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Russian Phoenix

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Anthropology and Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are my constant companions. As an anthropologist doing research in Eastern Europe, I have been collecting them for the last 18 years. Since the global recession began in 2008, [conspiracy theories have multiplied and spread throughout the region](#). These stories help me understand the local worldviews of men and women who have weathered the social, political, and economic upheavals of the collapse of communism. I never once thought that they might come true, but recent events in Ukraine have me questioning that certainty.

In former communist countries where the state controlled the media and governments once failed to warn their citizens about nuclear accidents like Chernobyl, it is understandable that ordinary people believe in nefarious plots by dark-suited men in shadowy rooms. Conspiracy theories help the [powerless make sense of a world they cannot control](#). Uncle Petko's cancer can be blamed on the World Bank, the IMF, the European Central Bank, and their deliberate financial machinations against the poor.

My favorite conspiracy theory came from an old Bulgarian friend whom I will call Kaloyan. He was the grand master of conspiracy theories, and over the years I have spent many hours in Sofia bars listening to him spin yarns about secret societies and omnipotent oligarchs. Ever the skeptic, I once promised Kaloyan that if any of his conspiracy theories came true I would buy him drinks for a year.

In 2008, Kaloyan came to visit me in Maine. The gift he brought me from across the Atlantic was a whole new interpretation of the end of the Cold War. Kaloyan related that sometime in the late 1980s the Soviet Politburo realized that they could not keep up with the West. The superior US economy meant that the Americans could outspend the Russians on military technology, and capitalism excelled in providing consumer goods.

The Soviets had old and outdated factories that produced substandard products. What they needed was Western technology. For years the KGB had been trying to steal this. By the late 1980s Soviet leaders decided it would be easier to ask the West for help. But during the Reagan era, communism was the enemy ideology. There could be no cooperation.

So, according to Kaloyan, Soviet leaders hatched a secret plan for the USSR to fake its own collapse. The Russians would temporarily downsize their empire—letting the East European countries and certain Soviet Republics go their own way. The colonies were expensive, and the Russians needed time to concentrate on their own economy.

An elaborate ruse was planned. The new Russian leaders would sell off enterprises to foreign investors, bringing in much needed foreign direct investment. The Russians took loans from Western banks, and bought Western technologies. Western capitalists, eager to expand into the lucrative Russian market, built new factories and renovated aging infrastructure.

During this period the Communists would lay low. Capitalism would work its course, reviving Russia's industrial base while also creating vast inequalities in wealth and power. Kaloyan explained that once the Russian economy caught up with the West, and when the Russian people grew weary of the oligarchs and income polarization, some new Communist Party would reemerge like a phoenix from the ashes. These Russian leaders would nationalize all of the privatized enterprises and Western assets with the complete support of the Russian people. With this infusion of technology and capital, Russia could reclaim its old empire and regain its superpower status.

Marx believed that in order to build communism, countries had to pass through the historical stage of capitalism. In 1917, Russia tried to go straight from feudalism to communism. This was a mistake. The people apparently needed to experience the injustice of capitalism to see the value of communism. Thus, according to Kaloyan's conspiracy theory, by 2017 the Russian Communists would be back—protecting the rights of workers, women, the elderly, and the poor, trying to build a new world from the remains of the old Soviet Union.

“That communism might come back?”

“That capitalism might some day meet the same fate.”

In anthropology, researchers are supposed to listen to the stories that people tell about their own lives. We try to interpret these tales as metaphors that provide valuable cultural insights. The Russian Phoenix conspiracy theory is a tale that many East Europeans tell themselves to combat the hopelessness produced by 21st century global capitalism. They cling to a story that provides a way out, an alternative future.

The current crisis in Ukraine, however, has me paranoid and incredulous that Kaloyan was on to something. As a specialist in Eastern Europe, I have been obsessively following recent events, and I have often thought of Kaloyan's conspiracy theory as I watched the Russians take Crimea, and position themselves to take Eastern Ukraine.

Last month, I almost tipped out of my swivel chair when I [read a report](#) that Putin was already planning retaliatory measures against possible US and EU economic sanctions. According to the state media, Russian legislators were drafting a new law that would allow Putin's government to confiscate the assets of American and European companies operating in Russia. Whether or not it was ever planned out in advance, Kaloyan's conspiracy theory might come true.

This would certainly be a severe geopolitical shock, but sitting in my office in Brunswick, Maine, I am far more worried about the potential costs associated with keeping Kaloyan in spirits for a year. Bulgarians drink a lot. And if Russia does rise like a phoenix, I am not entirely sure that he will spend the year drowning his sorrows. After 25 years of neoliberal chaos, he might be celebrating.

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