

QAnon Gains Traction in Russia

The coronavirus pandemic has boosted the popularity of the pro-Trump viral conspiracy theory.

By [Felix Light](#)

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QAnon's baseless assertions of a worldwide anti-Trump conspiracy have infiltrated the American mainstream. **Matt Rourke / AP / TASS**

Ever since the U.S. presidential election was called for Joe Biden, Tatiana Abdullina has been watching the twists and turns of outgoing President Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the results from her home in Volchansk, a town of 10,000 in Russia's Ural Mountains. The mother of four is convinced the legal manoeuvres will be successful, and that Trump will remain president after Jan. 20.

"I hope that Trump's victory will help the whole world," she told The Moscow Times in an interview conducted over the social network VKontakte. "Not just with this so-called pandemic, but with other issues too."

Abdullina is one of a growing number of Russians who believe in QAnon – a sprawling patchwork of conspiracy theories based around the unfounded belief that Trump is battling a shadowy group of child-trafficking pedophiles in the highest ranks of the global elite.

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Since emerging in the darkest corners of U.S.-based internet chatrooms like 4chan, QAnon's baseless assertions of a worldwide anti-Trump conspiracy orchestrated by — among others — Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates and George Soros, have infiltrated the American mainstream, attracting hundreds of thousands of adherents. At least one open QAnon supporter won election to Congress on Nov. 3.

Outside the U.S. QAnon has made a particular splash in Europe, inspiring anti-lockdown protests and securing celebrity backers for its conspiracy theories in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany. Until recently, Russia, where cultural and linguistic barriers mean U.S. politics has less clout and public protest is rarer, had been an exception.

Alexandra Arkhipova, an anthropologist at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration who tracks the spread of online conspiracy theories, has found that while there are fewer explicit references to QAnon on Russian-language social media than Covid-19 denialism and 5G fears, its prevalence is spreading.

Data gathered by Arkhipova since August reveals thousands of Russian-language social media posts about QAnon. On VKontakte and Telegram — an encrypted messaging service popular in Russia — groups dedicated to spreading the conspiracy theory in Russia have grown to include tens of thousands of members.

“More than half of QAnon-spreading accounts have over 500 followers,” says Arkhipova.

“That would suggest the theory meets with a degree of social acceptance, and that people are not afraid to cite it and even see themselves benefitting from sharing it.”

QAnon's expansion into the Russian-speaking world is part of a worldwide surge in conspiracy thinking that has been linked by some experts to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Russia, where the fallout has pushed unemployment to an eight-year high, the crisis has fuelled increasingly widespread conspiracy theories that vaccines, masks and the coronavirus itself are being deliberately pushed by sinister forces to control the population.

“In Russia, QAnon is overwhelmingly associated with opposition to mask mandates and other public health measures,” said Arkhipova.

Many Russian QAnon believers who spoke to The Moscow Times credit what they see as a fake pandemic with their adoption of the conspiracy theory.

“I've always been into conspiracy theories, but if it hadn't been for the whole coronavirus saga, I would never have joined,” said 33 year-old Dmitry Afanasyev, who spurns conventional news outlets in favor of QAnon-focused social media communities.

During the pandemic, Dmitry became ever more sceptical of mask mandates and other anti-coronavirus restrictions, seeing in them a plot to control humanity by the dark forces posited by the conspiracy theory. He now fully subscribes to the view that the outgoing U.S. president is secretly battling those same forces.

“I consider Trump a hero. He’s the only person in the world, in my view, who can put an end to all this bacchanalia with mask regimes and whatever,” he said.

Evangelizing QAnon

Russia’s QAnon movement began in America.

In May this year, as protests surrounding the death of George Floyd gripped the country, Elena Podrzhkina, a Russian-American grandmother living in San Diego, California, who for years had run a YouTube channel dispensing helpful advice to would-be Russian immigrants to the U.S., began making videos about the dark forces arrayed against President Trump.

“The situation is very serious, I couldn’t remain on the sidelines,” she told *The Moscow Times*.

Podrzhkina was one of several Russian emigrant influencers in countries including the U.S., Germany and Israel who this year began spreading QAnon in their native language.

As QAnon filtered back to Russia, it picked up influential local champions. One, Vladislav Kopilkov, a Russian-Estonian former journalist and commentator on Russian TV now devotes himself to evangelizing QAnon to a Russian-speaking audience of over 40,000 subscribers.

Though Russian QAnon supporters still likely only number in the tens of thousands, many of the movement’s key tenets have been widely adopted by other such groups in Russia, a country with rich conspiracy theory traditions of its own.

One conspiracy group, the Soviet Citizens — who believe that the Russian Federation is not a sovereign state, but a Delaware-registered offshore company controlled by global elites that illegally occupies the rightful territory of the Soviet Union — have adopted concepts and phrases derived from QAnon, whose fears of a sinister global elite find echoes in the Soviet Citizens’ own ideology.

On social media, Soviet Citizen-linked accounts repeat QAnon-derived allegations that senior figures in the U.S. Democratic Party are members of a sinister cabal of pedophiles, alongside more familiar, pro-communist content.

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According to Ilya Yablokov, a historian and expert on Russian conspiracy theories at the University of Leeds in the UK, transmission of conspiratorial ideas across cultural boundaries is far from unusual.

“Even though some aspects of QAnon are specifically American, conspiracies evolve in more

or less every region around similar ideas about hatred of elites — especially financial oligarchies and liberal elites — which means they can spread with relative ease.”

One of the most vexing questions for Russia’s QAnon followers, however, is the role of their own homeland in the worldwide conspiracy. Russia’s QAnon movement is deeply divided over whether Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government are part of the sinister elite that they imagine to be manipulating world events.

“The Russian government are marionettes for the will of the globalists,” said Sergey Barsukov, a 35-year old resident of the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, who joined the QAnon movement during the pandemic, after having followed British conspiracy theorist David Icke for several years.

“This is a colonial administration,” he said.

Veneration of Trump

Other Russian QAnon advocates are more cautious in accusing Putin of participation in the conspiracy. On his YouTube channel, Vladislav Kopilkov cautions against implicating the Russian president in the global conspiracy, claiming to have “contradictory information regarding this, which I have been unable to verify yet.”

However, for many Russian conspiracy theorists, one of the biggest barriers to belief in QAnon is the movement’s veneration of Trump. While the idea of a sinister cabal manipulating world events is popular in Russia, framing an American president as a hero battling evil forces is a hard sell in a country where the U.S. government is widely distrusted.

For some QAnon believers, this has led them to play down the movement’s emphasis on Trump, in favour of a general reckoning with global elites.

“The main thing is to overthrow this Covid project everywhere. Then Russia can resolve its own problems for itself,” said Yevgeny, a 41-year old St Petersburg-based follower of QAnon, who spoke to The Moscow Times under condition of anonymity.

“But I’m not really sure how Trump beating these dark forces would actually change anything in our own country.”

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