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A (COLD) WAR FOR VACCINES

Retro-Conspiracism in Kremlin-Aligned Russian Discourse on Sputnik V

Boris Noordenbos

In August 2020, Vladimir Putin proudly reported “the world’s first-registered vaccine against the new Corona-virus”¹ (Putin 2020). Developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, it received the brand name “Sputnik V,” a nod to the pioneering Sputnik-1 satellite launched by the Soviets in 1957. The period following the announcement saw a steady outpouring of allegations leveled by, and at, Russia. Western governments and media outlets frequently denounced the Russian spread of fake news on traditional and online media platforms insisting on the health risks of Western-produced vaccines. Conversely, the Russian public was flooded with pro-Kremlin media stories on concerted efforts by Western governments, news agencies, and medical regulatory bodies to smear the country’s success, frustrate the Russian vaccine’s European certification, and delay its global rollout.

Focusing on the period between the summer of 2020 and the fall of 2021, this chapter discusses conspiracy-based interpretations of the fate of Sputnik V (and its “competitors”) in the global arena. It analyzes such vaccine conspiracism² in Russian-language Kremlin-aligned television programs;³ in statements by political leaders; and on Sputnik’s official, multi-language website. Proposing the conceptual label “retro-conspiracism” for this state-sanctioned rhetoric, I argue that it derives its persuasiveness from a combination of conspiratorial interpretation (keen to unveil hidden intentions and concerted manipulations) and commemorative gestures, of which the Sputnik name is only the most obvious manifestation. On the one hand, retro-conspiracism borrows profusely from the contemporary lingo of a globalized conspiracy culture. On the other, it relies on affectively charged invocations of Soviet-era events, symbols, and explanatory paradigms, which are inserted into, or projected onto, the reading of current affairs.⁴

The state-backed conspiracy view of “vaccine diplomacy” comes in different tonalities, ranging from mild cynicism (characteristic of TV magazine news shows)

to high-pitched agitation, the latter being the default mode of political talk shows on Russia's major television channels. In an information landscape still strongly centered around television,⁵ such programs play a vital role in the frantic top-down efforts to align public opinion with the agenda of the political leadership, who keep tight control over the selection and framing of the shows' topics (Sharafutdinova 2020, 151). A central strategy in the consolidation of consensus is the ceaseless expression and incitement of fear, anger, and sarcasm in these programs, all of which are directed at Russia's (and the government's) "others." Critical views – when articulated at all – are voiced in subdued tones by talk show guests representing the "systemic opposition" or by (often inarticulate) "useful idiots" – for example, liberal opponents of the government, (former) Ukrainian politicians, or Moscow-based American journalists. They are routinely bashed and ridiculed by guests and moderators alike, adding to the general mood of triumphant nationalist outrage that dominates these platforms of "agitainment" (Tolz and Teper 2018).

Apart from the discussions among the guests, these shows feature a carefully curated assemblage of content that comes in different media, for example, video interviews with Russians abroad, snippets from White House press conferences, official statements from the Kremlin, and accounts taken from (Russian and foreign) news websites. For my discussion of vaccine-related conspiracy stories, such programs are a suitable starting point. They spotlight the various ingredients of pro-Kremlin vaccine conspiracism as well as the centrally sanctioned interpretive and emotional frames in which these elements acquire their meaning. After zeroing in on one example, a broadcast of the program *60 Minutes*, I fan out to further explore the constitutive parts of Sputnik-related retro-conspiracism as it is channeled through other state-aligned platforms.

60 Minutes of Outrage

Hosted by the husband-and-wife team of Olga Skabeeva and Evgenii Popov, and broadcast on weekdays by the state-owned television channel Russia-1, the political talk show *60 Minutes* [*60 Minut: po goriachim sledam*] is one of the main outlets of Russian agitainment. The program of March 15, 2021, was almost entirely devoted to a statement just released by three Russian press agencies loyal to the state. Its content was purportedly based on an "anonymous, high-ranking source within the Kremlin." While the opening theme music plays, Skabeeva and Popov walk onto the stage, which is flanked by two semi-circular counters behind which the program's guests are positioned. Skabeeva sums up the news:

Against the background of a growing demand for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in all countries, including those in Europe, the United States and its allies – according to data of our special services – intend to conduct a large-scale information campaign against the Russian vaccine. This time, the Americans plan to play the game covertly: Faking ["instsenirovat"] massive [numbers of] victims, that is, making up stories about people who have

allegedly died after vaccination with Sputnik V. The goal is to intimidate Europeans, especially [in] those [countries] that have already certified Sputnik . . . with the aim, of course, to enhance trust in their own vaccines, Pfizer and AstraZeneca. Yet, almost everyone across Europe has lost confidence in these [vaccines] in light of the relentless cases of mortality and thrombosis.

(2021a)

The show then sets out to contextualize the exposed American scheme, showing news footage from across Europe to illustrate the social unrest and political cleavages caused by vaccine shortages, worries about safety, and disagreements over the (non-)approval of Sputnik V. Among the featured material are dubbed fragments from biased reporting on the Russian vaccine by “mainstream media” in Western Europe as well as a prerecorded audio interview with Putin’s press secretary, who advocates a composed and level-headed attitude toward the “unscrupulous politicians and provocateurs” from the West.

There can be no debate (or talk show) without a critic. The role is here fulfilled by Alexei Naumov, a foreign affairs expert and journalist for the newspaper *Kommersant*. He is worried that the Kremlin has been deceived and is skeptical about the “anonymous source” (who may be, he speculates half-ironically, a “Ukrainian or, I don’t know, perhaps a European or American mole”). Naumov is especially taken aback by the statement’s assertion that the Americans will cover up their involvement in the smear campaign by channeling it through nongovernmental organizations as well as major global news agencies (among others, the BBC and Reuters). Imitating the gestures of a ventriloquist holding a dummy, Naumov (admitting that there have been “provocations”) comments that “the hand of Washington or London” does not control Reuters from within. He is cut off by the moderators, who now allow the other guests to double down on their support for the official interpretation. One of them adduces anecdotal evidence as proof of the highly refined methods by which “they,” as in the West, manipulate the digital media landscape using commissioned “bloggers” to spread online lies about Sputnik V; another recalls Putin’s recent address to the FSB in which the president had praised the agency for its collection of information about Sputnik-related provocations.

The overheated denunciations of Western manipulations culminate when Igor Korotchenko – a member of a public council advising the Ministry of Defense and editor of the journal *National Defense* – is invited by the moderators to weigh in. The camera zooms in, establishing a symmetrically framed close-up of his head. Looking not at his discussion partners, but straight into the camera, Korotchenko delivers his analysis of the situation. The Kremlin’s information, he reminds the viewer, is based on reliable intelligence obtained through “sources in the West.” Underpinning the Western scheme is a battle for geopolitical influence, a “vaccine race” that could turn out to be

[E]xactly the same as the space race [and] the nuclear arms race in the 1960s of the past century. . . . Since Russia is successful in this realm [of vaccine

development], the discrediting of our vaccine is inevitable, because it is an element of soft power, an element of influence, an element of state prestige.

Many more provocations, he assures, are to be expected.

Meanwhile, the camera alternates between close-ups of Korotchenko and overview shots of the studio, allowing a view of the vaccine's promotional clip playing on the immense screen in the background and showing a Sputnik satellite circling around a planet-shaped virus particle. Korotchenko ends his speech with a piece of advice directed at the security services in those European countries that have already bought doses of Sputnik V, not awaiting approval by the European Medicines Agency (EMA):

I would recommend the counter-intelligence services in . . . Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and other countries . . . to closely monitor their senior brothers in the intelligence community – the Americans, the British, perhaps even the German BND [Federal Intelligence Service] – so that they won't play you the nasty trick of staging, on your territories, massive cases of side effects purportedly caused by the Russian vaccine.

Korotchenko's contribution, typical of the wider retro-conspiracist vilifications of the West during the pandemic, propels the audience back in time: not only to a bygone communist-capitalist rivalry for military and technological supremacy, but also to conspiratorial Soviet propaganda narratives about nefarious imperialist foes eager to undermine the country's values and aspirations. This perspective, tinted by espionage romanticism, appears to be untouched by the digital revolution and the ensuing deterritorialization of information flows. For Korotchenko, information is still firmly grounded in geographical space: intelligence is obtained through Russian "sources in the West," while clandestine Western agents and provocateurs encroach on Eastern European "territories," attempting to plant their compromising material there. Korotchenko's analysis sits awkwardly with the twenty-first-century concerns expressed earlier in the show, which hinged on biased reporting in the "mainstream media," the vulnerability of the online sphere to political manipulation, and the threats posed by "fake news." Yet, this anachronistic alternation between current affairs and Cold War-era myths and constellations elicits no questions from the participants in the *60 Minutes* episode.

The Open Secret of a Western Plot

Before probing deeper into this combination of contemporary and history-based paradigms in pro-Kremlin conspiracy discourse, we should assess Russian reporting on the vaccine more broadly. Its tone and focus can be gauged from the discussions on another talk show, *Time Will Tell* [*Vremia pokazhet*] (*TWT*). Broadcast by the state-controlled Channel One, and airing on weekdays, this two-and-a-half-hours political discussion program is longer but otherwise structured like *60*

Minutes. During the fall and winter of 2020–21, the show’s guests and alternating hosts tirelessly reiterated that vaccine development is a race, or a war, not merely between the spreading virus and the advancements of medical science, but primarily between national governments. These governments, according to the overriding consensus, initially competed to be the first to produce an effective vaccine against Covid-19 and are now engaged in a bitter economic and political struggle to promote their vaccines and discredit “competitors.” In one broadcast, the program’s host, referring to this second stage of Covid-era competition, exclaims, “The vaccine race has begun!” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b).

In *TWT* and other news and discussion programs, Russia’s stake in this race is symbolized by two Sputnik V flacons with red and blue lids, representing the Russian flag, the white labels on the flacons completing the tricolor. These are brought into the studio and shown to guests and viewers, or they feature in photographs on the studios’ screens. This “nationalized” notion of vaccine competition is further expressed in graphs and tables showing the varying efficacy of different vaccines, their names often accompanied by little flags signaling the vaccines’ respective national origins. As the host of *TWT* admits, “I look at these tables as one looks at the [results of] the Olympic Games or a world championship, when you want to see how many of your flags are [listed] there” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b). However, the competitive rhetoric often extends beyond the metaphor of a sportive test of strength, taking on the more belligerent connotations of a “vaccine war” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020c). The prevailing image is that of a bitter struggle for markets as well as a more consequential battle for prestige and (soft) power over populations and territories. During one of the *TWT* broadcasts (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b), the host vividly articulates this geopolitical outlook via the newly minted adage “whoever controls the vaccines, controls the world.” This perspective is further fleshed out in another episode (Vremiia pokazhet 2021b) featuring the writer and journalist Nikolai Starikov, one of the main voices in the Russian milieu of anti-Western conspiracy theorists (Yablokov 2018, 54–56). Joining the overheated debate on the Ukrainian rejection of Sputnik V, Starikov explains that the Zelenskii government’s decision not to use the vaccine has been dictated by the country’s new American bosses, who fear any rapprochement between the neighboring countries: “In terms of its economy, politics, and diplomacy, Ukraine is an American occupation zone. In this zone, decisions can only be made with the blessings of the occupier’s administration.”

The repeated terminology of a “race” or “war” serves multiple rhetorical purposes at once. First, and most obviously, it gives center stage to Russia’s world-changing triumph over both microbial and political “enemies.” Second, this double discourse of Russia’s success allows for an alternating stress on the scientific and the political implications of the recent victory. Indeed, adding to this convenient rhetorical flexibility is the ambiguous “V” in Sputnik’s name, which the developers and their financial backers alternatively link to “Vaccine” and “Victory.”⁶

The ubiquitous space-race theme further troubles the official presentation of this “Victory” as merely one over the virus. Third, the insistence on global competition

keeps the discussions' focus securely on foreign affairs (the preferred domain of the Russian government's persuasive strategies [Sharafutdinova 2020, 148]), thus deflecting attention from domestic problems at a time when less than 40 percent of the Russian population was willing to get vaccinated with Sputnik V (Levada Center 2021). In the rare instance when such domestic problems are raised, they are juxtaposed with stories about substantial numbers of foreigners who are allegedly eager to travel to Russia for vaccination with Sputnik V (Vremiia pokazhet 2021c).

Finally, and most importantly, the emphasis on competition opens the door to conspiratorial explanations that identify foul play by Western companies, governments, and media agencies, all of which apparently operate in cahoots with each other. Subscribing to the central conspiratorial premises that everything is connected, and nothing is ever as it seems (Butter and Knight 2020, 1), the rhetoric of the *Time Will Tell* show frequently pivots on what Todor Hristov has called "the offstage," a realm of obscured knowledge that is nevertheless conceived as being transparent. In conspiracy discourse the offstage, Hristov writes, acts as "an open secret," one that is "both kept and revealed" (2019, 74). Indeed, identifying gloomy machinations and muddy motivations under the surface of Western policies and statements, the show constantly reveals what the audience presumably already knows. Acting as an arbiter in the "vaccine race," the EMA is prejudiced against Russia and has applied "double standards." Moreover, Western reports about the cutting of corners in Sputnik V's clinical trials are "paid by those who don't want our vaccine on their markets" (Vremiia pokazhet 2021b). That vaccine development has become a "race" is itself presented as a lamentable result of the aggressive market-logic and Russophobia of Western companies and governments. The West's spite, greed, and conniving behavior are contrasted with Russia's humanitarian commitment to solve this worldwide crisis, that is, to create "a 'Sputnik moment' for the global community," as the vaccine's website has it ("Sputnik Moment" n.d.a; emphasis added).

The insistence on a political and economic conspiracy against the Russian vaccine is also reflected, though in more subdued tones, in the press releases of the Gamaleya Institute and the financial sponsor of the vaccine's development, the Russian Direct Investment Fund. Characteristic is a statement published on the English-language version of Sputnik V's website on October 21, 2021. It claimed that "misleading" attacks "from anonymous sources" against the Sputnik vaccine increased "after official studies showed that mRNA vaccines' efficacy . . . falls to below 50% in just five months." After adducing data to prove Sputnik V's "superior efficacy and longer-lasting immunity" compared to mRNA vaccines, the statement ends with a recommendation that, instead of "attacking" Sputnik, producers of mRNA vaccines in the West should use the "one-component Sputnik Light as a booster." It goes on to insist that the media should not rely on "inaccurate anonymous sources" but instead rely on the "official position of regulators." It condemns what it sees as the "unscrupulous media attacks organized by some big pharma

companies,” which it thinks are not only “unethical” but delay the roll-out of vaccination programs as well, allegedly allowing new virus mutations to emerge which will cost lives (“On Information Attacks” 2021).

More noteworthy than the vigorous promotion of Sputnik V (and its single-dose version) is the text’s adherence to the ambiguous logic of the “offstage.” Indeed, the statement both keeps and reveals an “open secret,” emphasizing the anonymity *and* the identity of the forces behind the misleading information. It first suggests a causal relation between the intensification of disinformation and the disappointing efficacy of Western-made mRNA vaccines (pointing to Moderna and Pfizer, not to AstraZeneca with whom Sputnik by this time conducted trials on the combined use of the two vaccines). Then it implies – apparently by asking “who benefits?” (the age-old justification for “intentionalist interpretations” [Byford 2011, 41–43]) – that “Western mRNA vaccine producers” are the organizers (and the “anonymous sources”?) behind the media attacks against Sputnik V. Without spelling out the narrative, the statement adheres to the Russian establishment’s go-to account of Western actors as sore losers, whose spite and pursuit of financial gain prove more important than the protection of human lives. Yet, the declaration mixes this perspective with hints borrowed from globalized narratives of suspicion regarding the limitless power of “Big Pharma” and the political and financial elites’ control of the mainstream media. While these elements do not come together to form a full-fledged conspiracy theory, they invite the reader to connect the dots. Surprisingly, the statement combines conspiracist insinuations with a defense of evidence-based medicine as well as accurate and unbiased journalism. Such an ardently expressed commitment to procedures, values, and norms that Russia has often been accused of violating aligns with recent attitudes and practices in Russia’s international diplomacy. Central among these is a strategy of “overidentification,” which “endorses but indirectly subverts the normative frameworks within which it is performed” (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021).

Soviet Retro

It is time to return to the historical references in Sputnik V conspiracism in order to analyze the temporal relations it cultivates and ask how these bolster the discourse’s rhetorical and emotional persuasiveness. As noted earlier, Korotchenko’s analysis in *60 Minutes* found former Cold War rivalry lurking under the surface of vaccine-related intrigues. More implicitly, Starikov’s analysis of Ukraine as an American occupation zone echoed Soviet propaganda stories about the United States as “an overly militarized, evil country bent on world domination” (Sharafutdinova 2020, 76). Yet, for a more in-depth discussion of the retro-element of state-backed vaccine conspiracism, I turn to a section on the Sputnik V website devoted entirely to the history of Soviet space exploration. Accessing this section, the visitor first encounters an image of the curved, blue surface of the Earth as seen from outer

space, with a ball-shaped satellite apparently orbiting our planet. Visual hints to medical science are absent, but a short, superimposed text invokes the connection:

In 1957 the successful launch of the first space satellite Sputnik-1 by the Soviet Union reinvigorated space research and exploration around the world. The announcement of the new Russian Covid-19 vaccine created a so-called ‘Sputnik moment’ for the global community. The vaccine is therefore called Sputnik V.

(“Sputnik Moment” n.d.)

Further down, the Sputnik V promotional clip – also shown on *60 Minutes* – is included. The short video continues to juxtapose the dimensions, producing a composite of Soviet history and current affairs, space exploration and vaccine development, and macro and micro perspectives on life on Earth. In the video, a Sputnik satellite orbits a virus particle recognizable due to its extending spike proteins. With each circle of the satellite, this “viral” celestial body loses parts of its brownish surface, revealing a progressively more familiar, “cleaned-up” version of planet Earth.

The clip (or imagery taken from it) was featured in countless news and discussion programs throughout 2020 and 2021. A broadcast of the news program *Time [Vremia]* used the video to assure the audience that “in microbiology, as in space exploration, our specialists have long-proven technology at their disposal.” Adding to the space theme, it showed a computer-animated rocket launch to illustrate that Sputnik V’s vector vaccine technology “transports any harmless virus into the cells as if it were into the orbit, thus triggering immunity” (August 15, 2020). On other occasions, the invocation of the space race facilitates projections about scientific breakthroughs in the future. In a summer 2020 *Time Will Tell* episode, the host rebuts the skepticism of one guest (the liberally oriented political scientist Andrei Nikulin) about the speed of the upcoming Russian vaccination campaign. From now on, the host notes assuringly, things will progress quickly: “It’s like the flight into the cosmos. You understand that without the Sputnik [satellite] we would never have reached [the point of] piloted space flights. After Sputnik there were other. . . .” When interrupted by his opponent, the camera zooms in on the show’s second moderator, who directly addresses the audience at home and reminds them that the first human being was sent into space only four years after the Sputnik satellite (*Vremia pokazhet 2020a*).

The seemingly far-fetched resonances between a twenty-first-century vaccine and a twentieth-century satellite do not take shape via a simple analogy between two historically discrete moments of scientific innovation. Instead, the rhetoric of a “Sputnik moment” overlays these achievements to create a vision of permanent East–West rivalry and Soviet/Russian supremacy. This perspective can only be communicated by suspending one’s awareness of the obvious differences and complications which seem to render the suggested continuity untenable: Russia is not the Soviet Union; the post-Soviet nationalist framing of the global “vaccine race” sits uncomfortably with the simultaneous invocation of Soviet-imperialist prestige;

and the current Russian leadership lacks a coherent and up-to-date ideological basis for pitting Russia's aspirations against those of "the West."

Scholarship on contemporary Russia has adopted various perspectives on this (often ambiguous) Putin-era "reconciliation with the Soviet" (Dubin 2006) and its multifaceted manifestations in the realms of culture, media, and politics. Kevin Platt has coined the term "Soviet retro" to describe the "ongoing reconstitution of Russian and Soviet history as a continuous fabric." Retro, in his use of the term, is different from nostalgia as "it describes the revival or continuation of traditions that appear never to have been lost" (2013, 464). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has recently zoomed in on the socio-psychological dimensions of this politically expedient promotion of Russia as the "main bearer of the legacies of the Soviet state" (2020, 79). She points to the Putin government's "well-coordinated media machine" that relentlessly fuels the public's wounded pride (167). Emotions of shame, fear, and outrage regarding Russia's denigrated role in global affairs are harnessed for a revanchist national unification around a set of selectively rekindled paradigms drawn from Soviet culture and propaganda. The first among these is a resuscitated "sense of exceptionalism – of living in a country that was unique and superior to the rest of the world" (64), while the others build on a Soviet notion of "capitalist encirclement" (91) and on an understanding of the country as a "besieged fortress" (21).

In the wake of the annexation of Crimea, the Russian leadership and the media platforms it controls have doubled down on narratives involving foreign foes and their treacherous domestic allies. These stories always insist on the urgency to "unmask . . . and denounce . . . the 'enemies,' whether they are Russian liberals representing the 1990s, fascists from Ukraine, or Americans, the global troublemakers" (161). Ilya Yablokov, too, identifies the reverberations of jingoistic Soviet propaganda in the current state-led mass production of anti-Western conspiracy theories. A case in point is the government's protracted legislative attempt to curtail the activities of NGOs in Russia, a project that culminated in a 2012 law requiring NGOs – those that receive donations from abroad and engage in "political activities" – to register as "foreign agents." Yablokov notes that the phrase "recalled the accusations levelled against numerous Soviet citizens during the Great Purges in the 1930s" (2018, 125) and observes that the term's use in the new law demonstrates "the dependance of the official political discourse on the vocabulary of the Soviet era" (125–26). In 2020, the law was expanded and made applicable to independent media platforms and to individuals, which further reinforces the uncanny parallels with violent Soviet histories of political paranoia and state terror.

For Platt, Sharafutdinova, and Yablokov, such constructed historical reverberations, however, do not signal an actual full-fledged "return" to Soviet times or policies. Rather, as Sharafutdinova explains, these echoes are employed to capitalize on the "emotional sore-spots" of post-Soviet Russians in strategic attempts to manufacture an ever more comprehensive pro-Kremlin unanimity among them (2020, 176). She characterizes the resulting situation as "a moment of consolidation, emergence, and the coming together of a post-Soviet collective identity envisioned through the central symbolic pillars of the Soviet identity" (19).

This instrumentalized “retro” vision of Soviet/Russia – as a country always at the forefront of history even as it is constantly threatened by its age-old adversaries – is at the heart of official vaccine discourse. Its retro element takes on different yet related guises. It manifests itself as a rearticulation of past achievements in the present; as a story of political and identarian continuity which glosses over the seismic changes wrought by the transitions of the 1990s; and as an affect-laden interpretive lens onto present affairs, one that takes its cues from a selective set of Soviet conspiracy tropes.⁷

Typically, the inevitable anachronisms of retro-conspiracism do not diminish its rhetorical and emotional force. Characteristic in this regard is one of Igor Korotchenko’s rants during another episode of *60 Minutes* (60 Minut 2021b). After proudly noting that “the Russian word ‘Sputnik’” has recently been “resonating across the entire globe,” he fulminates against the (orchestrated) Western media skepticism toward the Russian vaccine. Only Western envy and fear could explain “why those Western lapdogs [i.e., American-controlled media personalities] now bark so nastily!” Fired up by his own self-righteous revanchism, he declares that Russia would prevail regardless: “Even if these lapdogs bite at our pants, we will proceed forward!” Boris Nadezhdin, a *Just Russia* politician, advocates a more level-headed, less “politicized” approach. Not hiding his enjoyment of Korotchenko’s performative and oratory skills, he also stresses its out-of-placeness: “You should have [addressed the audience from] the stage of the Party Congress in 1937, condemning those enemies of the People. I haven’t heard something like this for a long time, ‘these Western lapdogs,’ well done!” With the hosts condemning Nadezhdin’s mild irony and attacking his blindness to “what’s happening abroad” as well as his presumed “infatuation with everything American,” the show continues.

On this occasion and others, retro-conspiracism does not culminate in a seamless integration of disparate historical settings and traditions of explanation. Its logic is better understood as one of superimposition, by which the diverse historical strata each retain a level of distinctness while also acquiring a degree of transparency, thus allowing for a vision of the one through the other. Accordingly, this retro-conspiracist outlook does not equate the twentieth-century satellite launch with the twenty-first-century development of a vaccine. Yet, in the overlay of these events, the prestigious contours of the former shine through in a vision of the latter, producing an historically composite “Sputnik Moment.” Likewise, the capitalist-imperialist enemy of Soviet propaganda may differ from Russia’s manipulative opponent today. Yet, the portrayal of contemporary foes through Soviet-era templates works to add affective “colouring” to the interpretation of events. This process – confirming Sara Ahmed’s analyses of the “stickiness” of affect (2004, 2014) – serves as a reminder that retro-conspiracism involves not only interpretive, but also emotional re-arrangements of meaning. In Korotchenko’s rhetorical and performative superimposition of paradigms, the affective weight adhering to the “enemies” from Soviet propaganda is pressed onto Russia’s presumed post-Soviet adversaries and comes to stick to these latter figures (i.e., “the Americans” and those obediently serving them). Once more illustrating the “sticky” dynamic of

affect, this resentful rhetoric itself glues together a hated (but persevering) Russian “us,” interpellating the television audiences as a cohesive collective of ardent supporters of the (externally threatened) state. Finally, the others’ hate and threats confirm Russia’s (continued or restored) significance in global affairs, a message further soliciting prideful collective identification with the nation.

Spotlighting the Hidden Front

To further illuminate the retro-conspiracist stratification of histories, one of its hallmarked “layers” must be discussed in greater detail. Frequently undergirding the rhetoric of vaccine conspiracism are the central tropes and figures of Soviet espionage fiction, which itself (like its Western equivalents) was often premised on an imagination of (political) reality as “layered.” As Valerii V’iugin argues in his analysis of the genre’s evolution from the 1920s to the 1980s, the spies, agents, and saboteurs of Soviet literature and cinema were more than a “theme.” They acted as rhetorical figures, inculcating an (evolving) understanding of Soviet society and its social, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Particularly relevant here are the genre’s postwar permutations, in which spies and saboteurs were less frequently spotted or confronted by ordinary Soviet citizens and were increasingly handled by Soviet security agents who battled the country’s obscure adversaries on an “invisible front,” as the Soviet phrase had it (2017, 304).

In the often ambivalent discourse on Russia’s vaccine-facilitated victories, the country’s indiscernible enemies (whether the spreading virus or furtive foreign provocateurs)⁸ acquire a significance inflected by espionage tropes. During one of the debates on *TWT* (*Vremiia pokazhet 2020a*), for instance, Sputnik V is presented as a participant in an “arms race” with the ever-evolving virus, a competition ambiguously characterized as a battle against an “invisible enemy.” In many of the previously discussed cases, an “invisible front,” even when not labeled as such, is invoked in more explicitly political terms.

The analyzed media coverage constantly presents the unfair and inaccurate Western reporting on Sputnik V as a matter of intelligence and state security. And it is this framing that allows the espionage trope of an “invisible front” to lend its weight to vaccine conspiracism. A case in point is the aforementioned statement from the Kremlin in March 2021 which declared that Russian intelligence services had revealed a secretly planned American propaganda offensive “of unprecedented aggression” to be conducted under the cover of commissioned NGOs.

The narrative of disguised enemies being heroically confronted by Russian counterintelligence stood out even more vividly in Vladimir Putin’s public speech three weeks earlier at the Collegium of the FSB (Putin 2021). In this address, broadcasted live by the state-owned television channel *Rossiiia24*, the president thanked the agency for their vital work in countering the relentless attempts to “obstruct our development . . . to provoke domestic instability, undermine the values that unite Russian society, and, ultimately, to weaken Russia and put her under foreign control.” Hinting at Ukraine, he added: “This, as we see, as we know, is

happening in certain countries of the post-Soviet territory.” Referring to Sputnik V, the President warned that, notwithstanding the friendly responses from many of Russia’s partners, “a purposeful information campaign is being conducted against us, with stubborn and unprovable accusations.” He emphasized, however, the FSB’s success in delivering “to the country’s political leadership information regarding certain provocations that are being planned in this sphere” and continued to say that “we have long been used to [such provocations] and are prepared [to respond to them].” Consequently, any attempt to meddle in Russia’s affairs was “absolutely prospectless.”

The image emerging from the speech is one of unwavering security officers who conduct their work, as Putin put it, “under irregular circumstances” and with a “ceaseless and tense rhythm,” and who invariably see through the Western smoke-screens and counteract the provocations. The battle they wage, out of public sight, is one of existential importance as ultimately, Russia’s stability and very sovereignty are at stake. The FSB agents, Putin added, knew very well that this presentation of affairs was not an exaggeration.

This rhetoric of the state’s hidden life-and-death struggle not only recycles a Soviet espionage genre but also evokes the doublings of reality characteristic of the early European spy novel, as discussed by Luc Boltanski. In this tradition, the enemies of the state are typically confronted in a “war” fought “under the cover of what appears to be peace” (2014, 126). Describing the key premise of the genre, Boltanski notes that

[o]rdinary citizens and even sometimes those responsible for the state . . . believe naively that the state is at peace and act accordingly – whereas in fact the state has never ceased to be at war. What the spy novel seeks to tell us – and this is its key mechanism – is that the state is always at war, always threatened, always fragile, even when ordinary – that is unseeing – people are unaware of this.

(127)

In the Russian cases discussed, the espionage notions that the state has “never ceased to be at war” and is “always at war” take on an even more pronounced temporal dimension. In retro-conspiracism, the country’s threatening enemies, their subversive tactics, and the heroism of those combating the foes are all marked by a particular permanence. Though twenty-first century-surface realities shroud the constant scheming, they are translucent enough to allow for occasional glances of the “invisible front” lurking underneath. This imagined semi-transparency also facilitates the superimpositions of distinct historical strata, which engender the temporality of the “always at war” condition identified by Boltanski. Interestingly, the blatant anachronisms of retro-conspiracism seem only to add to this rhetorical logic. They confirm the notion of a deceptively peaceful contemporary cover imposed on unchanging conflicts, and they invite interpretive gestures of “seeing through” the deception.

Returning to the president's address to the FSB, one should not overlook the participation of Putin's persona in these temporal layerings. Commentators have remarked on the political significance of his reputation as a former KGB officer. They note that the president's pose of a sober patriot and witty trickster has been electorally successful due in part to its resonances with the most beloved (fictive) spy figures from late-Soviet literature and cinema (Lipovetskii 2007; Norris 2013, 161–62; Noordenbos 2021, 164–67). As Sharafutdinova remarks, Putin confirms the old saying that “you never have a *former* security officer” (2020, 176). Indeed, the cultivation of the Soviet spy under the skin of the post-Soviet president adds another twist to the warped temporalities of retro-conspiracism.

Conclusion

Any claims regarding the uniquely Russian qualities of retro-conspiracism would be debunked by an article published by the British tabloid *The Sun* in the fall of 2021. The piece alleged, on the basis of information from “security services,” that “one of Vladimir Putin's spies” had stolen AstraZeneca's “blueprint” from the drug firm: “It is understood the data was stolen by a foreign agent in person.” Subsequently, the blueprint had allegedly been used to develop Sputnik V (Reilly and Cole 2021). In close alignment with its Russian equivalents, the story identified a Cold-War-inspired scenario lurking under the surface of contemporary circumstance that renders it improbable: the Gamaleya Center has a long-standing track record in vaccine development, and it had been developing its distinct two-vector-adenoviral technology long before the pandemic.

In talk shows like *60 Minutes* and *TWT*, vaccines had, by the second half of 2021, receded into the background, with other topics, especially those concerning Ukraine, taking the center stage. Consequently, these shows did not seize this opportunity for speculations about yet another meticulously planned anti-Russian propaganda campaign. *TWT* only discussed *The Sun*'s correction, which was published in the tabloid soon after the release of the news. The *TWT* hosts condemned, with fatigued resignation, the fact that the article's headline was left unchanged: “Sputnicked: Russian spies ‘stole formula for Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid jab and used it to create Sputnik vaccine.’” The condemnation on the English version of the Sputnik V website was more stinging, characterizing the article as a “blatant lie,” convincingly explaining why the theory made “absolutely no sense scientifically.” In a surprising inversion of its rhetoric, the declaration ended with a defense of AstraZeneca (with whom Sputnik V conducted joint clinical trials): “Rather than spreading fake stories, the UK media and government services should better protect the reputation of AstraZeneca, a safe and efficient vaccine that is constantly attacked by competitors in the media with facts taken out of context” (“Sputnik V Team Statement” n.d.).

Referencing the story in *The Sun*, I do not intend to imply symmetry between Russian and Western practices of retro-conspiracism. The affect-laden Russian accounts of Western connivance in late 2020 and early 2021 were far more

ubiquitous and prominent than their equivalents in Western Europe or the United States. They also acquired their distinct political significance in the context of exceptionally tight state control over traditional information channels. Still, the affair underlines the urgency of critically analyzing Western (media) practices which, like their Russian variants, pinpoint historical scripts and constellations under the semi-transparent cover of contemporaneity. Such scrutiny would be a first step toward countering the self-confirming rhetoric of retro-conspiracism and the endlessly proliferating logic of “who benefits?” In the aforementioned case, that question would inevitably lead to the assumption that *The Sun* had fallen victim to a clever Russian intelligence operation, one that facilitated yet another self-presentation of Russia as the defender of evidence-based science and unbiased journalism.

Notes

- 1 All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 I borrow the term “conspiracism” from Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, who, in the contemporary American context, observe a digitally fueled “new conspiracism.” In their analysis, this burgeoning mode of suspicion typically lacks a (reasoned) *theory*, “defies common sense” (2019, 27), and is “powered by resentment and spite and righteous anger” (28). While focusing on another context, and not subscribing to the authors’ somewhat nostalgic attitude toward “classic conspiracy theory” (20), I use the term “conspiracism” to signal a suspicious and affect-laden rhetoric that does not always crystallize into a full-blown conspiracy theory. Yet, at least in this state-backed Russian context, conspiracism *does* (strive to) make “common sense,” even though the emotional dimensions of this “sense” occasionally overshadow its cognitive ones.
- 3 I’m grateful to Ilya Malafei for his invaluable assistance in collecting data for this chapter.
- 4 This chapter was written before the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine that started in late February 2022. Since then, the propagandistic use of retro-conspiracist gestures in Russia’s state-controlled information landscape has gained even more traction, as the official attempts to justify this unprovoked war are frequently governed by the two-pronged rhetoric of mythologized history and conspiracy theory.
- 5 As a 2021 poll by the Levada Center shows, 60 percent of the Russian population still gets their news from television (Volkov et al. 2021).
- 6 The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has given an additional impulse to such multi-interpretable letter symbolism. In 2022, the “V” and “Z” signs, widely displayed by Russian citizens as markers of their pro-war and pro-government attitudes, have triggered a proliferation of diverse interpretations as to their exact symbolic meaning and ideological significance.
- 7 Already in 1989, Geoffrey Cubitt coined the phrase “conspiracy myth” to theorize how conspiracy theories constantly detect established, mythologized scenarios of manipulation in “fresh sets of events” (18). While I take inspiration from Cubitt’s argument, I do not employ his concept of “conspiracy myth” for my analysis as its static and fixed qualities do not do justice to the often eclectic and flexible nature of the retro-conspiracism analyzed here.
- 8 Helpful for understanding these alternations between viral realities and imagined conspiracies are Susan Sontag’s remarks in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), and especially in her 1989 addendum to that essay titled *Aids and Its Metaphors*. Here, Sontag comments on the frequent translation of conspiracy ideas into metaphors of virality. Invisible to the unaided eye, viruses invade the body, where they introduce “information,” which serves as a reproducible script for transformations in the genetic make-up of cells. In cultural imagination, these traits often resonate metaphorically with military and political notions

of traitorous infiltrations, insidious take-overs, and foreign undermining of the (political, social, or cultural) body (Sontag 1989, 68). It is this metaphorical potential of virality that is harnessed, whether overtly or implicitly, in Russian Sputnik V conspiracism, with the “invisible enemies” alternately serving as the metaphor’s source domain and target domain.

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