interpretive “generalization of special cases,” that is, an attempt to build an interconnected structure out of random or meaningless data. Researcher Ilya Yablokov (2018) views conspiracy theories as a way of perceiving reality that is based on the idea that the world is ruled by secret forces. Substantive elements of any conspiracy theory include a secret plan, a secret organization that implements it, and steps to worsen the living conditions of the group against which the plan is directed. As a worldview, conspiracy thinking serves as self-psychotherapy: it gives an illusion of control over the situation. Remarkably, people tend to accept a negative picture of the situation rather than uncertainty in order to “take back control” (to use Brexiteers’ motto). Naturally, lack of proper interaction with the state in a situation of political uncertainty adds to conspiracy thinking.

American researcher Knight (2000) states that “the rise of a cultural fascination with conspiracy as an undeniably plausible working assumption in the last few decades cannot be separated from the emergence of what might be called a culture of conspiracy. It is not just that conspiracy thinking has become more legitimate as a popular mode of historical explanation because a few conspiracies have been unmasked in a very public fashion. An internalized fantasy of conspiracy and counterconspiracy also seems to captivate those on the inside of the power game. During the twentieth century, and since the foundation of the CIA in 1947 in particular, American politics has increasingly relied on clandestine means to pursue its goals, and a bureaucratic culture of secrecy has come to be taken for granted” (Knight, 2000, p. 28). So, conspiracy culture has become a hidden technology of American politics.

In extremely rare cases, one can come across a positive conspiracy theory concerning secret brotherhoods that protect society from threats. This is one of the secrets behind the success of QAnon, which first gained popularity in the United States and then in other countries and

which apparently draws inspiration from American pop culture with its superhero industry. Yablokov claims that for countries with a global mission, such as the United States and Russia, conspiratorial motives constitute significant elements of national identity and political culture.

When normalizing and generalizing conspiracy theory, Yablokov interprets it as one of the grounds for building a national identity amidst socio-political transformation, as ideological support for identifying oneself against the significant Other, and as a way to legitimize political regimes and ensure social consolidation during socioeconomic turbulence, which is characteristic of many societies regardless of political culture and regime.

Avoiding the view on conspiracy theories as a product of paranoid thinking (Richard Hofstadter's approach) and "marginal groups (mostly from the far right) who exploit populist anti-elitist rhetoric to scapegoat certain groups of society," Yablokov concludes that "a common shortcoming of these concepts is their over-stigmatization," and proposes a new approach, according to which "conspiracy theories could, in fact, constitute a mode of rational thinking" (Yablokov, 2018, p. 3-4) and which could be helpful in addressing social phenomena and problems that are not represented in the mainstream rational discourse. Using Michel Foucault's terms, he calls it "suppressed knowledge" about significant social conflicts. Just like populism is the reverse side of democracy (Meshcheryakov, 2019), conspiracy theory, which is closely related to populism—alternative rationality of the increasingly broad sections of people gripped by resentment—is both the cause and the effect of identity politics, the result of unfair distribution of the positive and negative effects of globalization, and a manifestation of accumulated negative emotions and unjustified expectations.

All these emotions associated with an objective decline in living standards, both before and especially during the pandemic, dramatically increased distrust of the authorities, as well as representative institutions in general, the media, transnational businesses, especially those working in the field of information technology, as well as scientific expertise financed by the state and big corporations. The plot about the division into political and business elites who are "up

to something bad,” with scientists and journalists joining them and serving their interests, and understanding but powerless masses in tow, materialized in popular culture, primarily American, including such comedy films as *Kingsman: Secret Service* and *Don't Look Up*.

According to some estimates, however, trust in experts grew during the pandemic, and Ivan Krastev (2020) views this as a sign that rationality is coming back. However, this question cannot be resolved without a detailed cross-country study that would examine which groups of people are inclined or not inclined to trust certain experts, and what their initial attitude was like. In a rapidly changing situation, a professional expert opinion needs time to form; sometimes it seems divided, and the status of an expert looks blurred. It is highly likely that people trust those experts who conform to their views (that is, people inclined towards “alternative rationality” do not trust official experts representing the system, but trust “experts” who whip up fears or debunk official expertise and policy). This tendency can be facilitated by the “warming up” of mass consciousness by the media, media experts “selling threats,” mass culture, and politicians in different countries who politicize/instrumentalize public fears (Yabloko 2020).

MANIFESTATIONS OF CONSPIRATORIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

All conspiracy theories that have manifested themselves recently emerged during past epidemics. They can be grouped into several basic categories: “there is no disease,” “the real scale is concealed from us,” “the authorities are intimidating people for enslavement,” and “this is the work of external enemies.” The entire variety of mythological constructs is based on these models. These “meta-conspiracy constructs,” often competing with each other, imply that “the adherents of one conspiracy theory can easily believe another one, even if they contradict each other” (Arkhipova and Kirzyuk, 2020).

Conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding the origin, scale, prevention, treatment and other aspects of COVID-19 began to spread even before the pandemic was officially announced, and before the virus hit Russia. They were distributed by social media, instant messengers, and even state-controlled media in various countries, including Russia.

The most common theories claim that the virus is a biological weapon created by China, the United States or other countries, a tool for population regulation, as well as the covert and aggressive introduction of transhumanist technologies to control people (via microchip implants). The infodemic also includes medical misinformation about ways to prevent, treat and diagnose the coronavirus disease, which the WHO has declared the most dangerous coronavirus conspiracy theory. Analysis shows that the content, forms, and channels used for the dissemination of COVID-19 conspiracy theory show no significant differences from society to society or from one nation to another. They also have the same triggers. Post-Soviet conspiracy theories are therefore a regional variation of a global phenomenon that has a long historical legacy in Russia (Ortmann, 2012).

One of the main plots that sparked conspiratorial sentiments was the Event 201 high-level pandemic exercise hosted in 2019 by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Johns Hopkins Center, 2020). Bill Gates' speech (Gates, 2015), which had preceded the event, outlined key problems related to the world's unpreparedness for the spread of coronavirus infections, and accurately foresaw the events that followed, which gained him a worldwide reputation not as a visionary and humanist, but as the personification of global evil, one of the main "behind-the-scenes figures in the world government" and even the infernal creator of the pandemic.

A book titled *COVID-19: The Great Reset* (Schwab and Malleret, 2020) released in the summer of 2020 was also one of the events that attracted public attention. Its title became the topic of one of the sessions at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 25-29, 2021. Problematization of opportunities for future development is the main message sent in this book. But some commentators see the idea of Great Reset as a manifesto of "new globalists," as a revolution that establishes a new world order. Although the book is more like a rebranded version of old ideas debated for many years at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the public discussion around it was quite emotional and largely revolved around conspiracy theories both in Russia (not only in religious-

conservative (Novy Divny Mir, 2021), but also respectable academic and journalistic (Nedel, 2021) media) and in the West. This example shows how the conspiracy agenda forces its way into mainstream politics, finding supporters in parliaments and governments. So, the Great Reset is also the name of a conspiracy theory that unites all American conspiracy theories of the past from the flat-Earth theory and the Pizzagate pedophile scandal to more integral QAnon into a single narrative.

Another example is ID2020, which is based on the fact that in 2019 Microsoft filed a patent application for a cryptocurrency system mining process using body activity data and patented it in March 2020 under the number WO2020060606. This distinctive code containing a triple repetition of the number six, and therefore associated by some with satanic influences, was one of the reasons why it got sucked into a conspiracy theory (Thomas, 2020). ID2020, in which the concerns of anti-vaxxers and opponents of QR codes meet with elements of religious consciousness, along with a variety of other forms of alternative rationality, fits into a meta-conspiracy theory. As a matter of fact, the ID2020 project is a prototype of a digital identity system supported by the United Nations as part of the Sustainable Development Goals initiative. But proponents of this conspiracy narrative voice well-founded concerns about possible privacy threats and surveillance by digital identification systems. Possible “digital slavery” and freedom restrictions motivate political protests.

The Great Reset, Event 201, 5G networks, and other triggers of conspiracy theories share the same features: when scientific forecasts implying negative developments released by authors linked with big business, big data or artificial intelligence prove correct, they are seen by the public not as a warning to humanity, but as a declaration of war to it. In the spirit of the “new Middle Ages,” the accuracy of expert forecasts and the performance of algorithms look like magic, sometimes black magic, to everyday consciousness that cannot comprehend the principles of their work.

The transition to active political behavior (mass protests, violent actions, introduction of previously marginal content into the discursive field of “normal” public policy) is a reflection of present-day reality.

Previously publicly unacceptable discourses and political practices not just become possible during crises, but get incorporated into the political mainstream, thus expanding the boundaries of normativity. Normal public discussion is replaced, even at the official level, by a narrative of confrontation between healthy, rational, prosocial forces, on the one hand, and irrational, conspiracy theorists and extreme individualists, on the other. The latter can always be blamed for administrative miscalculations in order to channel public discontent against them. In so doing the authorities get a false impression that they fully control this narrative.

QANON PHENOMENON IN THE UNITED STATES

The QAnon umbrella conspiracy theory appeared in the United States a few years before the pandemic, but it was during that period that it made a strong showing. The theory did not arise out of nowhere but fell on fertile ground. Such ideas become increasingly popular due to a certain type of consciousness that is very common both in the United States and other countries. Research (Lewandowski, Oberauer, Gignac, 2013) has revealed, specifically, that belief in the invisible hand of the market greatly predetermines belief in all kinds of conspiracy theories. They are extremely popular with the American far right, who are behind not only the large-scale dissemination of these ideas among Americans, whose religious consciousness is eschatological, but also behind a specific political action, namely, the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The QAnon movement is an example of the fusion of quasi-religious faith and politics, highly characteristic of today's world. Having emerged as an element of socio-cultural and political polarization in the United States, during the run-up to the presidential election this movement quickly became its symbol and got an unprecedented boost for development. QAnon ideas are among the newest conspiracy theories that have rapidly gained popularity. QAnon started unfolding new details and incorporated a variety of conspiracy theories from Kennedy's assassination by CIA agents to a cabal of Satan involving the Democratic Party leadership. The possibility to add new details to QAnon, even internally contradictory ones, turned it into the most successful and rapidly spreading conspiracy theory on the web.

The main proponent of the theory, anonymous agent Q was seen as a politician (possibly ex-President Trump himself), an agent of security services, and a prophet at the same time. His adherents tried to decipher the riddles he left on the Internet. The shorter and more unintelligible and infrequent these messages were, the more popular they became. From the outside, it looked like a grandiose hoax, whose authors exploited the paranoid state of its followers believing that Agent Q was fighting with representatives of the American deep state led by Hillary Clinton. The deep state means a hidden and malign order-type organization, a coordinated group of public servants who influence national policy without regard to the democratically elected leadership. According to QAnon supporters, its main sponsors are the Rothschilds, the Saudis, and the George Soros family.

After Trump's defeat in the elections, the blocking of tens of thousands of social media accounts and the arrest of some of the QAnon active members, including Jacob Chansley (QAnon Shaman or Q Shaman) and Ron Watkins (Ronald "Ron" Watkins), who had run the 8chan website, where Agent Q's messages had been posted, the movement gradually lost popularity. Both its supporters and its critics and whistleblowers often mentioned the "hand of Moscow." While the former saw Russia and its president as part of a global evil conspiracy, the latter, who supported Trump in his fight against this evil, attributed QAnon's success to Trump's connections with Russia and the interference in the American elections by influential Russian hackers. In any case, Russia happens to be part of conspiracies.

COVID CONSPIRACY IN EUROPE

QAnon had its heyday in the United States during the 2020 election campaign but then its ideas spread overseas, adjusting along the way. Like other new forms of ideation in the modern world, this movement manifests itself like a puzzle or a "pick-and-mix," easily incorporating all local conspiracy theories and integrating into the national context. By analogy with the ISIS³ "terrorist franchise," QAnon acts as a "conspiracy franchise."

³ Terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

These ideas were most popular (after the United States) in the UK, followed by Canada, Australia, and Germany, but it is not yet possible to provide more accurate data. The November 2020 protests in the UK took place under the slogans of COVID-19 dissidence and in line with the Great Reset meta-conspiracy theory. Local right-wing COVID-19 dissidents believed that the elites would use the coronavirus epidemic as a pretext for pursuing a radical policy of forced vaccination, introducing digital identity cards, and restricting private property rights.

Germany (Dittrich et al., 2020) has its own fertile soil for nurturing various conspiracy theories—the Reichsbürger movement. Its followers claim that Germany is still occupied by Western allies, do not recognize its legitimacy, and call themselves citizens of the German Reich. Some of them espouse right-wing populist and nationalist views. Disparate groupuscules are increasingly often seen participating in street protests and extremist activities. In Germany, QAnon adherents are closely associated with anti-Semitic organizations, but unlike their American counterparts, who criticized Hillary Clinton, German conspiracy theorists directed their wrath against Angela Merkel as the main anti-hero personifying the vicious liberal transnational elite.

The QAnon narrative reached **France** at the end of 2018—apparently through Canada and the UK—and fell on fertile ground laid by the yellow vests movement (Weill, 2019; Scott, 2020). French conspiracy theorists targeted Emmanuel Macron for being a Jesuit-schooled and Rothschild-trained “deep state pawn.” In 2019-2020, a network of QAnon-dedicated Internet platforms was created (@QanonFrance on Twitter, Qanon-fr.com website, Gilets Jaunes versus Pédocriminalité (yellow vests versus pedophile crime) on Facebook, and others). This is when the anti-COVID and QAnon narratives merged into one. Conspiracy theorists claim that the COVID-19 pandemic “was part of the Deep State Plan...” to destroy the economy, cause chaos, and create demand for a world government led, of course, by Soros, the Rothschilds, and the Saudi family. Activists eagerly exchanged relevant messages and videos. For example, a QAnon video of July 2020, posted on the DisSept.com, was picked up by yellow vests’ supporters (including a public group called Gilet Jaune, which had

196,000 members) and was also actively disseminated by the supporters of local conspiracy theories (Labbe et al., n.d.).

The riots that swept big cities in the *Netherlands* in January 2021 after the imposition of total lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19 clearly showed that its deniers and citizens who had joined them were determined to fight for their freedoms. Their core was “coronavirus deniers, football fans, and Nazis,” but still, what made the protests so massive over the past forty years is that they were “social, not political” in nature and involved the majority of socio-political groups brought together not by some ideology, but by their own fatigue from the coronavirus crisis (Poplavsky, 2021). It is probably not so easy to distinguish those tired of coronavirus restrictions from ideological freedom fighters either in Amsterdam or in Moscow. But in both cases, there were mixed reasons for public discontent, even though QAnon followers made up the bulk of radical protesters in some European capitals.

COVID-19 conspiracy theorists’ discourse is largely based on common plots and ideas about the conspiracy of liberal globalism to enslave the masses through digitalization (microchip implants), and about side effects from vaccines. It is often religiously motivated.

In *Russia*, COVID-19 conspiracy mythologemes came into wide use thanks to a Besogon TV program entitled “Who Has the State in Their Pocket?” released on May 1, 2020. In it, film director Nikita Mikhalkov spoke about “billionaire Bill Gates’ plan to implant microchips in people under the guise of vaccination” in order to “reduce the population” by influencing human behavior. By and large, the Russian conspiracy discourse repeats the key points accentuated in the West. An original and acute topic is distance learning. The problem stems from real tension in society caused by the transition to this format of education in February-May and October-December 2020, as well as by rational fears that the difficult economic situation would force the government to cut social spending, particularly on education. This explains why Sberbank CEO German Gref, who advocates digitalization and numerous high-tech projects, including EdTech ones, has become the main anti-hero of conspiracy discourse in Russia. The Russian Communist Party was the main political force

that exploited conspiratorial and anti-vaxxer sentiments during the 2021 election campaign.

COUNTERING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Recently, QAnon has been less active. Firstly, with the end of the election campaign in the United States, the space of socio-political confrontation has shrunk. Secondly, the American and European authorities, with the assistance of IT companies, have significantly limited possibilities for disseminating these ideas. Following a series of actions organized by armed QAnon supporters, the FBI declared the movement a terrorist threat. TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube purged QAnon ideas and many other conspiracy theories, including COVID-19 dissidence, from their platforms. Today the threat of radical action by QAnon is estimated as relatively small. There is even an opinion that deradicalization efforts are a waste of resources and may potentially be dangerous as they overstate the threat and only fortify the right-wing agenda (Moskalenko, 2021).

Censoring conspiracy theories on social media is not easy technically and substantively. On the one hand, QAnon is recognized as a threat comparable to terrorist organizations; on the other hand, the blocking of their activities by the government and IT giants adds credibility to conspiracy ideas in the eyes of their followers. Apart from the blocking, the European Union and UNESCO have decided to expand educational projects in order to deconstruct conspiracy myths, develop critical thinking, and explain the fundamentals of psychology and communication with people captured by conspiratorial ideation. These include #ThinkBeforeSharing—Stop the Spread of Conspiracy Theories (The European Commission and UNESCO, 2020). Russia has followed suit with an encyclopedia of coronavirus rumors and fakes (Encyclopedia of Coronavirus Rumors, 2020) and a research project of the School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Arkhipova et al., 2020). These projects are similar in design, but, unfortunately, not in scale.

Consolidated efforts to stop conspiracy theories have produced little effect in Russia despite the government's measures to popularize

vaccination, supported by a large-scale information campaign. At the same time, public conspiracy activists worked on a variety of information platforms, using online (Facebook pages of COVID-19 dissidents, Telegram, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Internet portals, instant messengers) and traditional (TV, printed media) communication channels, creating and supporting organizational infrastructure (Union for the Revival of Russia) and analytical centers (Katechon), and holding public events (a roundtable on issues related to nationwide vaccination against coronavirus entitled “All-Russian Vaccination or a Threat to National Security”).

Almost all global social media are working to block this kind of content. There are studies that use quantitative analysis data to show how social media differ in terms of speed and intensity with which they spread fake information. Of all popular social media such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Gab, Twitter is the most respectable one, according to a study conducted by a group of Italian scientists (Cinelli et al., 2020), and the most unreliable is Instagram, where the R number exceeds 2.2, that is, each Instagram user, on average, potentially “infects” 2.2 persons with texts provoking panic attacks.

In the Russian segment of the Internet called Runet, most conspiracy communities operate on VKontakte (VK). The Russian version of QAnon on VK mainly promotes COVID-19 dissidence and anti-vaccine ideas. Standing next to them are groups that oppose 5G technologies, supporters of the flat-Earth conspiracy, and HIV dissidents. Odnoklassniki is similar. Telegram hosts several unpopular groups opposing 5G and channels run by COVID-19 dissidents with just a handful of subscribers. At the same time, the audience of QAnon Russia on Telegram is three times bigger than that on VKontakte, reaching almost 60,000 people (Protiv vaktsinatsii, 2021). After conspiracy content related to the spread of COVID-19 has been removed from Facebook, there remain only a few small groups espousing flat-Earth ideas. Most of these pages have been found on VKontakte—122 communities with 11 million accounts. Odnoklassniki is ahead of all others by the total number of subscribers: 18 million users are subscribed to 85 popular pages containing fake information

about COVID-19 (Vinokurov, 2021). Facebook labels anti-vaxxer content as “false information,” but other media do not do even that, and none of the social media blocks it completely for the sake of traffic.

GOVERNMENT AS A BENEFICIARY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Obviously, the problem is the lack of political will to block this kind of conspiracy content. Moreover, one gets the impression that its proliferation is encouraged. The issue of COVID-19 conspiracy theory cannot be considered outside the wider context—the spread of conspiracy theories in the Russian public and political spheres.

According to Yablokov (2018), conspiracy theory serves as a solid foundation for the Russian value-political project, with political elites and opposition counter-elites being the main producers, distributors, and beneficiaries of conspiracy theories. For official political discourse in Russia, explaining certain processes in the world with the help of conspiracy theory is not an occasional deviation from the norm, but part of the norm itself. Conspiracy theories underlie not only conclusions regarding the intentions of geopolitical opponents in the West, but also the basic understanding of global changes and their driving forces. Russian official discourse forms its own rationality and draws its own picture of the world. In some ways, pro-government conspiracy narratives oppose counter-elite narratives, and in some ways, they complement and substantiate them. And although the authors of such narratives seek to mobilize people in order to increase governability, the abuse of conspiracy theories in power discourse and the media leads to uncontrolled irrationalization of the public sphere and reduces the predictability of reaction. Consequently, the risk of losing control increases.

In Russian realities, the irrationalization of the public sphere has manifested itself in the anti-vaxxer movement as a form of distrust of the authorities, amplified by the rejection of government interference with an individual’s freedoms. So, the question of what created the anti-vaxxer movement in Russia should apparently be addressed through identifying existential elements in the balance between individualism and collectivism. At the same time, Russian anti-vaxxers are not

involved in other conspiracy plots too much, and therefore are not some marginal cohort, but make up an alternative mainstream group due to their large number.

COVID-19 dissidents exist in many developed countries. Most of them can be found among fundamentalists, on the one hand, and radical left-wing anarchists, on the other. But there are also many of them among those who adhere to moderate views. Moreover, research proves that the use of conspiracy theories reduces political activity and the desire to participate in public political campaigns (Yablokov, 2018), essentially acting as a powerful demotivating factor.

The followers of conspiracy ideas use conceptual models that are common for a particular period of time or area, and build their discourse as a puzzle based on the QAnon transnational “conspiracy franchise,” with relevant national specifics mixed in. The normalization of conspiracy discourse is taking place globally, becoming more habitual and socially permissible, and at the same time creating certain normativity, which provides an alternative rationality for discussing acute social problems ignored by the mainstream discourse.

Today, there are no signs of a potentially organized international interaction based on conspiracy theories, and conspiratorial sentiments serve simultaneously as a mobilizing and demobilizing factor of political engagement. These ideas are rapidly capturing large numbers of people, transcending national borders, and sparking brief but rough political actions that come as a shock to the governments.

Political elites using conspiracy theories and discourses for their own purposes increase the risks of destabilization and loss of governability. Russia is no exception to the general trends in global politics. QAnon seems to be a thing of the past now, but the increasingly growing anti-vaxxer movement and rejection of digital identification and QR codes (in the ID2020 conspiracy format) are creating serious challenges to national security by directly jeopardizing the health of the nation, and indirectly furnishing a strong basis for mobilizing political protests.

Conspiracy theory creates a “self-replicating system” and draws a consistent picture of the world with a complete explanatory potential, which makes it attractive. Enveloped by this alternative rationality,

one begins to act in the proposed system of social and political coordinates. International relations are no exception. A picture, where a “conspiracy of transnational elites” and “collective and unfriendly actions of effective personalist autocracies” are behind everything, generates a matching foreign policy narrative and strategy, increasing conflict potential manifold. In addition, reality in the modern world is often more absurd than conspiracy theories: secret spies and poisoners or omnipotent hackers who can decide the outcome of elections and referendums in foreign countries seem to be the fruit of an inflamed Cold War-era consciousness but only until they get proved by documentary evidence. The limits of the possible and permissible in world politics become blurred, critical thinking fails, and the border between reality and alternative reality becomes indistinguishable.

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