The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Society Is Increasingly Paranoid

By Andrei Malgin

July 29, 2015



A protester holds a poster saying "USA! Get your hands off Kievan Rus!" and the slogan "Motherland! Freedom! Putin!" added below.

A paranoid person harbors unhealthy suspicions and sees in random events conspiracies and intrigues against him by his enemies.

Paranoia is contagious and spreads from person to person with the speed of an epidemic. And if the authorities beam it across the television airwaves, there is little hope of escaping the contagion. A paranoid is not crazy. He is simply obsessed with one overriding idea, and he immediately categorizes anyone who does not share that idea as an enemy.

I was in Moscow this summer and repeatedly observed a curious phenomenon. I sat chatting with seemingly normal people when someone would switch on the television and the room filled with news of Ukraine. They transformed in an instant: their eyes looked mad, their movements became agitated and they began uttering incoherent blather about "the junta," "fascists" and "the killing of Russians." But once they turned off the television, they just as quickly reverted to ordinary people engaged in polite conversation.

In the mind of a paranoid person, seemingly incongruous things come together in what he sees as a coherent world picture. He is blind to the inconsistencies and refuses to discuss them.

I do not understand why the Russian people fail to see how the contradictions contained in the official propaganda are increasing daily. On the one hand, everyone understands that Russian soldiers are performing heroic feats in hostile Ukraine. And while the president denies their presence on foreign soil, their secret exploits seem somehow greater than any performed without duplicity. Well done, men! Bravo!

On the other hand, newscasters on state-controlled television encourage viewers to feel righteous anger over Western accusations that Russia is involved in the war. After all, they argue, the West is once again attempting to defame our great motherland.

How to believe both simultaneously? It turns out that everything fits nicely together in the minds of the paranoid. Russian propaganda went to great lengths to convince the Russian people that Ukrainian forces shot down flight MH17 over the Donbass. From morning until night, one Russian expert after another explains to the television audience that the Boeing passenger plane was shot down by a missile from another plane, while a second set of experts argues that a ground-fired Buk missile really was the culprit — only it was a Ukrainian Buk and not a Russian one. It worked. Russians are convinced.

And then a new twist appeared. Now the United Nations Security Council will vote on creating an international tribunal to identify the perpetrators behind this tragedy. But Russia is opposed! It would seem that Moscow is contradicting itself. Russia has convinced its own citizens that it has tons of evidence implicating Ukraine in the act, so why doesn't Moscow support a tribunal that would condemn the obvious culprit? No, Russia adamantly opposes it.

And yet Russian viewers do not see the contradiction. Moscow holds that Ukraine is clearly to blame, and yet it cannot allow a tribunal because it would deliberately place the guilt with Russia, as always. Everybody — the whole world — is against Russia. They want to investigate the disaster for the sole purpose of humiliating and accusing Russia. It is the typical logic of the paranoid.

Paranoid individuals harbor deep suspicions regarding their diagnosis and treatment. Doctors have methods and even effective drugs for treating paranoia, but the patient believes that the physician prescribing the treatment, the medication itself and even the whole field of psychotherapy represent one more attempt to control their minds.

The same is true of paranoid societies. They perceive any desire to help them as an attempt to humiliate and even destroy them.

So what is the solution? Unfortunately, there isn't one.

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