

# 1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

## SOME NOTES ON RUSSIAN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS A PART OF THE INFORMATION WAR IN UKRAINE: THE CASE OF MH17

VLADIMIR SAZONOV

### ABSTRACT

DOI: 10.26410/SF\_1/19/3

In this article I will focus on the case of the crash of flight MH17 which was used by the Russian media for propaganda purposes by creating and spreading conspiracy theories (CTs). In order to achieve its objectives the Russian propaganda machine uses a wide arsenal of tools in conducting information warfare, including the active use of CTs. Several CTs have been produced by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin forces since Russia invaded Ukraine; in one of these cases they used the crash of MH17. Russian media outlets and TV channels produced various conspiracy theories about this crash. Most of them were related to Ukraine and the West, NATO, US, etc. They tried to show that the West and Ukraine were guilty of crashing MH17, including CTs stating that MH17 was shot down by the CIA, the American or Ukrainian government, etc. One message promoted by the pro-Kremlin forces was that the crash of MH17 was an act of Western provocation against the Kremlin with the purpose of accusing Russia of this crime. The Russian media has produced dozens of CTs about by whom, how and why MH17 was shot down; the Russian side often used fake, falsified stories and emotional, sarcastic and offensive rhetoric. In disseminating these different CTs the Kremlin tried to create distrust among the people, a feeling of discomfort, and tried to disorientate them.

### KEY WORDS

Conspiracy theory, information warfare, Russia, Ukraine, West, flight MH17.

**VLADIMIR SAZONOV**

vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee

Academy of Security Sciences

Estonian National Defence College

University of Tartu

---

## 1. Introduction: CTs as a tool of information warfare

Conspiracy theories (CTs) have already been researched for decades from the perspective of various disciplines such as psy-

chology, history, philosophy, semiotics, religious studies, media and communication, and political sciences, and such research

often focused on a variety of topics and issues related to CTs<sup>1</sup>.

I am, however, particularly interested in the role of conspiracy theories as a tool of modern information warfare<sup>2</sup> used by the Russian Federation in the information war against Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. It is for that reason that I am going to provide here a brief explanation of how the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin orientated forces use CTs to promote and support Russian information campaigns against Ukraine<sup>4</sup>.

In the following short study I will focus on the crash of flight MH17 as a case study in which we can see how the Russian media (TV channels, media outlets) created and promoted several different conspiracy theories about the crash of this plane on July 14, 2014.

## 2. Short historical overview: conspiratorial traditions in Russia from the Imperial period up to Putin

The use of conspiracy theories<sup>5</sup> by the Russian ruling elite (especially for propaganda purposes) is not a new phenomenon and has its historical and cultural roots in the Imperial period of Russia. In 2018, Ilya Yablokov published the comprehensive study *“Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World”* on the subject. In this book Yablokov studies the role and use of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia, but he also goes back to the origins of Russian conspiracy theories during the Crimean War in 1853-1856. Yablokov also analyzes the historical evolution of conspiratorial thinking in Russia from the Imperial period (from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) over the whole Soviet period up until modern Russia under Putin’s regime, focusing deeply on conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia<sup>6</sup>.

In one of his earlier articles about conspiracy theories Ilya Yablokov argues: *Conspiracy theories possess an important communicative function by helping to unite the audience as ‘the people’ against the imagined ‘Other’, represented as a secretive ‘power bloc’*<sup>7</sup>.

Yablokov correctly remarks that *“in the mind of a Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as an ultimate*

<sup>1</sup> See e.g., M. Abalakina-Paap et al, *Beliefs in Conspiracies*, *Political Psychology* 20, 1999, pp. 637-647; Th. Burnett et al, *Conspiracy Encyclopedia: The Encyclopedia of Conspiracy Theories*, Collins & Brown, London 2005; D. Coady, *Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories*, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, 2003, pp. 197-209; D. Coady, *The Pragmatic Rejection of Conspiracy Theories*, in D. Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate, Hampshire 2006, pp. 167-170; M. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (Palgrave, New York 2014); M. Dentith, *When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation*, *Social Epistemology* 31, 2016, pp. 572-591; S. Clarke, *Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing*, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 2, 2002, pp. 131-150; P. Knight, *Conspiracy Nation. The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, New York University Press 2002; D.G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories, and the New Age*. *Millennial Conspiracism*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2016; A. Ventsel, *Political Potentiality of Conspiracy Theories*, *Lexia* 23/24, 2016, pp. 309-326.

<sup>2</sup> S. Macdonald, *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered Images and Deception Operations*. Routledge, New York 2007.

<sup>3</sup> H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, *Information Warfare as the Hobbesian concept of Modern Times – Principles, Techniques and Tools of Russian Information Operations in Donbass*, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31 (3), 2018, pp. 308-328.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., А. Дугин, *Конспирология, Евразия, Москва* 1992; А.И. Фурсов, *Мировая борьба. Англосаксы против планеты*, Книжный мир, Москва, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ch. Shinar, *Conspiracy Narratives in Russian Politics: from Stalin to Putin*, *European Review*, Volume 26, Issue 4, pp. 648-660

<sup>6</sup> M. Alyukov, *Conspiracy theory has gone mainstream in Russia. But how does it work?*, *Open Democracy*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maxim-alyukov/conspiracy-theory-has-gone-mainstream-in-russia> (accessed: 22.2.2019), I. Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity 2018.

<sup>7</sup> I. Yablokov, *Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)*, *Politics* 35 (3-4), 2015, p. 302 (accessed 22.2.2019).

and insidious 'Other' seeking to undermine the progress of the Russian nation towards its glorious future"<sup>8</sup>. It is notable that this idea has its roots in the post-Crimean war period which followed 1856 when in Russia the Crimean war was recognized by the political elite as a major defeat of Russian policy, and when the Russian patriotically-orientated elite felt that the West had betrayed Russia, since Britain and its allies turned against Russia and supported the Ottoman empire after Russia had started a war against the Ottomans. This period that followed 1856 produced numerous Russian CTs about the West<sup>9</sup>. During the Soviet era the belief that Western countries were dreaming of the annihilation and humiliation of the Soviet Union was also quite popular; Moscow and many Russian people still believe that there was a Western conspiracy or plot against the Soviet Union and that the West basically destroyed the USSR<sup>10</sup>.

Maxim Alyukov points out the role of CTs in the Putin era:

*However, after Putin's rise to power, these theories migrated to another layer of political life. Putin's government turned them into a vital instrument for mobilising supporters and discrediting opponents. This shift was closely associated with a number of Russian political technologists and politicians, such as Gleb Pavlovsky, chief of the pro-Kremlin Foundation for Effective Politics, and Vladislav Serko, First Deputy Chief of Presidential Administration, who crafted conceptual framework underlying the new regime and*

*developed a network of pro-Kremlin public intellectuals, educational programmes and publishing houses. Having moved from the bottom-up to the top-down level, conspiratorial thinking also migrated from the margins of Russia's public sphere to the very core of the country's political discourse – especially after the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2013-2014<sup>11</sup>.*

According to some studies the Russian population is quite susceptible to believing CTs<sup>12</sup> and, according to the data, 66% of Russian people believe in CTs, thinking that there are people who wish to destroy traditional Russian spiritual values and re-write Russian history. They believe that there exist CTs and plots against Russia and that secret organizations want to destroy, harm and humiliate Russia, its culture, orthodoxy and values<sup>13</sup>. These kinds of 'beliefs' among many Russian people are very often used by the Kremlin to propagandistic ends. Nowadays, in order to achieve its objectives the Russian propaganda machine uses various methods and quite a wide arsenal of tools in the planning and conducting information warfare, the active use of CTs among them.<sup>14</sup> According to Y. Yablokov "One exemplary case is RT's coverage of the Ukrainian conflict in 2013/2014 where anti-US conspiratorial discourse played a pivotal role in explaining Russia's actions. The official Russian narrative of events in Ukraine has been based on the assumption that the US provoked the revolution and top-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> В.Э. Багдасарян, "Теория заговора" в отечественной историографии второй половины XIX-XX вв: критика мифологизации истории, Московский государственный университет сервиса, Диссертация на соискание ученой степени доктора исторических наук, 2000, <http://cheloveknauka.com/v/32042/d/#?page=1>. (accessed: 1.3.2019).

<sup>10</sup> Theory Blaming West for Collapse of Soviet Union Gaining in Popularity, Poll Shows, The Moscow Times, 2 December 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/02/theory-blaming-west-for-collapse-of-soviet-union-gaining-in-popularity-poll-shows>

<sup>11</sup> M. Alyukov, Conspiracy theory has gone mainstream in Russia. But how does it work?, Open Democracy, 7 September 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maxim-alyukov/conspiracy-theory-has-gone-mainstream-in-russia> (accessed: 22.2.2019)

<sup>12</sup> Самые популярные теории заговора в России. Habr, 13 May 2018, <https://habr.com/ru/post/412101/> (accessed: 22.2.2019)

<sup>13</sup> С. Кракова, Мировая закулиса: откуда появился «заговор против России», Газета.ру, 21 August 2018, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2018/08/21/11903245.shtml> (accessed: 27.2.2019).

<sup>14</sup> U. Arold, Infosõja mõistatus, Kaja. Kommunikatsiooni ja suhtekorralduse ajakiri 18, 2015, pp. 14.

pled president Yanukovich"<sup>15</sup>.

Different Russian media channels, among them *RT* and *Sputnik*, have promoted various conspiracy theories; many of them are directed against the West (the United States, Europe, etc.), of which I will list here just a few examples:

- The lost Malaysia Airlines MH370 airplane might have been shot down by the United States<sup>16</sup>;
- The German authorities tried to cover up the alleged rape of a Russian girl by Muslim migrants in Berlin<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. Russian CTs about flight MH17

Many CTs have been produced by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin forces since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. One case which involves several CTs is the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17)<sup>18</sup>. MH17 is one of the best examples of this how the Kremlin and its supporters (trolls on social media platforms, pro-Kremlin activists on blogs, regular media, etc.) produced a massive amount of disinformation by creating and promoting a whole variety of CTs concerning the crash of flight MH17 in the eastern part of Ukraine in July 2014.

Russian media outlets and TV channels (e.g., *RT*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, various TV channels) and social media networks (*Odnoklassniki*, *Vkontakte*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*)

produced different conspiracy theories about the crash of MH17<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, TV, newspapers and social media can be strong weapons and tools of information warfare, as it has been shown in the previous research<sup>20</sup>. CTs can be spread very fast via social media, faster than by regular media, however social media is not the subject of this particular research.

Most of the CTs produced by Russia about the crash of flight MH17 since July 2014 (when the crash took place) concerned Ukraine and frequently also the West (NATO, the United States, Holland, etc.). They tried to show that the West (especially the United States, but also Holland) and Ukraine were guilty of crashing MH17, this particular CT claiming that MH17 was shot down on the orders of the CIA, Pentagon or the American government, etc. There also emerged CTs claiming that MH17 was not shot down at all, and that it was another plane that was shot down instead. In this scenario MH17 exploded because a bomb was detonated inside the plane in a terrorist act. One message strongly promoted by the Russian media was that the crash of MH17 was pure Western provocation against the Kremlin and separatists and terrorists from Donbass, aiming at implicating them in this crime. The Russian media has produced dozens of theories (including many conspiracy theories) about by whom, how and why MH17 was shot down. Thus, the Russian side used fake, falsified or changed stories, witnesses, pictures, videos, and emotional and often sarcastic and offensive rhetoric. There are several

<sup>15</sup> Yablokov 2015, p. 309.

<sup>16</sup> Пропавший в марте малайзийский Boeing могли сбить военные США, опасаясь теракта. МК.ру, 22. December 2014, <https://www.mk.ru/incident/2014/12/22/propavshiy-v-marte-malayziyskiy-boeing-mogli-sbit-voennye-ssha-opasayas-terakta.html>, (accessed: 27.2.2019); Британские СМИ: Пропавший над Индийским океаном самолёт Malaysia Airlines был сбит военными США, *RT*, 22 December 2014, <https://russian.rt.com/article/65845> (accessed: 27.2.2019).

<sup>17</sup> A. Missiroli et al. Strategic communications East and South, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) was a flight from Amsterdam (Holland) to Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) which was shot down July 17, 2014 while flying over eastern Ukraine, 283 passengers and 15 crew on board were killed.

<sup>19</sup> V. Sazonov, Examples of criticism towards Ukraine based on materials from *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, ENDC Occasional Papers 7, 2017, pp 148-149.

<sup>20</sup> Th. E. Nissen, The weaponization of social media, Royal Danish Defence College, Copenhagen, 2015, <http://www.fak.dk/publikationer/Documents/The%20Weaponization%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf?pdfdl=theweaponizationofsocialmedia?pdfdl=TheWeaponizationOfSocialMedia> (accessed: 28.2.2019).

interviews with so-called experts who are apparently in possession of secret material, videos, documents, etc., about this crash which prove that Russia or pro-Russian separatists did not perpetrate the crashing of MH17, but that it was done by Ukraine, personally by the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, or by the CIA, etc.

In disseminating these various CTs the Kremlin tried to create distrust among the people, a feeling of discomfort, and tried to disorientate them. The idea was that people would start disbelieving the media completely, especially when it came to any information about flight MH17. The other aim was probably to persuade some people into choosing which CT they prefer, for we know how people tend to like to hold onto theories and narratives, especially when there is some conspiracy involved. As Maj. U. Arold correctly remarks, “*Russian TV channels produced a variety of different conspiracy theories about the plane incident, making the information from the media extremely confusing*”.<sup>21</sup> In using this “data deluge” method a multitude of Russian narratives and CTs about MH17 overwhelmed the audience with a huge amount of information, trying to target people with controversial data and facts, fake stories and conspiracies. The case of the crash of flight MH17 is a very good example of the use of CTs and this “data deluge” method by which the Kremlin’s purpose was to disorientate the target audience simultaneously in Russia, in Ukraine and in the West.

In my overview I will focus on the media outlets in Russian language, especially *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.<sup>22</sup> The most popular stories about the shooting down of flight MH17 in July 2014 (among them various CTs) were related, of course, to Ukraine. There were, however, other popular theo-

ries and CTs: e.g., that MH17 was shot down by the CIA or the American government in order to blame Russia, or that it was shot down by an Israeli missile. An interesting story in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* about a “time hole” according to which another plane, Malaysian Boeing 777, disappeared in March 2014 into a “time hole” can serve as another example.<sup>23</sup> There were also suggestions that it disappeared because of an unidentified flying object (UFO), to name but one more alternative theory.

Let us now take a look at some narratives promoted by the Russian media about MH17. Some examples will follow.

### CT 1. Ukraine is guilty

If we look very briefly at the period following the crash of flight MH17 on July 17, 2014 we will find a huge amount of misinformation and fake stories about this catastrophe in the Russian mass-media. For example, just a few days after the crash *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published texts about MH17 and the catastrophe containing a lot of misinformation and even false stories. From July 23, 2014 the situation changed and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* started to produce a quite specific view that Ukrainian armed forces were probably guilty of this catastrophe. Then there emerged different versions of how it was done, who did it, why, and so on.

For example, in one article published on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, six days after the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* claimed that the most likely culprit was a Ukrainian soldier named Sergei Patchenko.<sup>24</sup> Later on, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* simply stopped mentioning him and

<sup>23</sup> В.Лаговский. Малазийский «Боинг» провалился в дыру во времени? Комсомольская правда, 25 March 2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26210/3095390/> (accessed: 28.2.2019).

<sup>24</sup> О. Александрова, Солдата украинской армии затравили за фото на фоне «Бука», Комсомольская правда, 23.07.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26259/3138276/> (accessed: 02.09.2018).

<sup>21</sup> Arold 2015: 14.

<sup>22</sup> V. Sazonov, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, ENDC occasional papers 7, 2017, pp. 84–89

promoted alternative narratives instead. However, this remained only a speculation; no serious facts were ever produced to support it, but the narrative that Ukraine was guilty began to work<sup>25</sup>.

The story that Ukrainians shot down MH17 was also strongly promoted on all Russian federal television channels, and also in online and social media. The Russian mass media blamed the Ukrainian army directly and indirectly for shooting down MH17 and tried to convince people that Ukrainian soldiers were responsible for this catastrophe<sup>26</sup>. Russian information warfare once again used the “data deluge” method as in many other cases, trying to target people with confusing and sometimes controversial information; this method, together with CTs, was used to overwhelm the public. The purpose was, of course, to disorientate the target audience<sup>27</sup>. The main narrative was “Ukraine is guilty of shooting down flight MH17” but there were different variations of this story. On December 22, 2014 *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published an article mentioning that the Ukrainian captain Voloshin shot down MH17, and Russia found a secret witness who even appeared in *KP* to explain everything<sup>28</sup>.

This idea that Ukraine was guilty was massively promoted by the Russian media from 2014 and is still used even today. For

example, on September 17, 2018 the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published one of the latest articles so far on MH17 about the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Defence briefing which discussed the view that the missile which destroyed MH17 was Ukrainian<sup>29</sup>. We can see a similar picture in other Russian media outlets, blogs and social media.

There are articles directly accusing the Ukrainian government of shooting down MH17 (sometimes personally accusing president Poroshenko), calling it a fascist junta from Kiev. For example, one article by Aleksei Zhuravko, published in *NewsFront* on May 28, 2018, does just that, quoting a so-called expert Zhuravko claiming that he is 100% sure it was done by Poroshenko, at his order. There are rumours running in Poroshenko’s circle to the effect that Poroshenko personally gave the order to the Minister of Defence to destroy MH17<sup>30</sup>. Zhuravko accused Voloshin, the Ukrainian Air Force captain, of causing the MH17 crash, speculating that Voloshin committed suicide in Nikolaev in his flat. Why would he do such a thing? The Russian side found a witness in Yevgeni Agapov from Ukraine who served in the Ukrainian Air Force who said that MH17 had been shot down by Voloshin, and that Poroshenko immediately gave him a reward for doing so.<sup>31</sup>

One other narrative related to Ukraine promotes the idea that the order to destroy MH17 was given by Poroshenko personally (even promoted by *TV Zvezda*, owned by Ministry of Defence of Russian

<sup>25</sup> Комсомольская правда: Малайзийский Боинг был сбит в небе над Донбассом украинским летчиком, Радио Эхо Москвы, 23.12.2014, <http://echo.msk.ru/news/1460870-echo/comments.html> (accessed: 11.08.2018).

<sup>26</sup> See e. g. Н. Варсегов, Украинские пушки бьют по месту катастрофы «Боинга», чтобы не дать работать голландским специалистам, Комсомольская правда, 10.11.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26305.5/3183895> (accessed: 08.09.2018); С. Полосатов, Появился фотоснимок, на котором украинский истребитель атакует малайзийский «Боинг», Комсомольская правда, 24.11.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26307/3186146/> (accessed: 06.11.2018).

<sup>27</sup> Interview with D. Kuleba, carried out by Sazonov on 27th of May 2015 in Kiev.

<sup>28</sup> Малайзийский «Боинг» сбил украинский летчик – капитан Волошин, Комсомольская правда, 22 December 2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26323.5/3204312/> (accessed: 02.09.2018).

<sup>29</sup> Е. Белоконова, Минобороны: сбившая “Боинг” над Донбассом ракета стояла на вооружении украинской армии, Комсомольская правда, 17 September 2018, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26882/3926318/> (accessed: 01.03.2019).

<sup>30</sup> Алексей Журавко: Боинг-777 рейса MH17 сбита власть фашистов в Украине, NewsFront, 28 May 2018, <https://news-front.info/2018/05/28/aleksej-zhuravko-boing-777-rejsa-mn17-sbila-vlast-fashistov-v-ukraine/> (accessed: 01.03.2019).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Federation)<sup>32</sup>. In this claim (published June 5, 2018) a former member of Ukrainian parliament, Aleksei Zhuravko, confirms the suggestions of others and says that President Poroshenko personally gave the order to destroy MH17<sup>33</sup>. There was also another speculation and several CTs about Ukraine's role in the crash of flight MH17. For example, one article in *KP* from August 24, 2014 asserts that the Boeing which disappeared in March 2014, and which had a different flight designator 9M-MRO, was shot down in Ukrainian airspace in July 2014<sup>34</sup>. Another story in *KP* would have us believe that Ukrainian dispatchers changed MH17 planned route and because of that the plane flew into airspace where military actions were taking place<sup>35</sup>.

## CT 2. The CIA and USA shot down MH17

One rather popular theory promoted by the Russian media was that the US government and/or CIA shot down MH17 in order to blame Russia. For example, on December 17, 2017 the Russian media channel *Tsargrad* published an article with the title *"Boeing in the air above Donbass was shot down*

*at US order"*<sup>36</sup> in which the author was keen to point out that tests related to the crash of MH17 were performed in laboratories in the US and Lithuania, i.e., countries already full of hate against Russia. According to the author there is no proof or evidence showing that the Russian BUK missile system shot down MH17<sup>37</sup>. In his argumentation the author tries to defend Russia and blames the West, especially the US, for "dirty deals", underlining the fact that neither the Russian side nor pro-Russian separatists had any motives for this crime, whereas the Kiev regime, which wants to discredit the fighters of Donbass who are fighting against the Nazi dictatorship in Kiev, did indeed have a motive<sup>38</sup>.

One version of events argues that the crash of MH17 was a terrorist act organized by the CIA. According to this CT, the CIA placed a bomb inside the aircraft. There are several articles which promote the idea that MH17 was destroyed due to the bomb detonation in a terrorist act organized by the CIA<sup>39</sup>. Some of these articles, in which it was suggested that terrorists destroyed MH17, also accused the CIA<sup>40</sup> of shooting Boeing MH17 down.

## CT 3. The West and Ukraine organized the crash of MH17 together

Who is potentially guilty in this alternative "version"? According to this theory promoted by *Tsargrad.tv* the West (US) and Ukraine organized the annihilation of MH17 together. Here the author also blames the

<sup>32</sup> Приказ сбить малайзийский Боинг отдал лично Порошенко, Newsland.com, 1 April 2018, <https://newsland.com/community/4109/content/prikaz-sbit-malaziiskii-boing-otdal-lichno-poroshenko/6280527> (accessed: 01.03.2019); А. Журавко, Порошенко лично отдал приказ сбить Boeing в Донбассе - бывший депутат Рады, TV Zvezda, 4 June 2018, [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201806041709-sift.htm](https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201806041709-sift.htm) (accessed: 01.03.2019).

<sup>33</sup> Н. Виктор, Малайзийский "Боинг" сбили вместо лайнера с россиянами, Утро.ру, 08.08.2018, <https://utro.ru/life/2018/08/08/1369845.shtml> (accessed 1.3.2019).

<sup>34</sup> Н. Варсегов, Над Украиной сбили тот самый «Боинг», который пропал еще в марте, Комсомольская правда, 28.8.2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26275.4/3152876/> (accessed: 12.02.2019).

<sup>35</sup> В. Демченко, Украинские диспетчеры изменили маршрут погибшего лайнера, и он летел над районом боевых действий, Комсомольская правда, 18.7.2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26257/3136622/> (accessed: 12.02.2019).

<sup>36</sup> "Боинг" в небе над Донбассом сбили по приказу из США, ЦарьГрад, 9.12.2017, [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebe-nad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha\\_99766](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebe-nad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha_99766) (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> М. Ремизова, А. Рогоза, М. Бруснев. Версия: «Боинг» взорвала заложенная внутри бомба, Комсомольская правда, 12.8.15, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26419.3/3291610/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

US for bombing Iraq since 2003 and for destroying the World Trade Centre buildings in New York on September 11, 2001.<sup>41</sup> On August 12, 2015 Komsomolskaya Pravda published the article "Theory: Boeing was blown up by a bomb from the inside"<sup>42</sup> and according to this version of the story Komsomolskaya Pravda investigated secret materials and came to the conclusion that this crash near Donetsk was a secret CIA operation. According to Komsomolskaya Pravda this claim came from Sergei Sokolov, a former security guard of Russian oligarch Boris Berezovski, who is now working for a detective agency. He and his colleagues supposedly had secret materials which he called "17.17".

## CT 4. Holland is guilty

Other CTs were also promoted and tried to accuse Holland of destroying MH17 by using a bomb placed inside the plane<sup>43</sup>. Russia chose Holland for a couple of reasons: a) flight MH17 was from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur so accusing Holland and its government was an easy task; b) the government of Holland started an investigation into crash MH17<sup>44</sup>. Although this CT using a false narrative was mostly disseminated by fringe portals and outlets like the

information agency of the Russian public movement "Renaissance. The Golden Era", this conspiracy theory was still used in the Russian media and social media in order to disorientate the target audience. The federal information agency "Analytics and Security" (*Аналитика и безопасность*) used an "expert" by the name of Sergey Sokolov who presented his own version of events which, according to the article, had not been previously considered. Sokolov supposed that the MH17 crash was a special operation and that the Boeing was destroyed by a bomb placed inside. The article mentions another independent technical expert Juri Antipov who also supports the theory that MH17 was destroyed from the inside, and he criticizes other theories that claim that a missile destroyed MH17<sup>45</sup>.

Another interesting article "Dutch people 'dropped' Boeing MH17 on the FIFA World Cup"<sup>46</sup> accuses Holland and Ukraine. Juri Antipov, an "independent" specialist and technical expert, also presented the theory that there were several bombs on board of flight MH17 which destroyed it: "All witnesses say that they heard several explosions in the air. Some say that they heard 2 explosions, others say 3. But the Russian system 'BUK' only caused one explosion. Holland is doing this because if it is ever proven that the plane was blown up then Holland will be fully responsible for the fact that a plane took off from their airport with a bomb on board"<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> "Боинг" в небе над Донбассом сбили по приказу из США, ЦарьГрад, 9.12.2017, [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebe-nad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha\\_99766](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebe-nad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha_99766) (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>42</sup> М. Ремизова, А. Рогоза, М. Бруснев. Версия: «Боинг» взорвала заложённая внутри бомба, Комсомольская правда, 12.8.2015, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26419.3/3291610/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>43</sup> А. Афанасьев, Голландцы «сбросили» Боинг МН17 на чемпионат мира по футболу, ЦарьГрад, 24.5.2018; [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu\\_134423](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu_134423) (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>44</sup> The investigation was conducted by the Dutch Safety Board (DSB) and the Dutch-led joint investigation team. The Dutch side concluded that MH17 was shot down by a missile (Buk system). This missile was launched from pro-Russian terrorist-controlled territory in the Eastern part of Ukraine. For more see MH17 crash, Dutch Safety Board, The Hague, 2015, <https://www.webcitation.org/6cFSGnsRg?url=http://cdn.onderzoekraad.nl/documents/report-mh17-crash-en.pdf> (accessed: 25.2.2019).

<sup>45</sup> М. Ремизова, А. Рогоза, М. Бруснев. Версия: «Боинг» взорвала заложённая внутри бомба, Комсомольская правда, 12.8.15, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26419.3/3291610/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>46</sup> А. Афанасьев, Голландцы «сбросили» Боинг МН17 на чемпионат мира по футболу, ЦарьГрад, 24.5.2018, [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu\\_134423](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu_134423) (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



## CT 5. MH17 Crash as a classic Western provocation against Russia<sup>48</sup>

On July 18, 2014 Jevgeni Sazonov published the following article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* which describes the crash of MH17 as a classic Western provocation against Russia<sup>49</sup>: *Crash in Donbass fits classic conspiracy theories very well<sup>50</sup>. He added that NATO and the USA are interested in sending their troops into Ukraine for a so-called peacekeeping mission. Good reasons for that could be Russian intervention into the conflict in Donbass and Russia's defense of the borders of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. Russia, however, did not react to these provocations from the West and so the West apparently destroyed MH17, hoping that Russia would now intervene<sup>51</sup>.*

## Conclusion

I have listed only some CTs which the Russian media outlet *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and some other produced concerning the MH17 crash. There are other CTs which I have not even mentioned here. Most of them (ca. 90%) are related to Ukraine and sometimes to the West/NATO and the US/CIA in which Russia accuses the West and Ukraine, and less frequently Holland, of being guilty of crashing flight MH17.

The Kremlin tried to create the narrative that neither Russia nor pro-Russian separatists and terrorists shot down this plane. The Russian side has also been trying to create the illusion that this is all Western provocation directed against the Kremlin and pro-Russian separatists in Donbass in

order to accuse them of this crime.

The Russian media has produced dozens of CTs about by whom, how and why MH17 was shot down. The Russian side often used fake, falsified or changed stories, witnesses, pictures, videos, and emotional and often sarcastic and offensive rhetoric. To lay claim to some measure of credibility, these articles often use interviews with so-called experts who have secret material, videos, documents, etc., on the MH17 crash, which are to prove that Russia and pro-Russian separatists could not have organized this crash, and that it was done by Ukraine and the West (e.g., at the order of the Ukrainian president Poroshenko or by the CIA, or by Holland, etc.).

By spreading these various CTs (often full of fake details or misinformation) in the Russian media, the Kremlin has been trying to create distrust among the people, a feeling of discomfort, and trying to disorientate them. The idea was that people would stop believing the media completely, especially when it comes to information about MH17. The other aim was probably to persuade some people into choosing which CT they prefer, because we know how people often like to believe in conspiracies.

The goal of using this "data deluge" method with several Russian narratives and conspiracy theories about MH17 is to overwhelm the audience with a mass of information/stories/alternative narratives, etc., so as to target people with controversial data and facts, fake details and conspiracies. The case of the crash of flight MH17 is a very good example of using this "data deluge" method in combination with CTs in which the Kremlin's purpose was to disorientate the target audience simultaneously in Russia, Ukraine and in the West.

<sup>48</sup> Е. Сазонов. Нестыковки и загадки малайзийского "Боинга", Комсомольская Правда, 18.7.2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26257/3136728/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## Bibliography

- M. Abalakina-Paap et al, Beliefs in Conspiracies, *Political Psychology* 20, 1999, pp. 637-647;
- M. Alyukov, Conspiracy theory has gone mainstream in Russia. But how does it work?, *Open Democracy*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maxim-alyukov/conspiracy-theory-has-gone-mainstream-in-russia> (accessed: 22.2.2019).
- U. Arold, Infosõja mõistatus, Kaja. Kommunikatsioon ja suhtekorralduse ajakiri 18, 2015, pp. 9-14
- Th. Burnett et al, *Conspiracy Encyclopedia: The Encyclopedia of Conspiracy Theories*, Collins & Brown, London 2005.
- S. Clarke, Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 2, 2002, pp. 131-150
- D. Coady, Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, 2003, pp. 197-209.
- D. Coady, The Pragmatic Rejection of Conspiracy Theories, in D. Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate, Hampshire 2006, pp. 167-170;
- M. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Palgrave, New York 2014.
- M. Dentith, When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation, *Social Epistemology* 31, 2016, pp. 572-591.
- DutchSafetyBoard, The Hague, 2015, <https://www.webcitation.org/6cFSGnsRg?url=http://cdn.onderzoeksraad.nl/documents/report-mh17-crash-en.pdf>
- Interview with D. Kuleba, carried out by Sazonov on 27th of May 2015 in Kiev.
- I. Yablokov, Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT), *Politics* 35 (3-4), 2015, p. 301-315.
- I. Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity 2018.
- P. Knight, *Conspiracy Nation. The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, New York University Press 2002.
- S. Macdonald, *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered Images and Deception Operations*. Routledge, New York 2007.
- A. Missiroli et al. *Strategic communications East and South*, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016.
- H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, Information Warfare as the Hobbesian concept of Modern Times – Principles, Techniques and Tools of Russian Information Operations in Donbass, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31 (3), 2018, pp. 308-328.
- Th. E. Nissen, The weaponization of social media, Royal Danish Defence College, Copenhagen, 2015, <http://www.fak.dk/publikationer/Documents/The%20Weaponization%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf?pdfdl=theweaponizationofsocialmedia?pdfdl=TheWeaponizationOfSocialMedia> (accessed: 28.2.2019).
- D.G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories, and the New Age. Millennial Conspiracism*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2016.
- V. Sazonov, Examples of criticism towards Ukraine based on materials from *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, ENDC Occasional Papers 7, 2017, pp 148-149.
- V. Sazonov, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, ENDC occasional papers 7, 2017, pp. 84-89.
- Ch. Shinar, Conspiracy Narratives in Russian Politics: from Stalin to Putin, *European Review*, Volume 26, Issue 4, pp. 648-660.
- Theory Blaming West for Collapse of Soviet Union Gaining in Popularity, Poll Shows, *The Moscow Times*, 2 December 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/02/theory-blaming-west-for-collapse-of-soviet-union-gaining-in-popularity-poll-shows> (accessed 22.2.2019).
- A. Ventsel, Political Potentiality of Conspiracy Theories, *Lexia* 23/24, 2016, pp. 309-326.

## In Russian

- О. Александрова, *Солдата украинской армии затравили за фото на фоне «Бука»*, Комсомольская правда, 23.07.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26259/3138276/> (accessed: 02.09.2018).
- Алексей Журавко: *Боинг-777 рейса МН17 сбита власть фашистов в Украине*, News-Front, 28 May 2018, <https://news-front.info/2018/05/28/aleksej-zhuravko-boing-777-rejsa-mn17-sbila-vlast-fashistov-v-ukraine/> (accessed: 01.03.2019).
- А. Афанасьев, *Голландцы «сбросили» Боинг МН17 на чемпионат мира по футболу, ЦарьГрад*, 24.5.2018, [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu\\_134423](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/gollandcy-sbrosili-boing-mh17-na-chempionat-mira-po-futbolu_134423), (accessed: 04.01.2019).
- В.Э. Багдасарян, *“Теория заговора” в отечественной историографии второй половины XIX-XX вв: критика мифологизации истории*, Московский государственный университет сервиса, Диссертация на соискание ученой степени доктора исторических наук, 2000, <http://cheloveknauka.com/v/32042/d/#?page=1>. (accessed: 1.3.2019).
- Е. Белоконова, *Минобороны: сбившая “Боинг” над Донбассом ракета стояла на вооружении украинской армии*, Комсомольская правда, 17 September 2018, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26882/3926318/> (accessed: 01.03.2019).
- “Боинг” в небе над Донбассом сбили по приказу из США*, ЦарьГрад, 9.12.2017, [https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebenad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha\\_99766](https://tsargrad.tv/articles/boing-v-nebenad-donbassom-sbili-po-prikazu-iz-ssha_99766) (accessed: 04.01.2019).
- Британские СМИ: Пропавший над Индийским океаном самолёт Malaysia Airlines был сбит военными США*, RT, 22 December 2014, <https://russian.rt.com/article/65845> (accessed: 27.2.2019).
- Н. Варсегов, *Украинские пушки бьют по месту катастрофы «Боинга», чтобы не датъ работать голландским специалистам*, Комсомольская правда, 10.11.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26305.5/3183895> (accessed: 08.09.2018).
- Н. Викторов. *Малайзийский “Боинг” сбили вместо лайнера с россиянами*, Утро.ру, 08.08.2018, <https://utro.ru/life/2018/08/08/1369845.shtml> (accessed 1.3.2019).
- В. Демченко, *Украинские диспетчеры изменили маршрут погибшего лайнера, и он летел над районом боевых действий*, Комсомольская правда, 18.7.2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26257/3136622/> (accessed: 12.02.2019).
- А. Дугин, *Конспирология*, Евразия, Москва 1992.
- А. Журавко, *Порошенко лично отдал приказ сбить Воeing в Донбассе – бывший депутат Рады*, TV Zvezda, 4 June 2018, [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201806041709-s1ft.htm](https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201806041709-s1ft.htm) (accessed: 01.03.2019).
- Комсомольская правда: Малайзийский Боинг был сбит в небе над Донбассом украинским летчиком*, Радио Эхо Москвы, 23.12.2014, <http://echo.msk.ru/news/1460870-echo/comments.html> (accessed: 11.08.2018).
- С. Кракова, *Мировая закулиса: откуда появился «заговор против России»*, Газета.ру, 21 August 2018, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2018/08/21/11903245.shtml> (accessed: 27.2.2019).
- В. Лаговский, *Малайзийский «Боинг» провалился в дыру во времени?*, Комсомольская правда, 25 March 2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26210/3095390/> (accessed: 28.2.2019).
- Малайзийский «Боинг» сбил украинский летчик – капитан Волошин*, Комсомольская правда, 22 December 2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26323.5/3204312/> (accessed: 02.09.2018).
- Приказ сбить малайзийский Боинг отдал лично Порошенко*, Newsland.com, 1 April 2018, <https://newsland.com/community/4109/content/prikaz-sbit-malaziiskii-boing-otdal-lichno-poroshenko/6280527> (accessed: 01.03.2019)
- С. Полосатов, *Появился фотоснимок, на котором украинский истребитель атакует*

- малайзийский «Боинг», Комсомольская правда, 24.11.2014, <http://kompravda.eu/daily/26307/3186146/> (accessed: 06.11.2018).
- Пропавший в марте малайзийский Boeing могли сбить военные США, опасаясь теракта.* МК.ru, 22. December 2014, <https://www.mk.ru/incident/2014/12/22/propavshiy-v-marte-malayziyskiy-boeing-mogli-sbit-voennye-ssha-opasayas-terakta.html>, (accessed: 27.2.2019).
- М. Ремизова, А. Рогоза, М. Бруснев. *Версия: «Боинг» взорвала заложенная внутри бомба*, Комсомольская правда, 12.8.15, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26419.3/3291610/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).
- Е. Сазонов. *Нестыковки и загадки малайзийского “Боинга”*, Комсомольская Правда, 18.7.2014, <https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26257/3136728/> (accessed: 04.01.2019).
- Самые популярные теории заговора в России.* Habr, 13 May 2018, <https://habr.com/ru/post/412101/> (accessed: 22.2.2019).
- А.И. Фурсов, *Мировая борьба. Англосаксы против планеты*, Книжный мир, Москва, 2016.

---

**VLADIMIR SAZONOV** (PhD in History). A Senior Researcher at the Centre for Oriental Studies in the University of Tartu and a researcher at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences and at Estonian National Defence College. He has also worked at Estonian National Defence College as Associate Professor and a researcher, and as a lecturer at Baltic College. V. Sazonov has studied at universities in Tartu, Tallinn, Basel and Göttingen. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Innsbruck, Bar-Ilan University, Istanbul, Berlin, Göttingen, Würzburg, Münster and Basel. His research fields comprise Ancient Near Eastern cultural history and modern Middle Eastern state ideology and religions. His another sphere of interest is Russian (state) ideology and propaganda. The last monograph was published in 2016

in the U.S.A. Vladimir Sazonov published more than 150 scientific articles in different scientific journals in Estonia and abroad.