Gemma Ware: Russia is often accused of spreading disinformation that goes on to feed conspiracy theories around the world. At the same time, back home in Russia, conspiratorial thinking has become a mainstay of political life. As Russians head to the polls this month in presidential elections, we speak to an expert about the central role that conspiracy theories play in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

I’m Gemma Ware and this is The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

Salut, Grégory!

Grégory Rayko: Hi, Gemma!

Gemma Ware: Grégory Rayko, you’re the international editor at The Conversation in France and a very keen watcher of Russian politics, all things Russian. Tell me why.

Grégory Rayko: Well, first, because, of course, it’s part of my job. Also out of a personal interest because I’m of Russian origin myself. I was born in Russia, I speak Russian, and I have family in Russia, and I studied Russian politics at university, a long time ago. So, it’s both a professional and a personal interest. And of course, there’s so much going on that it’s hard not to miss something. And that’s where actually the advantage of The Conversation network comes in. You can talk to researchers, who have their eyes constantly on the country and on every aspect of its political, economic, and social life. And of course, on the war it has been waiting for two years now in Ukraine.
Gemma Ware: Hmm. So Russians are going to be voting in a presidential election between the 15th and the 17th of March, over three days. It’s widely expected that Vladimir Putin is going to win another term in office and continue as president, perhaps until at least 2030. So with that in mind, what’s actually at stake in these elections?

Grégory Rayko: Well, like you said, of course, there is absolutely no suspense. Of course, Putin is going to win in the first round. The only little intrigue is with what score exactly and what will be the official figures of the turnout that will be announced by the authorities. So it’s a farce, it’s a parody, and nobody really takes it seriously.

Gemma Ware: And it’s really hard as well, isn’t it, for the real opposition to get on the ballot in Russia?

Grégory Rayko: It’s impossible. Last time you had a real, serious representative of the real opposition on a ballot, on an important election in Russia, it was 10 years ago when Alexei Navalny, who was famous for being an anti-corruption blogger, he ran for mayor of Moscow. And he received 27% in the first round, and after that, it was over. They don’t let people like that come close to power and especially run for president. Navalny, as everybody knows, died recently in his prison, in the Arctic. And that was another lesson for all those who want to oppose Putin. The real opposition now in Russia is either in jail, either silent absolutely, either abroad, either dead.

Gemma Ware: And these are the first elections since the war in Ukraine began in 2022. Is it a big part of the campaign?

Grégory Rayko: They don’t speak so much about the war. And of course, you can’t say war in Russia, right? We say only special military operation. It’s forbidden to call it a war. The main focus of the campaign is that we have this great president, who is doing great in an international atmosphere, where we have the West, who is against Russia, but we have so many other countries that are pro-Russian and we’re changing the political landscape of the world.
**Gemma Ware:** And one element of elections around the world in recent years has been the rise of disinformation. Russia is actually itself accused of spreading that disinformation in other countries’ elections, but there’s also disinformation swirling around in the country, too, and particularly conspiracy theories, isn’t there?

**Grégory Rayko:** Yes, of course. If you follow Russian TV, Russian official press, Russian official media accounts, you see conspiracy theories all day long. Everything that can be considered as negative for Russia comes from a conspiracy, right? What’s happening in Ukraine, it was a conspiracy from the West because they want to destroy Russia, right? You have little details, like bio labs conducted in Ukraine by CIA, whatever. Every person in Russia who is opposed to Putin or to the war is on the West’s payroll. This is very, very present everywhere. All the crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, of course, these are fake news. And so, since most of the population gets their information from TV, from the official press, they live in a parallel reality.

**Gemma Ware:** Hmm. Thanks so much, Grégory, for setting the context out there.

**Grégory Rayko:** Thank you very much, Gemma.

**Gemma Ware:** We wanted to find out more about the role that conspiracy theories play in Putin’s Russia. So, I reached out to an expert who spends his academic life studying conspiracy theories.

**Ilya Yablokov:** Well, I watched a lot of crap, I have to admit.

**Gemma Ware:** Ilya Yablokov got hooked on conspiracy theories when he was a student.

**Ilya Yablokov:** So, it was in 2005, I was finishing my degree at Tomsk State University in Siberia and my supervisor at that time, who is now a prominent exiled journalist from Russia, who is residing in Europe, suggested to have a look at conspiracy theories, because some of the stuff with which I was working in my final paper was very much conspiratorial, not in the content, but the sources.
**Gemma Ware:** Ilya went on to do a PhD in conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia and he’s since written a couple of books about their role in Russian politics.

**Ilya Yablokov:** There was no particular conspiracy theory which I was looking at, it was just the culture of conspiracy theories in Russia that charmed me.

**Gemma Ware:** Today, Ilya is a lecturer in digital journalism and disinformation at the University of Sheffield in the UK.

**Ilya Yablokov:** I keep on reading a lot of horrible stuff, which is part of my job if I want to understand how disinformation works, what kind of stuff people believe, what kind of stuff the Kremlin tries to promote nowadays with regard to the war in Ukraine.

**Gemma Ware:** Can you describe for me, two or three of the main conspiracy theories that are circling right now in Russia ahead of the elections?

**Ilya Yablokov:** The top one, it’s definitely who killed Navalny, these days.

**Newsclips:**

*Male broadcaster speaking Russian*

*Female broadcaster: Russia’s prison authorities have announced that the leading Kremlin critic, Alexei Navalny, has died…*

*Male broadcaster: Prison officials say Navalny went for a walk, but felt unwell and quickly lost consciousness. They say medics could not revive him…*

**Gemma Ware:** What’s the conspiracy theory around that?

**Ilya Yablokov:** That he was killed by his puppet masters from the West. It was not the Kremlin. I mean, when they said the West, they mean US, right? He was killed by them because his murder would actually make Putin look awful in the eyes of the global communities. That idea popped up like hours after the news broke that he was killed, uh, that he died.
Newsclip:
[Female broadcaster speaking Russian]

Gemma Ware: In this clip, Margarita Simunan, the editor of the Russia Today TV channel, is saying “It’s completely obvious that this does not benefit Russia and the Russian government, but for them, the timing is excellent. The support for Putin is off the charts.”

Ilya Yablokov: So, that’s the top one. The second conspiracy theory is a never-ending one. It’s from 2003 and 2004, Kremlin’s fear of The Color Revolutions…

Newsclip
Male broadcaster: Hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy Ukrainians in the streets today protested against the results of the presidential election…

Gemma Ware: The Color Revolutions refer to a series of uprisings against the leaders of post-Soviet states. The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, for example, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan.

Ilya Yablokov: So revolutions through the programs, plans from Washington or with the help of Washington that pushes the sphere of influence of The White House to the regions that are not typically pro-American ones.

Gemma Ware: This theory pushes the idea that Washington did everything it could to topple a number of post-Soviet regimes, in an effort to create liberal democracies more friendly to the West.

Ilya Yablokov: They train protesters, they provoke clashes with the police, they shake the foundations of the political regime and political stability, and they undermine the reputation of the ruling elite and hence topple the regime and put their puppet as a leader of the country. So, that’s the second one. And the third one, I mean, it’s really difficult to choose. Certainly, these days, it’s all about the war in
Ukraine, basically says that it’s Washington that is behind Ukraine’s resistance for Moscow’s control.

**Newsclip**

*Male broadcaster: The Kremlin claims without any evidence that the US has helped Ukraine develop biological weapons in secret laboratories.*

**Gemma Ware:** The conspiracy theory here is that Ukraine is a testing ground for all kinds of anti-Russian operations sponsored by the West. It’s a theory that’s continued evolving since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

**Ilya Yablokov:** And on the eve of the elections, Vladimir Putin is portrayed as the ultimate protector of the Russian lands and the Russian population from the NATO/American invasion.

**Gemma Ware:** This bears similarities to another conspiracy theory, known as the Golden Billion, which Vladimir Putin has begun referring to in recent years.

**Ilya Yablokov:** It’s basically a version of another popular conspiracy theory that emerged in the US in the 70s and 80s: the New World Order conspiracy theory, that essentially says there is a global government that pushes the interest of the few in the world and exploits the many. But the Golden Billion is a slightly updated version of the era of globalization in which, in a way, quite clearly, there is an image of the first-world countries that profit from the exploitation of third-world countries, which is the grain of reality in this conspiracy theory.

**Gemma Ware:** The Golden Billion refers to a kind of apocalyptic battle for the world’s resources, between the global elite, led by America and its allies on the one hand, and Russia on the other.

**Ilya Yablokov:** But there is a resistance of numerous countries that represent the third world that are ready to protect their sovereignty from American power. And the objective of Moscow, in using this conspiracy theory, is actually to show the countries of the global south that it’s actually us who can help you, who
provide you with the help in the end, and who can help you to resist the American influence. I bet it resonates with lots of people in the global south.

**Gemma Ware:** Before we continue, here’s a trailer for a new podcast series from The Conversation:

*Vinita Srivastava:* Hi everyone, it’s Vinita, the host of Don’t Call Me Resilient. I just wanted to let you know that we have more episodes coming your way soon. We’re starting Season 7. I can hardly believe it myself. My team and I have been busy prepping new episodes, taking our anti-racist lens to the news unfolding around us and the issues occupying a lot of our minds these days.

*Male broadcaster:* This week, Israel stepped up its bombing across the Gaza Strip. Since October 7, more than 28,000 Palestinians and around 1,200 Israelis have died.

*Female broadcaster:* Tech experts are sounding alarm bells over the rapid spread of AI-generated, explicit images of women online.

*Male broadcaster:* According to the Canadian Climate Institute by 2025, climate change is expected to shave $25 billion off of Canada’s GDP.

*Vinita Srivastava:* From big cultural moments like the Oscars to the scary spread of AI, and the ongoing impacts of climate change, to the devastating war in Gaza, we’ll be on it all in our signature way. Don’t Call Me Resilient starts up again on Thursday, March 14, so please join us and follow along.

**Gemma Ware:** So, Ilya, I want to ask you now about Vladimir Putin’s relationship with conspiracy theories. He’s been in power in Russia in some form since 2000. How has his relationship with conspiracy theories changed during that time and what do we know about his views on them now?

**Ilya Yablokov:** As a KGB guy, he would rarely disclose his real thoughts. We know that he’s very good at mirroring people. That’s one of the skills that he learned in the KGB academy, back in the day.
**Gemma Ware:** Ilya’s convinced that Putin’s KGB intelligence background has influenced his view of the world.

**Ilya Yablokov:** We know that these guys are driven by the production of conspiracy theories. You know, this is their bread and butter. The same applies to the CIA and the FBI, you know, counterintelligence and intelligence, they live in the world of conspiracy theories. So initially he was not a big promoter of conspiracy theories.

**Gemma Ware:** Ilya suggests that something shifted for Putin around the time of The Color Revolutions.

**Ilya Yablokov:** I think the first grains of anti-Western conspiracy theories were planted back then in the mid-2000s. At the same time, he still wanted to look like a legitimate political actor and a rational one. Because that was one of the pillars of his public image, that Putin is a rational player with very commonsensical style of making decisions. And if Vladimir Putin shares a conspiracy theory, then you know it sends a wrong message to the elite because the elite would then think, “Oh, he is actually a little bit of a crackpot, maybe we should really avoid him, right?”

**Gemma Ware:** Still, Ilya said that Putin did embrace conspiracy theories at critical political moments. For example, in 2011 and 2012, when a wave of protests erupted in Russia, people took to the streets holding up white ribbons, banners and balloons to protest against accusations of irregularity and fraud in legislative elections.

**Newsclip**

*Female broadcaster:* It’s a public outpouring on a scale that has not been seen in Russia for two decades. Anti-Putin demonstrators of all ages came together to strike at the heart of power followin gallegations that Sunday’s parliamentary election was rigged.
**Ilya Yablokov:** So, the pro-democracy people in the streets of Russia that saw that the parliamentary elections in 2011 in December were actually rigged. They saw that with their own eyes.

**Gemma Ware:** This all happened just as Putin announced that he would be standing again for president after serving four years as prime minister under President Dmitry Medvedev.

**Ilya Yablokov:** He had to fight with his own entourage but also with the people in the streets in Moscow and elsewhere across Russia to be re-elected, and he started to promote very aggressively conspiracy theories that the United States stands behind those protests of the white banners, that those observers of the election were bought by the Washington diplomats, etc. So, all kinds of conspiracy theories. And he won, right? Then they realized that conspiracy theories can be a very powerful source.

**Gemma Ware:** Initially, Putin would only make subtle references to conspiracy theories in his public speeches.

**Ilya Yablokov:** At times in 2010, he would utter a conspiracy theory once in 2–3 years in his public speeches. But then, in 2016, 17,18, he would utter conspiracy theories more often. It would be about biological weapons against the Russians, or it would be about big tech conspiring against Russia. But at the time, all these utterings were the way to legitimize certain domestic agenda. Like, for example, to put Russian big tech under control, to turn the Russian internet into the sovereign internet, or to prevent the work of foreign scientists inside Russia.

**Gemma Ware:** But Ilya says that around the time of the pandemic, Putin seemed to descend even further into the world of conspiracy theories.

**Ilya Yablokov:** He became obsessed with the anti-Ukrainian conspiracy theories when he turned into this self-named historian and started justifying all the actions of the Kremlin by his conquest to protect Russia and Ukraine and Belarus from this LGBT-driven, you know, multiple-genders conspiracy against the true Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. I’m kind of, I’m saying it in a joking
way, but, you know, if you listen to him carefully, that’s his obsession. And that’s the obsession of the closest circle of his cronies that promote similar views on a daily basis, if you listen to them carefully.

**Gemma Ware:** How important are conspiracy theories today in Putin’s grip on power? Do they help him attract new voters or are they merely used to justify his position?

**Ilya Yablokov:** I think qualitatively, we can say that at the moment, conspiracy theories are one of the few ways of keeping the society together and to prevent the change of the regime. If you look at what happens in Russia, the legislation that is put into place, it’s all informed by the theories of anti-Russian conspiracy. Let’s put it that way, right? So, that’s what we call Russian conspiracy culture. Twenty years ago, it was part of some intellectual tradition that existed in the margins of Russian culture and Russian politics, but it was never in the center. Now, conspiracy theories inform almost every aspect of domestic legislation.

**Gemma Ware:** He gives the example of changes to the criminal code that were made in 2022, aimed at censoring any criticism of the Russian military, particularly its actions in Ukraine.

**Ilya Yablokov:** So if you have an alternative point of view on the actions of the Russian military, you are spreading conspiracy theories about the Russian state, that undermines the stability of the Russian regime, you are going to end up in prison. Every possible activity that can shake up the regime and question its actions is forbidden on the grounds of an existing conspiracy against Russia and its regime.

**Gemma Ware:** Ilya told me that it’s really hard to get reliable information about just how many people in Russia actually believe conspiracy theories. One of the reasons for this, he says, is the Kremlin’s repression of independent polling agencies and sociological research centers that happened in the early 2000s after Putin became president. Some agencies do still try to gauge public opinion though. For example, on the war in Ukraine.
**Ilya Yablokov:** There are different sociological research groups that measure the attitudes towards the war and other related issues inside Russia. So they say it’s around 30% of Russians who sort of openly embrace anti-Western conspiracy theories and share all those propaganda notions that they push from 2022 up until today. There is a segment of Russian population that’s sort of neutral or unsure whom to believe. That’s another 30–25%. So, we can say that roughly, those who are on the side of the Russian society spectrum, who believe in the conspiracy theories, we can say it’s a half population, but again, it’s really difficult to say.

**Gemma Ware:** And do we know what Putin’s own kind of embrace of conspiracy theories actually means for people’s belief in them?

**Ilya Yablokov:** The argument says the following: These guys on the top certainly have reasonably good information, something that we don’t know. And therefore, we should trust them because if they make this decision, their decisions are well supported by this information that we don’t have. And that’s how it’s justified. That’s how these beliefs are justified.

**Gemma Ware:** How does the media play into this? You know, the mainstream media in Russia, do they respond to conspiracy theories? Do they spread them? Do they even attempt to debunk them in any way?

**Ilya Yablokov:** They don’t debunk for sure. All the media in Russia, at the moment, are state controlled. And the level of state censorship these days, just there is no way they will debunk anything. Historically, Russian journalists and Russian media, especially loyal to the regime, were the developers and spreaders of conspiracy theories. So it’s an egg-and-chicken situation, because very often Russian journalists would create various types of conspiracy theories and push them, and then political stakeholders would refer to them or include them in their own reports that they bring to the top. So in Russia, media plays the central role in this sort of circle of production of conspiracy theories.

**Gemma Ware:** So, Ilya, last question here. What do you think the proliferation of conspiracy theories can tell us about the general state of Russian politics today?
**Ilya Yablokov:** I mean, I have one word. It’s madness. You think you would never see Soviet history repeating itself. And the merger of Soviet beliefs that a lot of the Russian current ruling elite hold with the global conspiracy theories like QAnon, like The Golden Billion, like The New World Order, and the incredible opportunities that the digital media provides to authoritarians these days. It really helped Putin and his cronies to really go back in time, and rebuild the Soviet Union. But also, I think, they really think they’re invincible with the amount of resources and the access that the digital technologies provide them, to access, let’s say, the global south and push all kinds of disinformation there. We see that it pays back. But kind of the overall conclusion that I have is, look, if this guy wins, it’s going to be designed for all kinds of authoritarians in Europe and elsewhere, that, you know what? If he can do that, if he can get away with that, we can do that.

**Gemma Ware:** Well, on that uplifting note, let’s end, so thank you so much, Ilya, it’s been really fascinating.

**Ilya Yablokov:** Thank you.

**Gemma Ware:** That’s it for this week’s episode. Special thanks in this episode go to Peter Knight, who suggested that we talk to Ilya Yablokov. Peter was one of the researchers who collaborated with The Conversation on a podcast series we ran back in 2020 called *The Expert Guide to Conspiracy Theories*. We’ll put a link in our show notes to where you can listen to that. And thanks also to Grégory Rayko at The Conversation in France, who you heard at the top of this episode. We’ll put some links to The Conversation’s coverage of the Russian elections in our show notes.

This episode was written and produced by me, Gemma Ware and Katie Flood, with production assistance from Mend Mariwany. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

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