

## **Conspiracy Theories in Russian Security Thinking**

Erik Andermo, Martin Kragh<sup>1</sup>, Liliia Makashova

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### Abstract

Based on an analysis of around 500 texts from security-affiliated Russian academic journals and one newspaper over a ten-year period, this article details how conspiratorial ideas are spread, tolerated and legitimized within military institutions and official think tanks in Russia. Particular conspiracy theories systematically underpin a broader conspiratorial worldview, which in its basic orientation is anti-Western and illiberal, and which reinforces a perception of Russia as being under threat. As such, this phenomenon serves to justify and rationalize both Russian foreign policy conduct, as well as the targeted repression of various domestic groups as necessary for security reasons. We discuss whether the prevalence of conspiratorial ideas merely reflects an established worldview popular in certain circles or if it influences actual policy and outline some policy implications for the interpretation of Russian foreign policy conduct. The prevalence of conspiracy theories in renowned publications is a concern in itself since it hampers a genuine understanding of international affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> Contact: [Martin.Kragh@ui.se](mailto:Martin.Kragh@ui.se).

Over the past decade, conspiratorial ideas have moved closer to the mainstream of Russian political discourse. A study undertaken by the Russian daily newspaper *Vedomosti* showed that conspiracy theories in Russian media were on average six to nine times more frequent in 2018 than they were in 2011.<sup>2</sup> This is part of an international trend, where conspiracy theories in political discourse seem to have become more popular.<sup>3</sup> The trend is discernible also in the higher echelons of society, where Russian politicians and policy makers have promoted conspiratorial thinking, especially those with a background in the security establishment. Andreas Umland, an early observer of this trend, noted in 2013 that “there is a danger that the increased campaign of incitement against the US may ... permanently establish a conspiracy-minded, paranoid worldview as a legitimate pattern for the interpretation of international events.”<sup>4</sup> As an example of an apparent confirmation of Umland’s prediction, Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council, former director of the Russian Federal Security Service FSB (*Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*) and widely regarded as part of president Vladimir Putin’s inner circle, alleged in 2015 that the US would prefer if Russia did not even exist as a state, and that in the American perspective Russia did not deserve its endowments of natural wealth. To support this idea, he referenced an alleged statement by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the effect that neither the Far East nor Siberia belonged to Russia.<sup>5</sup> Already on the same day as the interview was published, Yulia Latynina at the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* debunked the story and traced the origins of the Albright myth to pro-Kremlin Internet forums, although she concluded that Patrushev’s statements reflected a genuine belief.<sup>6</sup> In a more recent example, the Russian president argued that ‘someone’ was collecting biological materials from Russian citizens, and that the US may be running an illegal laboratory for biological warfare in Georgia, although he has not provided any credible evidence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Vedomosti*, ‘Why conspiracy theories are gaining popularity’ (Pochemu teorii zagovorov nabirayut populyarnost’), 11 May 2018, <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/05/11/769142-teorii-zagovorov-populyarnost>>.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Alfred Moore, ‘Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic Politics’, *Critical Review*, 28/01 (2016) 1–23.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Umland, *New Extreme Right-Wing Intellectual Circles in Russia: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Isborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club*, Russian Analytical Digest No. 135, 5 Aug. 2013, <[https://www.academia.edu/4195331/New\\_Extremely\\_Right-Wing\\_Intellectual\\_Circles\\_in\\_Russia\\_The\\_Anti-Orange\\_Committee\\_the\\_Isborsk\\_Club\\_and\\_the\\_Florian\\_Geyer\\_Club](https://www.academia.edu/4195331/New_Extremely_Right-Wing_Intellectual_Circles_in_Russia_The_Anti-Orange_Committee_the_Isborsk_Club_and_the_Florian_Geyer_Club)>

<sup>5</sup> *Kommersant*, ‘Behind the destabilization of Ukraine lies an attempt to radically weaken Russia’ (Za destabilizatsiyey Ukrainy skryvayetsya popytka radikal’nogo oslableniya Rossii), 26 Jun. 2015, <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2752250>>

<sup>6</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, ‘Patrushev and Albright: How a phrase of the Kremlin trolls became a symbol of faith of the Kremlin elite’ (Patrushev i Olbrayt: kak fraza kremlevskikh trolley stala simvolom very kremlevskoy elity), 24 Jun. 2015, <<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/06/22/64636-patrushev-i-olbrayt-kak-fraza-kremlevskikh-trolley-stala-simvolom-very-kremlevskoy-elity>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Interfax*, ‘Putin struggled to assess the credibility of reports on biological weapons in Georgia’ (Putin zatrudnilsya otsenit’ dostovernost’ soobshcheniy o biologicheskom oruzhii v Gruzii), 18 Oct. 2018,

As noted by Ilya Yablokov, during Putin's third presidential term (2012–2018), the conspiratorial worldview became an increasingly 'important element of the country's political ideology, exploiting people's nostalgia for Russia's past greatness, justifying the authoritarian turn and providing a basis for social cohesion and popular mobilization.'<sup>8</sup> Eliot Borenstein has put forward a similar argument. In the context of Putin's third term, he argues that an increasingly reductionist approach to geopolitics was established, where Russia, the US and the West became 'reified and caricatured as entities with essential, unchanging cores' where every expression of political opposition to Putin's government (domestic or external) came to be regarded as part of a Western master plan.<sup>9</sup> Scholars in international relations have emphasized the importance of the mental frame and perceptions of partners as well as adversaries,<sup>10</sup> and what the prevalence of a conspiratorial worldview can mean for Russian security thinking and threat perceptions is a relevant research question that deserves increased attention.

The academic literature usually defines 'conspiracy theory' as a non-conformist explanation of an event referring to some hidden actions or motives of conspirators who, typically, pursue corrupt or malevolent purposes. Thus, a key characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they represent simplified theories of how power operates, and we adopt this definition in our analysis. As noted by Serghei Golunov and Vera Smirnova, this definition should come with two main caveats.<sup>11</sup> First, several conspiracy-related theories can be accepted by a large segment of the public, and they should therefore not be considered peripheral. Historically, political leaders in different countries have promoted conspiracy theories.<sup>12</sup> Arguably, when conspiracy theories become mainstream in a society, their relevance becomes considerably more important also as a research topic. Second, conspiracy theorising as a tool of analytical inquiry is not necessarily wrong—history has witnessed conspiracies that were later proven real (for example the Iran-Contras Affair and Watergate). Therefore, the attempt to reveal potential conspiracies can be a legitimate enterprise within

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<<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/634011>>. RBC, 'Putin told about collectioning of Russians' biomaterial' (Putin rasskazal o sbore biologicheskogo materiala rossiyan), 30 Oct. 2018,

<<https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/59f74b019a794730d39b9955>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia. Conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia*, (Medford MA: Polity Press 2018) 188.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia. Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 2019), pp. 18–20.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Serghei Golunov and Vera Smirnova, 'Proliferation of Conspiracy Narratives in Post-Soviet Russia: The "Dulles' Plan" in Social and Political Discourses', *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 37 (2016) 21-45.

<sup>12</sup> On the Middle East, see, for example, Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, 'Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East', *Political Psychology*, 15/3 (1994) 443-459.

journalism, historical research and the social sciences, provided that the analysis is conducted with requisite care.

Inaugurated as a field of research with the work on the ‘paranoid style’ in US politics by Richard Hofstadter, the more recent studies of conspiracy theories have mainly been carried out by philosophers, psychologists and sociologists.<sup>13</sup> According to contemporary scholarship, a recurring feature of conspiracy theories is their tendency to mistake insufficient or non-representative evidence (or even non-accessible evidence) for acceptable evidence, what scholars have termed ‘errant data’ or ‘crippled epistemologies’, or the derivation of claims which are inferred not from facts but the absence of contrary evidence (the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy).<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that conspiracy theories typically produce claims that are not directly falsifiable, e.g. that a secret elite group runs the world—for a true believer, the absence of credible evidence can be understood as a part of the conspiracy. Conspiracy theories, furthermore, should be regarded as a mode of thinking, and therefore be treated as a spectrum on which anyone can be located rather than a binary relationship between rational and irrational thinking.<sup>15</sup> To believe in a particular conspiracy theory does not require a bonafide adherence to a conspiratorial *worldview* in general, i.e. the belief in a larger global conspiracy or world government, although a conspiratorial worldview typically draws on specific conspiracy theories. For example, a neutral observer can perceive certain conspiracy theories as more or less plausible, such as the idea of a US laboratory for biological warfare in Georgia, without adhering to an outright conspiratorial worldview whereby a wide range of phenomena are primarily interpreted from a conspiratorial perspective. Since a person’s worldview is not directly observable, this article focuses on the constituent building blocks, i.e. the specific conspiracy theories, that would form the basis for a genuinely conspiratorial worldview. We must therefore concede, on methodological grounds, that we can never conclude definitively that a person who promotes conspiracy theories actually believes in them. This concession does not demerit the potential significance of the research problem but warrants a careful and restrictive interpretation of our results, especially when it comes to the influence of conspiracy theories on policy-making. However, an important methodological point is that while a certain conspiracy theory in general does not lend itself to scientific refutability, particular constructions of a conspiracy theory can potentially be refuted depending on how the argument is constructed.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> See for example Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Brian Keeley, ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 96/3 (1999) 109–126.

<sup>15</sup> Borenstein, 40.

A general assumption underpinning our analysis is that for any strategic actor who wishes to influence long-term trends in the world, the chance of success is greater the more aligned their perceptions are with reality. Put differently, the risk for strategic errors is assumed to be positively correlated with the gap between perception and reality since a larger gap will increase the risk for suboptimal commitment of resources and undue risk taking. If this assumption holds true, then the widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories (or indeed other unproven theories<sup>16</sup>) inside official institutions becomes paradoxical, since they damage the security thinking climate.<sup>17</sup> Although the focus of our study is Russia, the argument that distortions between reality and perceptions can increase the risk of strategic errors is valid in a more general sense.<sup>18</sup>

Previous scholarship has highlighted the prevalence of conspiracy theories in Russian domestic political discourse, and in public diplomacy tools such as RT, Russia's international broadcaster.<sup>19</sup> The spread of disinformation, including the use of so-called troll factories to influence public opinion through social media and the internet, is a topic that has also seen an increased attention in recent scholarship.<sup>20</sup> A notable example is provided by the coordinated anti-vaccine campaigns on Twitter and Facebook, shown to be partially operated by Russian-sponsored troll factories and automated bot accounts.<sup>21</sup> Historical examples include the fabrications by the Soviet security agency, the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*), that the CIA had murdered John F. Kennedy, or that the US military had invented HIV-AIDS in a Pentagon laboratory—two conspiracy theories that gained

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<sup>16</sup> One example would be the domino theory, especially popular during the Cold War, which hypothesized that a communist or democratic regime change in one country would rapidly spread to nearby countries. This theory has since been empirically investigated, with the results showing only weak support for the theory. See Peter T. Leeson and Andrea M. Dean, 'The Democratic Domino Theory: An Empirical Investigation', *American Journal of Political Science*, 52/3 (2009).

<sup>17</sup> The Russian reform economist and, for a few months in 1992, Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar also noted the connection between conspiracy theories and strategic errors in his study of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its legacy: 'The Russian failures in 2003–2004 in Georgia, Ajaria, Abkhazia, Ukraine and Moldova continued the "collection of errors" made by others long before. But it is difficult for the post-imperial consciousness to accept that. It is easier to believe that we were beaten not by the Georgians or the Ukrainians but by a "world conspiracy" that backs them.' He also argued that this view was widespread in the Russian population in the early 2000s. Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire. Lessons for Modern Russia*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press 2007), pp. xii and xviii.

<sup>18</sup> There are different approaches to the study of threat perceptions in the academic literature. For an overview, see Janice Gross Stein, 'Threat Perceptions in International Relations', Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, Jack S. Levy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Steve Abrams, 'Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia', *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 15/1 (2016) 5-31; Ilya Yablokov, 'Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)', *Politics*, 35/3-4 (2015) 301-15.

<sup>20</sup> Jessikka Aro, 'The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools', *European View*, 15/1 (2016) 121-32; Peter Pomerantsev, 'The Kremlin's Information War', *Journal of Democracy*, 26/4 (2015) 40-50.

<sup>21</sup> David A. Broniatowski et al, 'Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate', *American Journal of Public Health*, 108/10 (2018) 1378-1384.

traction among segments of the Western population during the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Issues such as disinformation and fake news, however, should not be conflated with conspiracy theories and would require a separate treatment.

This article does not attempt to explain the spread of conspiracy theories in society in general. The purpose of this article is to analyse how a narrow but important segment of Russian society, namely its military and security establishment, has promoted and legitimized a conspiratorial worldview. More specifically, we focus on knowledge production in areas such as military studies, strategy and foreign policy, and the role of conspiracy theories in shaping the analysis within these fields.<sup>23</sup> To achieve this, we have analysed a set of articles published in Russian academic journals. Unlike public diplomacy and the media, these publications cater mainly to an audience of domestic Russian experts. As noted by Serghei Gulunov, academic theorizing on foreign and security policy performs a non-trivial role, as it can either contribute to the reinforcement of conspiracy-minded worldviews or contribute to their demise in society.<sup>24</sup> Although we cannot observe anyone's worldview directly, it is reasonable to assume that analyses and opinions produced within these fields reflect an established worldview, and that such opinions can influence security and foreign policy thinking among Russian political and military leaders.<sup>25</sup> An assumption we make is that the Russian military and security thinking to some extent simultaneously both informs and reflects Russia's military strategy and foreign policy conduct, and that the publications chosen for our analysis are representative of such

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<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Agursky, 'Soviet Disinformation and Forgeries', *International Journal of World Peace*, 6/1 (1989) 13-30; Myron Rush, 'The War Danger in Soviet Policy and Propaganda', *Comparative Strategy*, 8/1 (1989) 1-9; Max Holland, 'The Propagation and Power of Communist Security Services Dezinformatsiya', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 19/1 (2006) 1-31; Herbert Romerstein, 'Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War', *Journal of Intelligence History*, 1/1 (2001) 54-67; Ladislav Bittman, 'The Use of Disinformation by Democracies', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 4/2 (1990) 243-61.

<sup>23</sup> Previous research on important individuals in Russian political and military groups has primarily discussed their anti-Western intellectual tendencies, rather than the conspiratorial notions they may deploy as such. See Andreas Umland, 'Post-Soviet 'Uncivil Society' and the Rise of Alexander Dugin: A Case Study of the Extraparliamentary Radical Right in Contemporary Russia', *PhD. diss. Cambridge University* (2007) <[http://www.academia.edu/2635113/Post-Soviet Uncivil Society and the Rise of Aleksandr Dugin A Case Study of the Extraparliamentary Radical Right in Contemporary Russia Ph. D. in Politics University of Cambridge 2007](http://www.academia.edu/2635113/Post-Soviet_Uncivil_Society_and_the_Rise_of_Aleksandr_Dugin_A_Case_Study_of_the_Extraparliamentary_Radical_Right_in_Contemporary_Russia_Ph._D._in_Politics_University_of_Cambridge_2007)>; and Marlène Laruelle, 'Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success', *Russian Review*, 71/4 (2012) 565-580. doi:10.2307/23263930.

<sup>24</sup> Serghei Golunov's analytical brief analyses the role of conspiracy theories in Russian-language textbooks on geopolitics. See Serghei Golunov, 'What Should Students Know about Russia's Enemies? Conspiracy Theories in Russian Geopolitical Textbooks', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 35)

<sup>25</sup> To emphasize the point made earlier, it is possible for a two-way feedback loop to exist between policy and theory, causing certain notions to be amplified in both fields. This is, of course, not unique to Russia; in a democratic context, however, such feedback mechanisms can be expected to be self-corrected after some time through the process of scrutinizing journalism and general elections, if the public perceives policy as drifting too far from reality. Presumably, the mechanism could also work the other way, thereby fueling populism, if the public perceives policy as drifting too far from a romanticized ideal.

thinking; although we do not claim to be able to show how such causal links operate in practice, the academic and policy relevance of the topic merits a deeper investigation.

Our article contributes to at least four areas in the current literature. First, we provide the first systematic analysis of the role of conspiracy theories within the Russian military and security establishment. Second, although we do not claim to ascertain any causal links between a particular worldview and actual policy-making, we are able to draw inferences about the thinking within a group closely related to strategic decision-making in Russia. Third, we discuss the implications of a potential situation where the use of conspiracy theories by Russian leaders is not merely instrumental but may reflect—within boundaries—genuinely held beliefs. Such policy implications can also have a general relevance for other countries than Russia. Last, we highlight potential policy implications of our research for the international community with regard to Russian foreign policy conduct.

The first part of the article discusses the sources and scope of our study. The second part details the historical background of conspiracy theories in Tsar Russia and the USSR, and their role in Russia today. The third part provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the prevalence of conspiracy theories in Russian military academic literature. The penultimate part outlines the limitations of our research, and the last part contains a concluding discussion.

### **Sources and scope of our study**

Our main source base consists of a set of articles published by three leading Russian-language journals and one weekly newspaper in the field of military and security: *Military Thought*, *The Herald of the Academy of Military Sciences*, *Problems of National Strategy*, and *Military-Industrial Courier*. We have limited the analysis to the period from 2008 to 2018 (except a few texts from earlier years), selecting for more detailed scrutiny approximately 500 articles published on the broader topics of geopolitics, foreign policy, and security. In analysing these articles, we attempt to identify dominant themes and the extent to which they operate on the basis of conspiracy theories. In order to provide a check on our findings, we perform qualitative and quantitative analyses of our source base. A more detailed description of our method is provided in the analytical section below.

The publications analysed here are different from conventional mass media or social media in that they represent the military and security establishment of Russia. With the exception of *Military-Industrial Courier*, which is a weekly newspaper, they have academic credentials and represent the views of important Russian military institutions or official think tanks, as well as the discourse among

Russian security experts and military professionals. The international academic community should therefore also assess these journals according to higher standards than what is the case with other mass media. Indeed, articles from these publications are frequently quoted by leading Western scholars analyzing Russian military affairs.<sup>26</sup> *Military Thought* is the main academic periodical of the Russian Ministry of Defence, and the journal is included in the list of scientific publications that in Russia are considered when a scholar defends a candidate's or doctoral thesis. *Problems of National Strategy* is the publication of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISS, *Rossiskii institut strategichskeskikh issledovaniï*), an organization that until 2009 belonged to the Foreign Intelligence Service SVR (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki*) but is now directly subordinated to the presidential administration. *Military-Industrial Courier*, although not an academic journal, has received two national awards and is regularly used by Russian military leaders for the publication of new concepts and articles. For example, the incumbent chief of the Russian General staff since 2012, general Valery Gerasimov, currently has 16 articles in *Military-Industrial Courier* accredited to his name during his time in command.<sup>27</sup> Thus, all four publications reach important groups in Russia: general and senior military officers, different research institutions within the power ministries, higher-education teaching staff and cadets of military academies, political decision-makers, universities and institutes, security services, and managers in the defence industry. Table 1 summarizes the titles, publication frequency, and institutional affiliations of these publications.

[Table 1 about here]

Four factors limit the scope of our study. First, we do not make any assumptions (or reach any conclusions) about how common a conspiratorial worldview is among officials in Russia's military and security establishment, although we can provide certain estimates based on quantitative analysis and heuristics. Second, we cannot know whether the use of conspiracy theories is based on genuine conviction or rather instrumental (e.g. for the political mobilization of the population, or as an active measure against an opponent), although we can document their presence in the national security

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<sup>26</sup> See for example: Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulègue, 'Russia's New State Armament Programme. Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027,' Chatham House Research Paper, May 2018; John R. Deni (Ed.), 'Current Russian Military Affairs. Conference Executive Summaries', United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, July 2018; Gudrun Persson, 'Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016' (Rysk militär förmåga i ett tioårsperspektiv – 2016), Swedish Defence Research Agency, Jan. 2017.

<sup>27</sup> In one recent article, Gerasimov argues that a normalization of NATO-Russia relations is possible, but he also claims that 'the special services of the West' are using 'hybrid warfare' against Russia, and that democracy promotion and human rights are only excuses for the real purpose of undermining the sovereignty of other states, including Russia. Valery Gerasimov 'NATO is not a verdict' (NATO ne prigovor), *Voyenno-promyshlennyi kur'yer*, 30 Apr. 2019 <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/49970>>. A list of all Gerasimov's publications is available at <<https://vpk-news.ru/authors/1324>>.



discourse.<sup>28</sup> Third, not all articles in the four Russian journals we survey share a conspiratorial perspective, either because they reject it outright or because they deal with less politically charged topics such as combat experience or weapon technologies. Fourth, we cannot determine any causal links between conspiratorial thinking and actual policy conduct. It is reasonable, however, to assume that the prevalence of conspiracy theories within the military and security establishment may both reflect and affect Russia's political development and foreign policy conduct. As we discuss below, this has been particularly visible in the Russian official discourse on the risk of foreign-sponsored regime change and colour revolutions, which has been an important component in the country's authoritarian turn since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing Russian military intervention in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conspiracy theories in Russia: past and present**

As elsewhere in the world, conspiracy theorizing has a long history in Russia, where it arrived in its modern form in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The perception of Russia as threatened by hostile states, domestic arguments over Russia's 'civilizational path', the perceived humiliation of defeat in the Crimean War (1853–56), and hostility towards the liberal reforms introduced by Tsar Alexander II in the 1860s, were some of the factors that stimulated the spread of conspiracy theories. Under Alexander III, who inherited the throne after Alexander II in 1881, anti-Western and reactionary ideas gained more legitimacy. The rise of radical nationalism within circles of Russian society eventually amplified the proliferation of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, exemplified by the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903, a fabrication that was used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to allegedly 'prove' the existence of a 'Jewish-Masonic' conspiracy.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Research approaches in experimental psychology studies have attempted to clinically analyse beliefs among people who believe in conspiracy theories. For different reasons, such research approaches could not be used in the present study. See for example, Aleksandra Cichocka *et al*, 'Does self-love or self-hate predict conspiracy beliefs? Narcissism, self-esteem, and the endorsement of conspiracy theories', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7/2 (2016) 157–166.

<sup>29</sup> The discussion on security threats in Russia's near abroad mirrors the broader geopolitical discussion among Russian politicians and academics on the meaning of the 'Russian World' (*russkii mir*) or 'Russian civilization'. See Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence'", *Geopolitics* 23/02 (2018) 330-353.

<sup>30</sup> Vadim Rossman, *Russian Intellectual Antisemitism in the Post-Communist Era*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2002), Ch. 2. The *Protocols* were published in Russia in 1903 and in England in 1920. Already in 1921, a British journalist could show that the text was a plagiarism based on a French satire about Napoleon III from 1865. See *The Times*, 'The Truth About "The Protocols". A Literary Forgery. From The Times of August 16, 17 and 18, 1921' (London: Printing House Square, 1921). In 1938, the Russian historian Vladimir Burtsev (in exile in Paris) published a book showing that the document was fabricated by the Czarist Russian secret police. In 1993, a court in Moscow established that the document was forged and an expression of anti-Semitism. See

The Soviet government that came to power in 1917 developed a new breed of conspiracy theories. Under Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin, an ‘enemy of the people’ (*vrag naroda*) was anyone who opposed—or was claimed to oppose, no matter how flimsy the evidentiary base—the Soviet regime. Archival evidence that emerged in the 1990s showed how Stalin personally identified different conspiracies against his rule—usually a combination of foreign states working with the so-called ‘fifth columns’, ‘elements of counter-revolution’, ‘Trotskyite-Mensheviks’, ‘White Guards’, ‘kulaks’, or ‘former people’; and he directed his security services to provide ‘evidence’ through interrogation so that the culprits could be persecuted.<sup>31</sup> In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Soviet leaders modified their rhetoric, and the Stalin-era levels of political repression also declined, but the general anti-Western predisposition of the regime remained a mainstay until Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika in the late 1980s.<sup>32</sup>

According to Ilya Yablokov, Russian and Soviet leaders have historically used conspiracy theories instrumentally in order to influence perceptions and public opinion in their country about the Kremlin and the outside world, and the information deprived climate in the USSR provided fertile soil for conspiracy theories.<sup>33</sup> The dominant narratives among Russian political and military leaders promote a scepticism of a perceived US-led world order, and define Russia as a victim of Western arrogance and NATO hostility. All criticism of US or Western actions are, needless to say, not necessarily conspiratorial: for example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, or the NATO operation to overthrow Libya’s dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, can be criticized on political, legal and ethical grounds—and be described as strategic mistakes.<sup>34</sup> What we investigate is how such events are used in a conspiratorial context. Another historical episode that helps fuel a conspiratorial worldview is the US government’s provision in 1999 of financial and organizational support to the anti-Slobodan Milosevic opposition in Serbia in a push to oust him from power.<sup>35</sup> A more recent example is a

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for example *The New York Times*, ‘Russia Court Calls ‘Protocols’ Anti-Semitic Forgery’, 27 Nov. 1993 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/27/world/russia-court-calls-protocols-anti-semitic-forgery.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004). The key document of the Great Terror (1937-38) was entitled NKVD prikaz no. 00447, ‘On the operation for the repression of former Kulaks, criminals and various anti-Soviet elements’, and provided regional quotas for the number of people who should be sentenced to forced labour or executed. See Sergei Mironenko and Nicolas Werth (eds.), *The History of Stalin’s Gulag. Volume 1. Mass Repressions in USSR* (Istoriia stalinskogo gulaga. Tom 1. Massovye repressii v SSSR) (Moscow: Rosspen 2004) 268-275.

<sup>32</sup> See Eliot Borenstein, ‘Why conspiracy theories take hold in Russia’. *HuffPost*, 28 Jul. 2014, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/eliot-borenstein/why-conspiracy-theories\\_b\\_5626149.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/eliot-borenstein/why-conspiracy-theories_b_5626149.html?guccounter=1)>.

<sup>33</sup> Yablokov (2018) 14-23.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, James Lebovic, *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Roger Cohen, ‘Who really brought down Milosevic?’ *New York Times*, 26 Nov. 2000, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/magazine/who-really-brought-down-milosevic.html>>.

formulation in the Ukraine Freedom Support Act adopted by the US congress in 2014, which includes the phrase that ‘The Secretary of State shall, directly or through nongovernmental or international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the National Endowment for Democracy, and related organizations ... improve democratic governance, transparency, accountability, rule of law, and anti-corruption efforts in the Russian Federation.’<sup>36</sup> It is not necessary to resort to conspiracy theories to conclude that such formulations can be perceived by the Kremlin as counter to their interests.

In Russia, however, anti-Western criticism in general, and anti-Americanism in particular, has become more radical and Manichean, and the perception promoted by the Kremlin is that the US (or NATO) seeks to implement ‘regime change’ or ‘colour revolutions’ in Russia and among Russian allies at every moment. According to a 2004 statement by Vladislav Surkov, then First Deputy of the Presidential Administration, ‘the enemy is at the gates. The frontline goes through every city, every street, and every house... in a besieged country a fifth column of left- and right-wing radicals has emerged... Fake liberals and real Nazis have a lot in common. [They have] common sponsors from abroad.’<sup>37</sup> An opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center suggests that a growing share of the Russian population also has come to define the US as an ‘enemy of Russia’: an increase from 22 percent in 1999 to 68 percent in 2017 (whereas in 2017 only 14 percent regarded the EU as an enemy). However, a broader perception among Russians of an external threat seems to be rather constant, while the specific threat perception has varied over time: in 1996, 75 percent of Russian respondents believed that their country had ‘enemies’, a number that was somewhat lower in comparison with 2014 (84 percent) but higher than in 2017 (66 percent).<sup>38</sup>

According to statements by Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Sergei Shoigu, Russia’s Minister of Defence, the US government’s preferred method of regime change is ‘managed chaos’ (*upravlyaemii kaos*), a term that appears relatively frequently in the publications we have surveyed.<sup>39</sup> The general idea of this theory is simple, and can be conceptualized as a basic principal-agent model where the US government allegedly directs and sponsors local actors in other countries such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and opposition parties, with the purpose of

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<sup>36</sup> Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014 (S.2828), section 9, <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-bill/2828/text>>

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Yablokov (2018) 80.

<sup>38</sup> *Levada-Center*, ‘The Enemies of Russia’ (Vragi Rossii), 10 Jan. 2018, <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/01/10/vragi-rossii/?fbclid=IwAR0N4ABaSNTI7ANHsWKPPAsMC4rzdKPBgl9hgQFZcAivSUULJqp7MAFoFKQ>>

<sup>39</sup> RIA Novosti, ‘Not a single ‘color revolution’ has made life better, Lavrov said’ (Ni odna ‘tsvetnaya revolyutsiya’ ne sdelala zhizn’ luchshe, zayavil Lavrov), 11 Aug. 2018, <<https://ria.ru/world/20170811/1500209852.html>>.

instigating social instability followed by regime change. The idea that the hands of Western governments have been behind recent political upheavals—in Russia’s near abroad (such as Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Ukraine in 2004 and 2014, Georgia in 2003), in the Middle East (Syria in 2011, Egypt in 2013, Libya in 2011), or the Russian protest movement in 2011—is widely accepted among Russian political and military leaders and has been heavily promoted by Russian state TV.<sup>40</sup> The perception of the US/NATO as Russia’s primary security threat is clearly elucidated in the country’s official strategy documents, such as the Foreign Policy Concept, the Security Doctrine, and the Military Doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

Since 2012, the organized chaos theory has inspired and legitimized important legislative changes in Russia, most notably the legislation against so-called ‘undesirable organizations’ and the provision that NGOs that receive funding from abroad register as ‘foreign agents’—a term that in the Russian language has clear linkages to the country’s Soviet past.<sup>42</sup> After the country-wide street protests in 2017, the head of the newly created National Guard, Viktor Zolotov, repeated the idea that anti-government domestic protests of that kind could only be the result of foreign meddling and brainwashing through Western media.<sup>43</sup> Putin has also used the threat from ‘colour revolutions’ in order to legitimize Russian security involvement in the countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the CSTO<sup>44</sup>, framing Russia as a bulwark against political instability.<sup>45</sup> While it is certainly true that the uprisings in several post-Soviet countries have been pro-Western in their orientation, the perspective promoted by representatives of the Russian government leaves virtually no room for the possibility that this is a naturally emergent phenomenon, but rather that such instability could only result from an operation that was planned and orchestrated from abroad.

As an illustration of how a conspiracy theory can promote the official Russian narrative, we can note an episode in the autumn of 2018, when Russia’s Ministry of Defence released a report claiming that

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M Brudny, ‘Russia and the Colour Revolutions’. *Democratization*, 19/01 (2012) 15-36.

<sup>41</sup> For an overview, see Roger E. Kanet (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge 2019), especially chapters 6, 7, and 17.

<sup>42</sup> Geir Flikke, ‘Resurgent Authoritarianism: The Case of Russia’s New NGO Legislation’. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32/2 (2016) 103-131.

<sup>43</sup> *Interfax*, ‘Zolotov compared protest actions in Russia with ‘colour revolutions’ (Zolotov sravnil protestnyye actsii v Rossii s ‘tsvetnymi’ revolyutsiyami), 16 Jun. 2017, <<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/566865>>.

Putin has also brought back the Soviet line of labelling political opposition as a ‘fifth column’, see *MK*, ‘Putin and the fifth column. Experts comment on the president’s words’ (Puin i pyataya kolonna. Slova prezidenta komentiruyut eksperty), 18 Dec. 2014, <<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/12/18/putin-i-pyataya-kolonna-slova-prezidenta-komentiruyut-eksperty.html>>

<sup>44</sup> The CSTO includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

<sup>45</sup> *RIA Novosti*, ‘Putin said that the authorities will not allow ‘color revolutions’ in Russia’ (Putin zayavil, chto vlasti ne dopustyat ‘tsvetnykh revolyutsiy’ v Rossii), 12 Dec. 2017, <<https://ria.ru/politics/20170412/1492073208.html>>.

the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, Georgia, was in fact a front for the US military's development of an allegedly highly toxic biological weapon with the capacity to target specific ethnic groups, e.g. Russians. The report claimed, astonishingly, that 73 Georgians had already died between 2015 and 2018 from the chemical and biological experiments conducted in the 'Lugar Laboratory.'<sup>46</sup> As mentioned in the beginning, the information has evidently reached Vladimir Putin, who at least twice in the last few years has referenced the report as a credible investigation of US malign activities in Russia's near abroad.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the accusation of US involvement in biological weapons production in Georgia emerged for the first time in 2008, in the wake of the Russia-Georgia War, although it did not gain any wider traction at the time.<sup>48</sup>

Another promoter of sometimes spectacular conspiracy theories is Leonid Reshetnikov, former head of the analytical department of the SVR and subsequently director of RISS (the publisher of *Problems of National Strategy*), who harbours profound suspicions of US foreign policy: 'The main goal of the US vis-à-vis Russia is the removal [*ustranenie*] of Putin', he has argued. 'To this end, there are different scenarios, even physical, although that would be very difficult. The priority of the US [therefore] remains the organization of disturbances of a type similar to Maidan and colour revolutions.' Furthermore, Reshetnikov has claimed that a small anti-Russian 'world government' is in control of international relations, and he has described the group's outlook as follows: 'Financiers, industrialists, and managers of transnational corporations. People without a national identity, cosmopolitans.'<sup>49</sup> Moreover, they are very committed to their goals, the same way our Bolsheviks or the French revolutionaries were. In order to understand their motives, it is necessary to keep this in mind. For them, profit is not the main thing. If my idea is Christ—theirs is Antichrist.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Interfax*, 'Russian Defense Ministry announced the death of 73 Georgian citizens in a secret US laboratory' (Minoborony RF zayavilo o gibeli 73 grazhdan Gruzii v sekretnoy laboratorii SShA), 4 Nov. 2018, <<https://www.interfax.ru/world/631904>>. See also Giorgi Lomsagze, 'Does the US have a Secret Germ Warfare Lab on Russia's Doorstep', *Coda*, 10 Apr. 2018, <<https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/does-the-us-have-a-secret-germ-warfare-lab-on-russias-doorstep>>.

<sup>47</sup> *Interfax*, 'Putin found it difficult to assess the credibility of reports on biological weapons in Georgia' (Putin zatrudnilsya otsenit' dostovernost' soobshcheniy o biologicheskoy oruzhii v Gruzii), 18 Oct. 2018, <<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/634011>>.

<sup>48</sup> Laina Farhat-Holzman, 'Deadly Conspiracy Myths in History', *Comparative Civilizational Review*, 58/58 (2008) 8.

<sup>49</sup> Note that the term 'rootless cosmopolitan' was introduced for the first time on 28 January 1949 in *Pravda*, in an article which marked the launch of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign against Soviet Jews. The anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli conspiratorial rhetoric became a pronounced element of official Soviet discourse right up to the country's collapse in 1991. See Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews 1948-1967: A Documented Study*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1984), 183-184.

<sup>50</sup> *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 'Leonid Reshetnikov: Russophobes will last a maximum of 20 years in Ukraine' (Leonid Reshetnikov: Rusofoby proderzhatsya na Ukraine yeshche maksimum 20 let), 11 Oct. 2018, <<https://m.kompravda.eu/daily/26444.7/3314664>>.

## Conspiracy theories in Russian military publications

As mentioned above, approximately 500 articles were reviewed for the purpose of our study. With the exception of a few older articles, they were published between 2008 and 2018 in three scholarly journals and one newspaper: *Military Thought*, the *Herald of the Military Academy of Sciences* (hereafter the *Herald*), *Problems of National Strategy* (hereafter *PNS*), and *Military-Industrial Courier* (hereafter the *Courier*). The selected articles represent a subset of all articles published by these publications during the relevant period; they were selected because they fit into the broader themes of geopolitics, foreign and security policy. We deliberately excluded articles on some topics, such as technical articles detailing various weapons technologies or descriptions of battle experiences. The *Courier* and *PNS* have made their entire publications for the period under consideration available online, and we have therefore also conducted a quantitative analysis of those journals, where we searched for occurrences of specific keywords that are indicative of conspiracy theories.

### *US hegemony, Russia under threat*

The dominant and recurring theme in all the articles we have analysed is that of a US threat to Russian security. Such a worldview, as discussed above, does not necessarily need to be conspiratorial, but often operates along a spectrum from the relatively mild to the more radical iterations of anti-Western ideologies and/or conspiracy theories. It is also a worldview which, as we noted above, is broadly supported by people within Russia's top political and military leadership. The following citations provide some illustrations of this theme. 'The West seeks to dismantle Russia, or take her under its control to such a degree as was the case in the Yeltsin era', argues one 2014 article in the *Courier*.<sup>51</sup> Another article from the same journal, authored by Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of Russia, claims that 'Russia for several centuries was the object of constant Western hostilities.'<sup>52</sup> Similar articles conclude that the goal of the US is to render 'Russia a former state, occupied by "peace keepers" of all colours, under the flags of all colours. And ideally—total annihilation.'<sup>53</sup> Another text argues that 'the United States is the main threat on the planet. And this is not a propagandistic slogan, but an objective fact.'<sup>54</sup> A 2008 article in *Military Thought* serves as an

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<sup>51</sup> Konstantin Sivkov, 'Destroy Russia' (Razrushit' Rossiyu), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 31 Mar. 2014, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/19721>>.

<sup>52</sup> Gennady Zyuganov, 'They have been destroying our defence industry or two decades' (Nash OPK gromili dva desyatiletiya), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 31 Mar. 2014, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/19719>> .

<sup>53</sup> Sergey Brezkun, 'From the perspective of historical justice' (S pozitsii istoricheskoy spravedlivosti), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 17 Sept. 2008, <<https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/4620>>.

<sup>54</sup> Graham Fuller, Sergey Dukhanov, 'Powerful neighbourhood' (Sil'nodeystvuyushcheye sosedstvo), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 12 Jun. 2017, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/37219>>.

example of another relatively common argument, namely that the US veils its intentions under the banner of democracy promotion: 'In Washington's strategy for the further "democratization" of Russia, we can expect from them the activation of the implementation of the whole arsenal for contemporary "information operations" already in peace time.'<sup>55</sup>

A related theme is the West's alleged strategy of framing Russia as an aggressor state. 'The Western states are provoking chaos in the international situation in a systematic manner, in order to strengthen the myth of a Russian danger and as a pretext for the build-up of military preparedness.'<sup>56</sup> Russia, in the perspective offered in these articles, is simply struggling to maintain peace and order: 'The responsibility for the maintenance of a sometimes unstable, and sometimes more stable, equilibrium in the post-Soviet space primarily falls on Russia. The weight of this responsibility is not light, but no one else can assume it.'<sup>57</sup> 'The most agreeable position for Russia has been her openness to the world, friendly relations with neighbouring states, creating a role for Russia as a bridge connecting the lands between the West and the East, the North and the South.'<sup>58</sup> Other articles phrase the role of Russia in more direct terms, creating a tension between the image of Russia as a victim of US aggression on the one hand and a great power able to conduct an independent foreign policy on the other: 'We, Russians, are an imperial nation and carry before God the responsibility for all the nations, who have lived or live together with us.'<sup>59</sup> 'The will of our historical fate and God has put on Russia the historical mission as the link between Europe and Asia. [...] It follows that we can expect conflicts, dangers and confrontations, and even, possibly, war.'<sup>60</sup> Issues such as 'traditional values', patriotism, Orthodox faith, and direct references to God, have been securitized in Russian military thinking.<sup>61</sup> Notably, a reference to Russia's 'spiritual-moral and

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<sup>55</sup> Sergei Komov, Sergei Korotkov, Igor' Dylevsky, 'On the evolution of the modern American doctrine of information operations' (Ob evolyutsii sovremennoi amerikanskoi doktriny informatsionnykh operatsii), *Voyennaya mysl'*, No. 6 (2008) 54-61,

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Bartosh, 'NATO's hybridization as a threat to Russia's national security' (Gibridizatsiya NATO kak ugroza natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossii), *Vestnik akademii voyennykh nauk*, No.1 (2018) 24-31.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander Sytin, 'Actual aspects of the new security architecture in the post-Soviet space' (Aktual'nyye aspekty novoy arkhitektury bezopasnosti na postsovetskom prostranstve), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, No.1 (2009) 48-61.

<sup>58</sup> Ludmila Koh, 'On the conflict of global interests and national security of Russia' (O konflikte global'nykh interesov i natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossii), *Voennaya mysl'*, No.6 (2011) 14-25.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Multatuli and Leonid Reshetnikov, 'Russia! Get up and rise!' (Rossiya! Vstan' i vozvyshaysya!), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 11/2 (2012) 12-26.

<sup>60</sup> V.V. Babych, 'About the new approach to the analysis of modern confrontation and some other problems' (O novom podkhode k analizu sovremennogo protivoborstva i nekotorykh drugikh problemakh), *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 3 (2008) 33-42. See also Yuriy Pahomov, 'Ukraine and Russia: The effects of complementarity and the risks of rejection'(Ukraina i Rossiya: efekty vzaimodopolnyayemosti i riski ottorzheniya), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, No.1 (2009) 62-77.

<sup>61</sup> Since 2012, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasized the unique role of the Russian language and culture as the 'glue' that binds the Russian civilization together. See Fabian Linde, *The Civilizational Turn in Russian*

cultural-historical values' also appears in the country's official Security Strategy adopted in 2015.<sup>62</sup> The 'spiritual deprivation of man', argues one article in the *Herald*, 'which was consistently ongoing in Russia during the last decades, has to be stopped at any effort and cost, for the purpose of the strengthening of our country's national security.'<sup>63</sup> Religion and love for the Fatherland are sometimes given even magical qualities. An article in *Military Thought*, dealing with the topic of the patriotic education of soldiers, sought to draw important lessons from the Russian 18<sup>th</sup> century military commander Alexander Suvorov. 'The first thing to say about our great commander: he was a truly Russian man, who endlessly loved his Fatherland and who was infinitely loyal to the Orthodox fatherly faith and the Russian throne. This true religiosity gave Alexander Vasilyevich [Suvorov] a lot... Indeed, from the Orthodox faith he received superhuman [*sverkhchelovecheskie*] capabilities...'<sup>64</sup> As seen from these quotations, the arguments weave together myths, conspiracy theories, metaphysical and sometimes even religious or mystical perspectives.

[Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 about here]

#### *George Soros, New World Order, Organized Chaos*

With the use of a specific computer script, adapted to automatically detect keywords in two of our four journals, we have been able to provide quantitative benchmarks regarding the prevalence of certain conspiracy theories in Russian military discourse. Tables 2 and 3 show how frequently three specific keywords indicative of more radical conspiracy theories appear in *PNS* and the *Courier* during the period 2008 to 2018 (note that *PNS* started its publications only in 2009): 'organized chaos', 'new world order', and 'George Soros'. These keywords were chosen because they are almost exclusively used in a conspiratorial framework, either in a specifically Russian context (as in 'organized chaos') or as ideas that at some point were imported from the outside (as in 'new world order'). No general pattern stands out from this data, although the total number of articles with conspiratorial keywords is peaking in 2015 for both journals (see Figure 1). As seen in Table 4, the terms 'organized chaos' and

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Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness, *Russian Review*, 75 (Oct. 2016): 604-25.

<sup>62</sup>Adopted on December 31, 2015. Full text available in Russian on the Russian Security Council's website <<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1/133.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Evgeniy Minnibayev., 'The role of the regions in strengthening the national security of the country (Rol' regionov v ukreplenii natsional'noi bezopasnosti strany), *Vestnik akademii voyennykh nauk*, 22/1 (2008) 62-68.

<sup>64</sup> Golubev A.Y. and Zhelnov I.I., 'On the issue of the upbringing and training of the Defender of the Fatherland' (K voprosu o vospitanii i obuchenii zashchitnika Otechestva), *Voyennaya mysl'*, No. 6 (2017) 74-81.



'George Soros' are somewhat correlated in *PNS*, while the pattern is the opposite in the *Courier*. In both journals, the terms 'organized chaos' and 'new world order' exhibit a certain degree of correlation, while the terms 'new world order' and 'George Soros' do not. Overall, this suggests that specific conspiracy theories come and go while a broad conspiratorial worldview remains over time. For example, the increased use in both journals of the term 'organized chaos' in 2014 is related to the war with Ukraine and the ensuing confrontation with the West. The surge in anti-Soros references since 2016 follows a broader international pattern of far-right, anti-systemic, and anti-Semitic assaults on Soros' Open Society Foundation and other non-governmental organizations.

[Figure 1 about here]

In *PNS*, Soros-related conspiracy theories appear in 23 articles between 2009 and 2018, and his name is mentioned 46 times in total. A similar pattern is apparent in the *Courier*, where Soros is mentioned in 14 articles between 2008 and 2018, and 41 times in total across those articles. His name is usually introduced in the context of US geopolitical ambitions, which are allegedly supported by loyal non-state organizations working from inside the former Soviet republics. It is noteworthy that the argument often is rooted in some factual observation, which is then given a sinister interpretation by the Russian authors, as in the following quote from *PNS*: 'The main goal of NGOs is the activation of a domestic Russian opposition, connected to the West and determined to destabilize the country's domestic situation. The generous funding and coordination of their activities is provided by state entities [...] as well as by foreign organizations, such as the Soros foundation...'<sup>65</sup> Of course, Western states do indeed support various groups in civil society in Russia and elsewhere, so that claim is not particularly controversial, but it is the projection of malign intent as the motivation for such support that reflects a conspiratorial worldview. Soros has also been accused by similar reasoning of stirring ethnic separatism, for example through alleged attempts to fuel separatist and isolationist sentiments among Crimean Tatars.<sup>66</sup> Whether or not such reasoning indeed reflects a conspiratorial mindset is dependent on the wider context of the specific texts. In other cases, however, the critique of Soros reaches more absurd levels, such as in a 2015 piece in the *Courier* accusing him of being part

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<sup>65</sup> Irina Bartochyna, 'The impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the domestic policies of the Baltic republics (2014-2015)' (Vliyaniye ukrainskogo krizisa na vnutrennyuyu politiku pribaltiyskikh respublik (2014-2015 gg.)), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 35/2 (2016) 24-48.

<sup>66</sup> Tamara Guzenkova, Oleg Nemeskiy and Galina Hizrieva, 'Crimean Tatars: Features and problems of integration into the Russian space' (Krymskiye tatory: osobennosti i problemy integratsii v rossiyskoye prostranstvo), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 37/4 (2016) 31-57. See also Anatoliy Kucherenkov, 'Crimea in the modern reality of European and regional security' (Krym v sovremennykh realiyakh evropeyskoi i regional'noi bezopasnosti), *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 14/5 (2012) 103-125. Kucherenkov writes: 'The funds are financing pro-Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and an "independent press", moreover the West believes that the most effective support is for the nationalist tendencies of Crimean Tatars (and other ethnic groups embracing Islam) and gypsies.'

of a US government programme to develop strings of the Ebola and HIV-AIDS viruses as biological weapons. The same story also involves the shooting down of the Malaysian flight MH17 over Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and is worth quoting at length as an illustration of the phenomenon:

'In 2006, the leading American virologist [person 1] stated in a speech at a ceremonial meeting at the University of Texas that with the help of a new string of the Ebola virus [parenthesis excluded] it would be possible to reduce humanity by 90 percent "for the benefit of the planet". The American scientists that were present in the hall stood up and gave him a standing ovation in unison... [ellipsis in original] And interestingly: [person 2], a representative of the World Health Organization, and a leading consultant on infectious diseases, AIDS and Ebola, was flying onboard the "Boeing-MH17", which was shot down in the sky over Donbass. He had been participating in investigations related to experiments on Africans in the George Soros-funded biological weapons laboratory located in Kenema Hospital (Sierra Leone): healthy people were infected with a deadly fever virus for vaccine development.'<sup>67</sup>

The conspiracy theory of a 'new world order' appears quite regularly in both *PNS* (60 mentions in 34 articles) and the *Courier* (92 mentions in 59 articles) during the period 2008 to 2018.<sup>68</sup> The idea of a 'new world order', needless to say, can be used in a neutral manner and does not necessarily need to carry any conspiratorial connotations.<sup>69</sup> The term, however, has also become popular internationally as a short hand term for the idea of the US as a dominant and destructive force in global affairs. One article appearing in the *Courier*, entitled 'The Goal of the Pentagon—The Return of the World to the Early Middle Ages', argues that all countries can be divided into two groups: 'vassals of the global centre', who lack real independence and fight for the new world order, and the 'revisionist states', who fight against it.<sup>70</sup> Again we observe how an uncontroversial fact, namely that some states are aligned with US and others are not, is used to construe a more conspiratorial theory with the claim that states supporting the US are simply victims of US hegemony; there is no room left for the alternative interpretation that the US shares a set of fundamental values with many of its allies. When in 2015 Leonid Reshetnikov was still the director of RISS, he explicitly rejected this interpretation in a newspaper interview: '[The US] holds Europe in several chains: the printing press

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<sup>67</sup> Vladimir Smyk, 'Applause killings' (Ubiystva pod aplodismenty), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 20 Apr. 2015, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/24902>>. The scientists are identified by name in the original but have been removed from the quote since their names are irrelevant to the argument.

<sup>68</sup> The term 'new world order' appears in slightly different iterations such as *novyi mirovoi poryadok*, *noyoe miroustroystvo*, and *novyi miroporyadok*.

<sup>69</sup> See Borenstein, 48-9.

<sup>70</sup> Tatyana Gracheva, 'Agents of the new order' (Agenty novogo poryadka), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 31 Aug. 2015, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/26811>>.

of the American central bank, the threat from colour revolutions and physical removal of inconvenient politicians.’ The reporter objects that Reshetnikov must surely be exaggerating concerning physical removal, but is immediately rebutted by Reshetnikov, who claims that the primary task of the CIA is to remove inconvenient politicians and organize coups.<sup>71</sup>

A similar article argues that the ‘goal of [US] military strategy is the creation of a new world order under American management.’<sup>72</sup> In some cases, NATO is substituted for the USA, and, in one instance, the alliance’s doctrine is described as ‘the uncompromising conceptual rationale for NATO’s desire to implement a new world order under its leadership.’<sup>73</sup> In this context, authors typically invoke third countries as a negative example; Ukraine, since 2014 in particular, is described as an artificial state marinated in anti-Russian ideologies by outside forces. The following quote from an article by Sergey Glazyev, advisor to Putin on economic policy and former minister of Foreign Economic Relations (1992–1993), is representative of this phenomenon:

‘For three centuries, beginning with Poland, then Austria-Hungary, Germany, and now the USA, Ukrainian separatism was cultivated. For this, they constructed a Ukrainian nation: a Russian [sic] people who hate everything Russian and bow down before everything European. Up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, this project did not achieve many successes, and was limited to the temporary establishment on German bayonets of a Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1918 and the formation of Ukrainian nationalist organizations subordinated to the occupying authorities in 1941–44.

(...) Protection against the information weapon is constituted by the truth, which is that American geopolitics threatens the world with destructive chaos and world war based on an artificial reincarnation of seemingly outdated forms of man-hating ideologies such as Nazism and religious fanaticism against the backdrop of the moral decay of the Western ruling elite.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Alexandr Chuykov: ‘The Civilization Russia’ (Tsvivilizatsiya Rossiya), *Argumenty nedeli*, No. 12 (453), 2 April 2015. <<http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n481/394395>>

<sup>72</sup> Tatyana Gracheva, ‘The end of the market (Konets rynka), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur’yer*, 17 Nov. 2015 <<https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/28046>>.

<sup>73</sup> Yuri Morozov and Elena Safronova, ‘Peace-loving aggressor’, or the army of a new world order’ (‘Mirolyubivyyi agressor’, ili armiya novogo mirovogo poryadka), *Problemy natsional’noi strategii*, 8/3 (2011) 185-190. See also Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov, ‘The influence of indirect action on the nature of modern war’ (Vliyaniye nepryamykh deystviy na kharakter sovremennoy voyny), *Voennaya mysl’*, No. 6 (2011) 3-13. ‘In the current situation the new world order is taking shape under the influence and in the interests of the USA, and to a smaller degree that part of the world that is called the “golden billion”.’

<sup>74</sup> Sergey Glazyev, ‘The window to Asia - chapter III’ (Okno v Aziyu - chast’ III), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur’yer*, 20 Jul. 2015 <<https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/26190>>.

In the years 2008 to 2018, the term 'organized chaos' appeared 56 times in 33 articles in the *Courier* and 38 times in 7 articles in *PNS*. The typical article describes the world's various conflicts as the result of Western so-called political technologies, where the idea of 'organized chaos' as a tool of statecraft has become one of the most popular explanatory concepts. One characteristic article published in *PNS* in 2014 describes the concept as follows: 'The scenarios [of organized chaos] are initially based on the combination of various methods of non-violent actions, directed towards the change of power in the country through the manipulation of the protest potential with the support of political, economic, humanitarian and other primarily non-warlike means of destabilization of the government, with the goal of putting the target country under foreign control.'<sup>75</sup> A 2016 article in *Military Thought* describes the US approach as follows: 'In its quest for global hegemony the White House single-mindedly initiates global instability to weaken strategic competitors, primarily China, Russia and the EU.'<sup>76</sup>

In this conceptual framework, global military conflicts and political upheavals—from Syria in 2011 to the Ukrainian 'Maidan Revolution' in 2014—are not spontaneous events but axiomatically the outcome of plans for 'regime change' (*smena vlasti*) developed in Washington.<sup>77</sup> This is also an idea heavily supported by Russian political and military leaders, as we noted above.<sup>78</sup> As discussed by another commentator in 2016: 'The goal is to bring down the economies of objectionable countries, to ensure their subordination to the American financial and banking system. The edge of this policy is now directed against Russia.'<sup>79</sup> There is no discussion of the background that led Washington to impose sanctions on Russia, namely Russia's own foreign policy conduct, only references to sinister American calculations. In some articles, different conspiracy theories such as US world domination and organized chaos exist simultaneously: 'After the collapse of the USSR, the United States began to nurture the idea of world domination, for which they needed a mechanism of absolute control

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<sup>75</sup> Alexander Bartosh, 'The model of adaptive implementation of force in "color revolutions' (Model' adaptivnogo primineniya sily v "tsvetnykh revolutsiyakh")', *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 27/6 (2014) 113-126.

<sup>76</sup> Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov, 'Military strategy: the look to the future' (Voennaya strategiya: vzglyad v budushee), *Voennaya mysl'*, No.11 (2016) 5-17.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Bartosh, 'The model of adaptive implementation of force in "color revolutions' (Model' adaptivnogo primineniya sily v "tsvetnykh revolutsiyakh")', *Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, 27/6 (2014) 113-126.

<sup>78</sup> *Meduza*, 'Globalization, postcapitalism, and American conspiracy. Why the head of the Russian Railways is very worried about the new world order', 18 Aug. 2015, <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/08/18/globalization-postcapitalism-and-american-conspiracy>>. Vladimir Yakunin, 'The Future of World Order: Building a Community of Common Destiny', *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 3/2 (2017) 159-173.

<sup>79</sup> Vasily Mikryukov, 'Mass destruction currency' (Valyuta massovogo porazheniya), *Voyenno-promyshlennyi kur'yer*, 9 Feb. 2016, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/29123>>.

through the creation of organized chaos in weak states.<sup>80</sup> Sometimes the threat is not necessarily another state, but powerful corporations and NGOs. As was noted in an article appearing in *Military Thought*, 'the possibility of a company such as Microsoft, or a public organisation such as Greenpeace, to influence world processes is greater than that of a good half of the UN member states. Russia is fully exposed and will in the foreseeable future be pressured by the parties of these forces seeking to take control of not only the territories rich in raw materials, but above all, impose their system of values and attitudes and erode from within the identity and self-identity of the people.'<sup>81</sup> Authors can also invoke historical and essentialist arguments in order to argue that the technique of organized chaos is almost as old as the USA as a state:

'The consistent US movement towards sole global domination requires the constant creation of organised chaos (a revolutionary situation) throughout the world. The foundations of the hegemony of the United States were laid in the doctrine proclaimed by the fifth American President, James Monroe, on December 2, 1823, in an annual message to Congress. Based on this, US interests are global and therefore they will intervene in the events taking place everywhere, by any means.'<sup>82</sup>

The above quote illustrates a style of argument that is based on rather careful references to historical events or other sources and is therefore qualitatively different than those texts that are outright fantastical or even delirious. Arguably, these types of arguments could have the potential to be more effective in influencing the intended target audience since the ideas are conveyed in a manner to give the impression of irrefutability, a specific category of conspiracy theory often operating under the pretense of scientific inquiry. According to Jovan Byford, conspiracy theories masquerading as scientific inquiry typically display rhetorical devices such as concern with demonstration and presentation of evidence, representation of the authors as investigators and researchers, and the emulation of formal features of academic discourse (jargon, pseudodemonstrations, and references

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<sup>80</sup> Anatoliy Kulikov and Oleg Falichev, 'Rebuff to the barbarians' (Otpor varvaram), *Voyenno-promyshlenniy kur'yer*, 29 Feb. 2016, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/29466>>.

<sup>81</sup> I. A. Shapovalov et al, 'Russia and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (Rossiya i vyzovy XXI veka), *Voennaya Mysl'*, No. 5 (2009), 13–17.

<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Novikov, 'The price tag for the nuclear suitcase' (Tsennik na yadernyi chemodanchik), *Voyenno-promyshlenniy kur'yer*, 2 Feb. 2016, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/29011>>. In fact, the Monroe Doctrine targeted the European colonial powers of the early 19th century, in a time when the US military was relatively weak.

to other work etcetera).<sup>83</sup> How this abuse of academic principles appear in the Russian case is the topic of the next section.

### *Abuse of academic principles and the use of forgeries*

A noteworthy aspect of the corpus of articles that we have surveyed for this article is the relatively common reliance on forgeries, i.e., fake documents and invented citations attributed to politicians and other decision-makers. This phenomenon reflects a departure from conventional academic ideals such as the careful use of sources and Occam's razor principle—and more widely from the academic principles formulated by Robert K. Merton.<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that the three academic journals surveyed for this study explicitly present themselves as following the mainstream academic tradition. The *Herald*, for example, has a statement on the cover page of each issue proclaiming that it is 'Recommended by the High Attestation Commission of the Ministry for Education and Science of the Russian Federation for publication of academic works that reflect the main content of scientific dissertations.' The journal *PNS* explicitly states in their guidelines for publication that submitted articles must reach a certain academic level and contain some academic novelty, and also include references and the academic degree of its authors. Submitted articles are said to be subjected to a quality check, and a copy of each submitted article is allegedly made available to the Russian Ministry for Education and Science.

Furthermore, in addition to promoting academic credentials, these institutions enjoy a close relationship with the Kremlin. As noted above, RISS has been subordinated to the presidential administration since 2009. It was a research institute within the SVR from 1992 to 2009; and prior to that a research institute within the predecessor of the SVR, the First Main Directorate of the KGB.<sup>85</sup> RISS is formally a government research institute; the president of Russia decides its charter, and its budget is controlled by the presidential administration. The director is appointed by the president and reports to the head of the presidential administration. The presidential administration also gives RISS its research tasks, as stipulated in article 8 of its charter. To conduct its work, RISS has access to state secrets (art. 12) and to databases of government agencies (art. 23 z.). Its overall purpose is to

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<sup>83</sup> Byford, 88–93.

<sup>84</sup> Robert K. Merton, 'The Normative Structure of Science', in Robert K. Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973 [1942]).

<sup>85</sup> Chuykov (2015).

provide federal agencies with analyses to formulate the strategic direction of the state's security policy (art. 15).<sup>86</sup>

Some examples of unwarranted claims were already referenced above, i.e. Putin's accusation that Georgia is the site of a biological weapons laboratory, or that Soros is financing the weaponization of deadly viruses in Sierra Leone. Serghei Golunov and Vera Smirnova's analysis of the 'Dulles Plan'—a plan named after the first CIA Director Allen Dulles, who in 1945 ostensibly developed a blueprint for the destruction of the USSR through the promotion of decadent values, was the first to draw attention to a fake document popularized in the 1990s by Russian politicians and academics.<sup>87</sup> The Dulles conspiracy is virtually unknown outside of the former USSR, but remains an important reference within the Russian military and security establishment. In the *Courier*, Dulles is mentioned 68 times from 2008 to 2018, in *PNS*, the name is mentioned 7 times over the same period.

Fake documents of the kind surveyed here share certain structural similarities with conventional conspiracy theories, where the most important is the danger from an outside threat. The actual production of fake evidence, however, goes one step further than the mere tendency to accept insufficient evidence (or crippled epistemologies) which has been identified in previous literature as a hallmark of conspiracy theories. The existence of an actual 'plan', formulated in the shape of a document or secret speech at a crucial moment in history but outside the purview of ordinary citizens, is in a way the epitome of a conspiracy or a conspiracy theory. A recurring reference is for example a speech attributed to US President Bill Clinton in 1995, where he allegedly celebrates the collapse of communism as a US opportunity to achieve 'unlimited freedom of action in the realization of our plans.'<sup>88</sup> In other instances, real citations or references to actual statements are used, but are taken out of context in order to make generalizations that support a conspiratorial narrative. A similar phenomenon is when a given citation is presented as a real quote but is actually only loosely related to, or perhaps inspired by, actual statements supported by primary sources. One example is a book review in *Military Thought* of a 2007 Russian monograph on the First Gulf War in 1991: the reviewer favourably assesses a quote that the authors accredit to former British Prime Minister Edward Heath, who allegedly said that 'The seizure of oil was always in the first place in the designs of the Americans when they talked about the use of military force.'<sup>89</sup> An Internet search for the exact

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<sup>86</sup> 'Charter of the Federal State Budgetary Institution 'Russian Institute for Strategic Studies'' (Ustav federal'nogo gosudarstvennogo byudzhetnogo uchrezhdeniya 'Rossiyskiy intitut strategicheskikh issledovaniy') *Problemy natsional'noi strategii* (2012) <[https://riss.ru/images/pdf/ustav\\_docs/ustav.pdf](https://riss.ru/images/pdf/ustav_docs/ustav.pdf)>.

<sup>87</sup> Golunov and Smirnova, 'Proliferation'.

<sup>88</sup> Sergei Tashlykov, 'Common features and some features of the content of modern military conflicts involving the United States and its allies' (Obshchiye cherty i nekotoryye osobennosti sodержaniya sovremennykh voyennykh konfliktov s uchastiyem SSHA i ikh soyuznikov), *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 8 (2010) 20-28.

<sup>89</sup> Valeriy Kiselyov, 'About future wars' (O voynakh budushchego), *Voennaya mysl'*, No.2 (2008) 72-74.

quote does not show up any other references than the article in *Military Thought*. However, even if we have not found any independent support for this particular quote, other sources have shown credibly that the Heath cabinet did indeed worry about a possible US invasion of Saudi Arabia during the oil crisis in the early 1970s.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, several other sources, including leading Western commentators and officials, have argued that both Gulf Wars were at least partly motivated by oil interests.<sup>91</sup> However, the alleged quote by Heath is used to support the notion that the First Gulf War was ‘an important stage for the military-political leadership of the USA on the road to the formation of a unipolar world.’<sup>92</sup> While this claim is certainly a somewhat accurate reflection of the unique global role that the USA assumed in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the broader argument has two hallmarks of conspiratorial thinking: firstly, the use of a dubious quote taken out of context and without references, and, secondly, the allusion to an actual conspiracy by a small elite.

An article in *PNS* illustrates how distorted translations are used in order to frame a specific topic, in this case the perception of Russia in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>93</sup> The article is authored by several notable individuals, including RISS deputy director Grigoriy Tishchenko and the RISS associate Johan Bäckman, a Finnish pro-Kremlin academic who in 2018 received a one-year suspended sentence for harassing and defaming a Finnish journalist.<sup>94</sup> The article references a statement by the chief analyst at the counterintelligence unit of Sweden’s security police, Säpo. A lengthy, verbatim Russian translation of this statement is provided which is broadly accurate, but which ends with the chief analyst allegedly claiming that Russia ‘is supporting terrorists with money and weapons.’<sup>95</sup> However, this final part of their translation is not substantiated by the indicated source. It thus appears as though the RISS authors have constructed a false reference, albeit one that is close to the original

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<sup>90</sup> The Guardian, ‘UK feared Americans would invade Gulf during 1973 oil crisis,’ 1 Jan 2004, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/jan/01/uk.past3>>

<sup>91</sup> CNN, ‘Why the war in Iraq was fought for Big Oil,’ 15 Apr. 2013, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/19/opinion/iraq-war-oil-juhasz/index.html>>

<sup>92</sup> Valeriy Kiselyov, ‘About future wars’.

<sup>93</sup> Tishchenko, G.G., Nikolaychuk, I.A., Vilovatykh, A.V. and Bäckman, J., The military-political situation in Northern Europe and the threats to Russia’s security (Voenno-politicheskaya situatsiya v severnoi Evrope i ugrozy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii), *Problemy natsionalnoi strategii* No 6 (2016) 11–37.

<sup>94</sup> Yle, ‘Anti-immigrant agitator Ilja Janitskin gets 22-month jail sentence’, 18 Oct. 2018, <[https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/anti-immigrant\\_agitator\\_ilja\\_janitskin\\_gets\\_22-month\\_jail\\_sentence/10463931](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/anti-immigrant_agitator_ilja_janitskin_gets_22-month_jail_sentence/10463931)>.

<sup>95</sup> Tishchenko et al. explicitly refer to the press conference of Säpo as the source of their claim. It is possible to verify the claim since recordings from the press conference are available on Säpo’s website (in Swedish): *Säkerhetspolisen*, ‘Chief analysts’ situation reports’ (Chefsanalytikernas lägesbilder), 17 Mar. 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-ewJvaSPQI>> and <<http://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2016-03-16-sakerhetspolisens-arsbok-2015-presenteras/2016-03-17-chefsanalytikernas-lagesbilder.html>>.



source, apparently with the intention to give the impression that the Swedish security police seeks to demonize Russia.

Scientifically debatable ideas or claims can also appear in unusual thematic contexts. In 2008, an article in the *Herald* issued a warning to the 'leaders in the army and navy' regarding 'the piercings and tattoos of servicemen, [which require] prophylactic measures of an educational and medical character in order to prevent a youthful fashion from rising into a national disaster.'<sup>96</sup> Typically, however, the most radical conspiracy theories appear in the *Courier*, rather than in the more formal academic Russian journals. One article in the *Courier*, for example, explains the dangerous impact of the 'macro-cosmos' (sunrays, cosmic radiation, etc.) on participants in mass protests, suggesting that the government should warn Russian citizens of the mental health risks associated with collective protest.<sup>97</sup> We have even found a warning about extra-terrestrial threats: 'The world has come to such a point, when ufological safety becomes decisive in the complex of other components on both the national and international arena. Otherwise, what is the point of fighting terrorism, crime, solving demographic and other problems, upholding and developing spiritual, ideological and social values in a particular country or region, if the Earth's population is doomed to degradation due to alien influence?'<sup>98</sup> That such ideas can appear in a newspaper where the key texts by Russia's most influential military leaders are also published is indicative of how conspiracy theories have become tolerated in Russian security thinking.<sup>99</sup>

### Limitations of our study

Our article has dealt with some of the ways Russian military and security analysts spread, tolerate and legitimize conspiracy theories in a way that supports a wider conspiratorial worldview that frames their country as a victim of US or Western attempts to undermine Russia. Can it be legitimately argued that the US, or the NATO alliance, pose a security threat to Russia? That question

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<sup>96</sup> Vitaliy Ryaboshapko, 'New fashion or trouble' (Novaya moda ili napast'), *Vestnik akademii voennykh nauk*, 25/4 (2008) 11-36.

<sup>97</sup> Roman Iluyshchenko and Evgeniy Zhovnerchuk, 'Nature warns: rallies are dangerous to health' (Priroda preduprezhdayet: mitingi opasny dlya zdorov'ya), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 19 Jun. 2012, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/8967>>.

<sup>98</sup> Yuriy Podgornykh and Vasiliy Dolgov, '18 security threats' (18 ugroz bezopasnosti), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 4 Aug. 2014 <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/21307>>.

<sup>99</sup> The Russian Academy of Sciences has initiated a commission to investigate scientific misconduct in Russian academic journals. In January 2020, they announced that 800 articles in different fields will be retracted. This work is ongoing and may be expanded. See Dalmat Singh Chawla, 'Russian journals retract more than 800 papers after 'bombshell' investigation', *Science*, 8 Jan. 2020 <<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/01/russian-journals-retract-more-800-papers-after-bombshell-investigation>>.

is beyond the scope of our article, but a detailed answer would likely involve an earnest discussion regarding the Western states' advantages over Russia in military domains such as cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, missile defence, robotics and space, and a general concern that the military balance is tilting in an unfavourable direction.<sup>100</sup> The discussion would also take stock of recent foreign policy conduct of several Western states, including for example the military interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), and the role of NATO. Furthermore, the promotion of Western values regarding the rule of law, human rights, and individual liberties, can justifiably be regarded as a threat to any authoritarian regime.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, from various perspectives, it may be hypothesized how Western states and even non-state organizations can weaken Russia's current political system through democracy promotion. Alas, not all criticism in Russia of Western states is conspiratorial but may have perfectly rational and legitimate motivations.<sup>102</sup> We would, however, have expected that kind of narrative to dominate over conspiracy theories in the types of publications we have surveyed for this study. Their absence strengthens the paradox of why conspiracy theories are accepted and legitimized in the first place. In this context it is interesting to note that there is some debate about the quality of military research in the very publications that we have surveyed, although the focus of this debate seems to be on technical aspects rather than political ones. One example is an article in the *Courier* by an expert at the Military Academy of Sciences, who has personally had to defend the status of the military sciences before the leadership of the Ministry of Education and Science (*Ministerstvo obrazovaniya i nauki*). The author argues that the field of military sciences has been radically weakened in recent years and that the quality of research is an urgent problem.<sup>103</sup>

Another question is whether the conspiratorial worldviews should rather be conceptualized as traditional Soviet/Russian active measures, i.e., the instrumental use of disinformation and other tools of deception. Notably, several structural similarities between active measures and conspiracy theories exist, such as the reliance on forgeries. It needs to be recalled, however, that the Russian (Soviet) intelligence agencies have normally applied the active measures against outside targets,<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Dmitri Trenin, '2014: Russia's New Military Doctrine Says It All', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 29 Dec. 2014 <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/57607>>.

<sup>101</sup> See Michael McFaul, 'Russia as It Is. A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2018).

<sup>102</sup> One noteworthy example of a well-articulated criticism of the West is the analysis by Igor Ivanov, former minister of foreign affairs: 'Undivided Security in a Globalized World,' *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security* 18/1 (2012) 85-89.

<sup>103</sup> Alexandr Rakhmanov, 'Demoted science. The militaries don't want to defend themselves' (Razzhlovannaya nauka. Voyennoye ne khotyat zashchishchat'sya), *Voyenno-promyshlennyyi kur'yer*, 29 May 2017, <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/37000>>.

<sup>104</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, 'Russia's Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: The Swedish Case,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40/6 (2017) 773-816.

and it is difficult to see why Russian military and security analysts would deliberately damage their own intellectual and policy-making milieu. If there is any causal link between active measures and conspiratorial worldviews in Russian military thinking, it could be indirect and not conscious—although this question is beyond the scope of our study.

### **Concluding discussion**

Our article has illustrated that conspiracy theories have been promoted and legitimized to such a significant extent that we confidently conclude, through inference, that a conspiratorial worldview is relatively common within Russia's military and security establishment. Within this group, in fact, conspiracy theories were prevalent for the whole period we have surveyed for this article, suggesting that their presence cannot be explained by the overall increased frequency of conspiracy theories in society. Our paper has also shown how Russian political leaders have legitimized a conspiratorial worldview, thereby giving them more visibility in public discourse. Overall, the promotion of conspiracy theories is widespread and tolerated within important Russian military institutions and official think tanks. The widespread and highly legitimized diffusion of conspiracy theories is a concern in itself, as it influences a country's analytical capacity adversely in a core area: the academic study of security, military and international affairs.

The legitimization of conspiracy theories promotes a general conspiratorial worldview, which in its basic orientation is anti-Western and illiberal, and which reinforces an image of Russia as under threat. The fact that we are only observing conspiracy theories with this particular bias, rather than a stochastic distribution of many conflicting conspiracy theories, suggest that their legitimization is contingent on political correctness. Similar ideas have been used by Russia's political and military leaders to justify and rationalize Russian foreign policy conduct but also to explain the targeted repression of different domestic groups as necessary from a national security point of view. We must be careful, however, to make a distinction between *believing* in a conspiracy theory and *using* it for a particular purpose. There are also strong variations in the degree to which the conspiracy theories we have surveyed are radical or more benign. In this respect, our findings support the claim that conspiracy theories should be regarded as a mode of thinking, and therefore treated as a spectrum rather than a binary relationship between rational or irrational thinking. Thus, even if our results convincingly show that a conspiratorial worldview is firmly established in the Russian military and security establishment, they are not sufficient to conclude that such a worldview is the dominant factor at the very pinnacle of strategic decision-making. The alternative interpretation still remains plausible, namely that the decision-making is largely the product of rational calculations based on

correct judgements and threat assessments, framed in a zero-sum worldview of geopolitics. This perspective regards the West primarily as cynical and ignorant, rather than conspiratorial. However, a rational political leader could encourage, explicitly or implicitly, the spread of conspiracy theories, as long they reinforce the zero-sum worldview of geopolitics. More evidence from other sources would be necessary to draw any stronger conclusions regarding the influence of conspiracy theories on decision-making.

Within the limitations mentioned above, we identify three noteworthy policy implications of our findings. The first implication is *cognitive*, where the conspiratorial worldview influences threat perceptions and the understanding of domestic and foreign developments more broadly. In this cognitive framework, changes to the political status quo are axiomatically interpreted as the outcome of Western hostile intent. Arguably, this increases the risk for strategic mistakes given the assumption that perceptions matter for the quality of decision-making. False statements made by President Vladimir Putin, such as the claim that the US is operating a laboratory to develop biological weapons in Georgia, suggest that he may receive reports containing conspiratorial ideas. This cognitive aspect also has implications for the way Russia's foreign policy conduct should be understood, particularly with regard to situations where Western analysts are at risk of engaging in mirror-imaging, albeit often implicitly, assuming that Russian and Western leaders share a similar worldview or rationality, and that the confrontation follows rationally given their different interests. Another aspect of this implication, which, arguably but paradoxically, is detrimental to Russia's security, is that it produces a failure of strategic communication: the prevalence of conspiratorial ideas risks crowding out more legitimate and plausible arguments about Russia's viewpoint in security matters that would be met by greater understanding in the West.

The second implication is that regardless of whether Russian decision-makers believe in a conspiratorial worldview or not, it can still act as a powerful *binding constraint*. To the extent that Putin has used conspiratorial ideas to legitimize his foreign policy conduct, his own freedom of action will be restricted. Indeed, if there was no imminent threat of a US-sponsored coup in Ukraine, how can the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk be explained? If the conflict in Ukraine was an artificial struggle staged by the West without Russian involvement, how can the presence of a Russian BUK surface-to-air missile in eastern Ukraine at the time of the shooting down of the civilian aircraft MH17 in July 2014 be explained? For the Kremlin, sticking to a conspiratorial worldview under such conditions becomes a politically defensive strategy, even if it crowds out alternative political narratives that could theoretically be more conducive to the normalization of Russia's relations with the West and a termination of the sanction regimes. There exists, in other words, a trade-off between short-run and long-run benefits from this strategy. In the

current political situation, an alteration of Russian foreign policy conduct would have to be preceded by an alteration in the country's ideological and analytical climate.

The third implication is that, since the space for self-correction is much narrower in an authoritarian regime than in open democracies with checks and balances on executive power, more time might be needed in an authoritarian system to exit any given feedback loop that arises due to a conspiratorial worldview. In 2003, the administration of US President George W. Bush had to concede that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, although this had ostensibly been the *casus belli* for the US-led invasion. The admission was important, as it forced the country's policy makers, intelligence services, but also media corporations, to be subjected to public scrutiny (and possibly a rethink of their modus operandi).<sup>105</sup> In a political system where feedback mechanisms are weaker, as in Russia, it is much less likely that unwarranted beliefs about the outside will be challenged. Not least in a situation where a conspiratorial worldview exists not only 'from below', but also within the country's military and security establishment.

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<sup>105</sup> For an overview, see Robert Jervis, 'Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29/1 (2006) 3-52.

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**Table 1. Russian Military Journals**

Journal title	Journal title (Russian)	Publication frequency	Institutional affiliation
<i>Military Thought</i>	<i>Voennaya mysl'</i>	Monthly	Ministry of Defence
<i>The Herald of the Academy of Military Sciences</i>	<i>Vestnik akademii voennykh nauk</i>	Quarterly	The Russian Military Academy of Sciences
<i>Problems of National Strategy</i>	<i>Problemy natsional'noi strategii</i>	Usually six per year, but sometimes less	The Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, subordinated to presidential administration
<i>Military-Industrial Courier</i>	<i>Voенно-promyshlennii kur'er</i>	Weekly	The Association of Military-Industrial Companies

Source: *Military Thought*, [www.vm.milportal.ru](http://www.vm.milportal.ru); *The Herald of the Academy of Military Sciences*, [www.avnr.ru](http://www.avnr.ru); *Problems of National Strategy*, [www.riss.ru](http://www.riss.ru); *Military-Industrial Courier*, [www.vpk.ru](http://www.vpk.ru).

**Table 2. Frequency of keywords in *Problems of National Strategy*, 2009–2018**

Year	'Organized Chaos'		'Soros'		'New World Order'		TOTAL	
	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles
2008	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2009	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
2010	0	0	4	2	5	3	9	5
2011	2	2	7	4	13	2	22	8
2012	0	0	2	1	5	3	7	4
2013	1	1	5	4	6	4	12	9
2014	20	2	2	2	11	6	33	10
2015	5	1	3	2	11	7	19	10
2016	10	1	13	5	2	2	25	8
2017	0	0	9	2	4	4	13	6
2018	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>64</b>

Source: Authors' calculations. See Table 1 for sources.

**Note:** The first column for each keyword indicates how many times it is mentioned in total, while the second column indicates the number of articles where the term is used, to compensate for the possibility that individual articles drive the results. For example, in 2016 a single article accounted for all 10 mentions of 'organized chaos'. Note that the publication of *PNS* started in 2009.

**Table 3. Frequency of Keywords in *Military-Industrial Courier*, 2008–2018**

	'Organized Chaos'		'Soros'		'New World Order'		TOTAL	
	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles	Word count	Articles
2008	0	0	5	4	12	8	17	12
2009	0	0	6	4	12	4	18	8
2010	4	1	0	0	3	3	7	4
2011	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	3
2012	3	3	0	0	12	7	15	10
2013	9	4	0	0	5	4	14	8
2014	9	5	0	0	7	5	16	10
2015	6	6	1	1	16	11	23	18
2016	12	6	2	1	7	6	21	13
2017	8	4	2	2	4	4	14	10
2018	5	4	24	1	12	5	41	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>106</b>

**Source:** Authors' calculations. See Table 1 for sources.

**Note:** The first column for each keyword indicates how many times it is mentioned in total, while the second column indicates the number of articles where the term is used, to compensate for the possibility that individual articles drive the results.

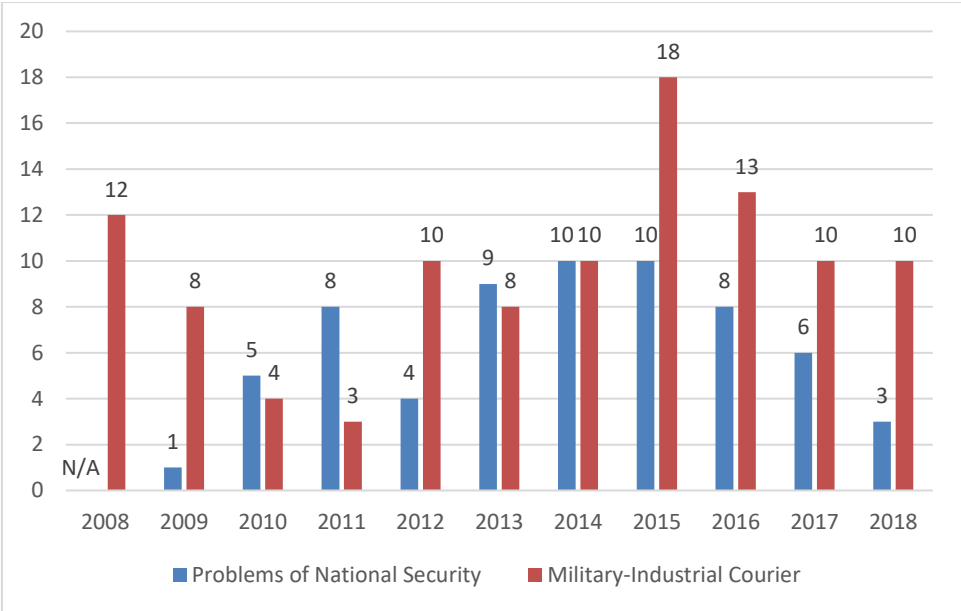
**Table 4. Keyword correlations**

Keyword pair		PNS	The Courier
'Organized Chaos'	'Soros'	0,594	-0,511
'Organized Chaos'	'New World Order'	0,370	0,432
'New World Order'	'Soros'	0,030	0,130

**Source:** Authors' calculations based on Table 2 and Table 3.



**Figure 1. Number of articles with selected conspiratorial keywords**



**Source:** Table 2 and Table 3. The diagram shows the total number of articles in each publication that contain the keywords in Table 2 and Table 3.