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Conspiracism on the Runet: Text Reuse and the Formation of a Conspiracy Theory

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Abstract

While repetition is widely recognized as a key mechanism in shaping cultural knowledge, its role in the formation of misinformation and conspiracy theories remains underexplored. This article examines Russian conspiracism by investigating the role of text reuse in the formation and dissemination of a conspiracy theory within text-based media. Drawing on a corpus of Russian-language websites and newspapers, we identify a prominent cluster that repeatedly promotes claims about an ancient Russian civilization and a multi-generational cover-up. Using a mixed-methods approach, we contextualize these websites and analyze their life cycles, loose interconnectedness, and "patriotic" profiles. The conspiracy theory examined in this case study circulated exclusively online, with the digital environment of the Runet accelerating its diffusion and entrenchment. Our findings of text reuse highlight the salience of lead-in introductions in shaping and reinforcing these narratives.

Keywords: text repetition, conspiracy theories, conspiracism, misinformation, Runet

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Introduction

The development of communication technologies has accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories, fake news, and movements like climate denialism and anti-vaccine activism, consequently attracting scholarly interest. Besides the sources, content, and receivers of misinformation, scholars have become increasingly interested in its dissemination dynamics (Giglietto et al. 2019; Zerback et al. 2020; Toepfl et al. 2023). Particularly, studies of conspiracy theories have focused on Western contexts, while non-English-language contexts remain comparatively underexplored (Mahl et al. 2022).

Russia is often examined as a source of disinformation, conspiracy theories, propaganda, and fake news, especially outside of Russia, following its involvement in the 2016 US presidential elections (Yablokov 2015; Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Toepfl et al. 2023). Russian authorities have justified the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by disputing its historical sovereignty and alleging secret schemes by "Anglo-Saxons" or "the collective West" in Ukraine as part of a broader scheme against Russia (Domańska 2021; Tolz and Hutchings 2023). Whatever the real reasons behind the invasion, this conspiracy-leaning rhetoric was meant to resonate affectively and symbolically among the domestic audience (Tolz and Hutchings 2023; see also Borenstein 2019; Casier 2023). While the domestic aspect of this extreme form of conspiracy reasoning is acknowledged, the dynamics of conspiracy theories within the vernacular Russian digital milieu remain under-studied.

Against this backdrop, the current study sheds light on the less-studied grassroots-level misinformation culture, particularly conspiracism within the Russian information environment. Conspiracism refers to a broad cultural system—a worldview in which conspiracies are perceived as the driving force of history (Byford 2011; Radnitz 2021). We examine a conspiracy theory embedded in conspiracist reasoning and thus connected to the wider phenomenon of epistemic polarization and conflict. Our research question is: what role does text reuse play in the formation of conspiracy theories in Russian text-based media? To this end, we compiled a representative corpus of content related to Russian origins—a characteristic theme in Russian conspiracism—and identified the most widely circulated conspiracy theory cluster as a case study, which we found to appear exclusively in online media.

We will proceed as follows: first, we define the key concepts of text repetition, conspiracy theories, and conspiracism. The second section reviews the background context of conspiracism in Russia, paying particular attention to the online sphere, as this is where our case study is situated. In the methods section, we first outline the research design, beginning with how we distinguished text repetition clusters from a representative data corpus. We then introduce directed content analysis and network analysis. The analysis section commences with the identification of an example case from online clusters discussing the origins of Russia, followed by a review of the development of its story variations. Secondly, we identify and analyze the key text snippets, the reuse of which constituted the cluster and its conspiracist character. Third, we examine the background of this conspiracy theory by reviewing the websites within the cluster and exploring their hyperlink networks. Finally, we provide a synthesis that connects our findings to the broader question of how text reuse contributes to the formation of conspiracy theories and Russian conspiracism, and conclude with a retrospective discussion.

From Epistemic Crisis to Conspiracism: The Role of Text Repetition

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) (see also Schiele 2020) have argued that democracies around the world fell into an “epistemic crisis” in the 2010s, due to strengthening polarization in the ways people accept something as knowledge. In this vein, scholars have studied propaganda, conspiracy theories, fake news and other related concepts in online environments through their identification (Shu et al. 2017), share in the media ecosystem (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Allen et al. 2020), dissemination (Giglietto et al. 2019), filter bubbles (Meylakhs et al. 2014), and the role of automated fake accounts (“bots”) in social networks (Kaveeva et al. 2018) in contemporary information societies.

Earlier scholarship has acknowledged that the formation of all kinds of knowledge—both valid and invalid—takes place in a kind of collective “conversation”, where some parts of the story become “accepted” through repetition (Östling et al. 2018; Tangherlini et al. 2020). Many cultural features are similarly largely based on reuse and variation of elements like texts, symbols, story structures, memes and other features (Schich 2009; Zamani et al. 2020).

Contemporary online media platforms enable the rapid proliferation of false information through the combination of scant content filters and participatory culture, as well as unprecedented possibilities for text dissemination, repetition, and modification (Adamic et al. 2016; Fuchs 2020; Tangherlini et al. 2020). Although there is evidence of the importance of repetition in forming culture and our knowledge environments, we still know very little about what is the role of repetition and how it works in the context of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories exhibit globally similar tendencies, thriving in both democracies and autocracies. Their origins are often unclear, but they typically involve a small, powerful, and sinister group of individuals with a vague plan to manipulate the masses. Across the existing literature, conspiracism is identified as a distinct culture—a system of knowledge, beliefs, ideas, rhetoric, and practices, as well as a tradition of interpreting major events and the functioning of the world through the lens of malicious secret plans by powerful forces. While conspiracies do occur in real life, widespread conspiracism tends to erode trust in public and expert institutions and render societies vulnerable to social and ethnic divisions, as well as harmful disinformation and misinformation (Gray 2010; Byford 2011, 5; Radnitz 2021; Mahl et al. 2022; Cherkaev 2022).

Paradoxically mimicking academic styles that they often denounce as corrupt, conspiracy theorists often put in great effort to find evidence and put “patterns” together to support their hypotheses matching radical conclusions. This process helps them make sense of an otherwise distressingly complex world and assert a sense of agency within it (Knight 2000; Byford 2011; Yablokov 2015; Radnitz 2021). Conspiracy theories about history characteristically entail claims of dramatic-scale revelations against established history that would not be possible without the involvement of a systematic and multigenerational scheme to keep “the truth” in malign secrecy from the public. Besides the scale, these claims characteristically differ from amateur history by claims of being valid history made to “correct” academic history. Yet, they systematically neglect disciplinary criteria, including methods, source selection criticism, and engagement in up-to-date discussion (Välimäki 2022, xxii).

Conspiracism in Russia and Runet

Russia is a relatively low-trust country where public and private discussions vary strongly and access to publicly relevant information is often restricted. The mistrust towards institutional authorities, including historians, has led to a notable popularity of informal information sources

(Yurchak 2005; Hosking 2012; also *re:Russia* 2023). Notoriously, conspiracy theories are popularized and utilized in the state's propaganda, which claims that enemies abroad are conspiring against Russians with color revolutions and liberal ideology (Borenstein 2019; Radnitz 2021; Domańska 2021).

In the final years of the USSR, the official version of history was subjected to public criticism following the relaxation of state control over information production and distribution. This gradually led to the revision of textbooks and the collapse of the grand Soviet history narrative, increasing the demand for alternative imaginaries of the future as well as the past (Kellner 2019). The legitimacy of the centuries-long territorial imperialism came to be questioned with the rise of ethnic nationalism in various parts of the USSR and later post-Soviet Russia. Consequently, Russian nationalists sought usable history to legitimize Russian territorial expansion (Shnirel'man 1998). These trajectories spawned an alternative history scene with seminars and bestsellers where the glorified Russian origins have been the subject of fan fiction, neo-medievalism, speculation and stern claims of historical truths even before the proliferation of digital media. While Russian alternative historians have various biographies, they are predominantly men (Sheiko and Brown 2014, 214; Shnirel'man 2015; Gorski 2019; Suslov 2020). The state's reasserted active role in historiography has further undermined the publicly perceived academic integrity of history in Russia (Grinëv 2022).

In domestic and foreign policies, Russian authorities have routinely used interpretations of history as pressing arguments, particularly to "protect" the history of "The Great Patriotic War" (the USSR against Nazi Germany and her allies 1941–1945), the security services and the Russian Orthodox Church from fabrications (Koposov 2018). Challenging the official version of history as a systematic fabrication and a conspiracy to support the elites can lead to criminal charges for example based on "dissemination of knowingly false information on the activities of the USSR during the Second World War" (Koposov 2018, 10).

There is a strong geopolitical association between the Russian Federation and the Russian-language internet (Runet). Despite the presence of several million Russian speakers living in other countries, the majority reside within Russia, which is therefore often regarded as the default national context when studying content production, dissemination, and consumption on the Runet. Reflecting the wider societal context in Russia, the Runet's history discussions mostly focus on twentieth-century topics (Rostovtsev and Sosnitskii 2018). Interest in the premodern age, on the other hand, is often connected to disappointment with modernist (e.g., materialist, liberalist and individualist) answers to existential questions of who "we" are, where we come from and what is important in life. Previously, researchers studied grassroots discussions about history on the Runet through the lens of communities of amateur historians (Golovashina 2014; see also Gorski 2019), national conservative groups (Zharchinskaya 2014) and people's receptiveness to mythology (Emelyanenko et al. 2017), among others.

Motivations to discover the glorious history include for example the interpretation of states and nations as essentialized entities that ought to have a great past in order to have a great future (Oiva and Ristilä 2022; Suslov 2020). While the Russian context has its specificities regarding the ontological exploration of historical identities and distrust of expert institutions, it is connected to global political trends of populism and nationalism (Kinnvall 2018; Välmäki 2022). Overall, the social and historical context in Russia entails many elements enabling conspiracism in its cultural spheres, including the text-based media where the complex relations between conspiracism and text repetition can be studied. The following methodological approach will allow us to examine how these relations materialize in practice—specifically, how conspiracy theories are formed and disseminated through patterns of text reuse.

Materials and Methods

Following the recognized salience of text repetition in the formation of various forms of misinformation (Adamic et al. 2016; Fuchs 2020), the present study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to provide descriptive and unobtrusive macro and micro-level perspectives on its dynamic role in the formation and circulation of a conspiracy theory on the Runet. Operationally, we employed the following steps. We first compiled a large corpus of text-based Russian media where text repetition could sufficiently be observed, from which we identified a conspiracy theory cluster for analysis. This step ensured a rich example of text repetition, which could not have been ensured through hand-picking. Next, we examined the formation and contexts of the selected cluster by applying content analysis to the directed coding category of conspiracism. For contextualization, we profiled the text-(re-)distributing websites and illustrated their locations in hyperlink networks.

To create a representative corpus of popular texts discussing Russian origins — a conventional topic where conspiracism manifests — we compiled Russian-language articles from the Integrum database and the Yandex search engine. From the Runet's most popular search engine, Yandex, we collected the online texts by identifying around 300 seed links through searching for websites and blog posts discussing the history of ancient Russia and its founders. The online texts were automatically collected by gathering the text contents and hyperlinks of the seed links following the hyperlinks three steps outwards with a Python script.[4] This resulted in a corpus of over 1.5 million texts. Additionally, we identified popular articles from the Integrum database, which contains publications from the Russian press, information agencies and other media from 1991 to 2019, with the help of a suitable keyword query.[5] The online data emphasized content from more recent years because websites tend to disappear if not maintained. Here, the comprehensive Integrum database complemented our corpus with older content.

After cleaning the raw data, we identified the most prominent repetition-based text discussions in the corpus by using a version of Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) developed specifically for text reuse detection and combining the websites and articles containing repeating texts of a minimum 300 characters into clusters. One cluster could contain several repeating samples, and not all the publications necessarily contained the same repeating texts. BLAST united them into one cluster when one publication uses all the repeated samples (see Table 1). This process produced more than 100,000 clusters organized by the number of repeated texts. From these, we selected the most widely distributed and long-lasting cluster that contained an identifiable conspiracy theory for detailed analysis.

To understand the formation and context of the selected conspiracy theory, we applied both qualitative and quantitative methods. Seeking to detect meaningful textual content related to conspiracism, we applied a directed qualitative approach to content analysis (DCA), which Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggest can extend previous theory about a larger phenomenon from textual data content. In this relatively structured qualitative approach, the coding criteria are derived from an existing theory to provide a systematic and transparent scope for analyzing content interpretatively. In our case, we applied the criteria outlined in the conceptual framework section to interpret content as conspiracy theories and conspiracism.

[4] The code used for collecting the online data can be found here: https://github.com/aristila/PHist.

[5] The Integrum data were collected with a keyword search of the words *Rus'* and *istori** in the same sentence covering the period between 1 January 1991 and 23 September 2019 (when the data collection began). The data collection was completed between 14 October and 3 December 2019 with the help of an algorithm coded using the Python programming language. Due to an unstable internet connection, approximately 5% of the query results could not be collected.

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Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1283) note that the downsides of DCA include a theory dependence that limits the researcher's view of the wider contextual features of the studied phenomenon. Our unobtrusive approach limited the availability of background information about the producers of our data, but we examined the websites that were part of our example cluster using hyperlink network analysis and reviewed their self-presented profiles.

To contextualize the cluster in its online environment, we quantitatively examined the hyperlink network that we configured using the R programming language and the Gephi network visualization tool. This revealed the positions, centrality and types of the nearest neighbors of the cluster websites within the cluster. With the Russian context in mind, we anonymized two websites that contained anti-Semitic content, which makes them more prone to be prosecuted as "extremist" under Russian law (Shnirel'man 2015).

Results

Example Case and Story Variations

We identified the example case for closer study through a careful selection process. Examining our database of websites discussing the origins of Russia and forming clusters through text repetition, we found that the largest clusters increased in size due to technical text repetition and online dictionary references, particularly variants from Wikipedia. The largest clusters with identifiable topics dealt with medieval Russia's (aka Kiev[an] Rus') relations with the Muslim caliphates and the establishment of the legal code *Russkaia Pravda* (the Justice of Rus'). Another large cluster discussed the ethnic origin of the founder of Kievan Rus', Prince Rurik, based on the historic document "Tale of Bygone Years" (*Povest' vremennykh let,* 1113, see also Oiva and Ristilä 2022). While these clusters included some radical interpretations of history, they lacked coherence and were often not presented explicitly to dispute and correct academic discussions, unlike what is characteristic of conspiracism.

Domain-wise, the twenty-seventh largest cluster in our database (from here on, the Ruskolan cluster) was the largest cluster where we identified a coherent conspiracy theory. This cluster consisted of nineteen online publications from 2003 to 2019, where various text snippets were (re)used in few variations of the distinct story of Ruskolan. The Ruskolan cluster did not include the Integrum newspaper publications from the 1990s and most of its publications were published after 2015, as shown in Figure 1. This indicates that the Ruskolan cluster developed predominantly online with no involvement of newspapers. The temporal imbalance may partially be explained by the fact that internet usage in Russia was marginal before the expansion of the user base in the early 2010s (Kiriya 2021). The publications were predominantly textual rather than visual. Some of them did include a few illustrative pictures of artifacts and painted images of landscapes and people, but their analysis is beyond the scope of our study.

With few variations and various details, all but two publications in this cluster claimed that the Slavic-Russian civilization has far more ancient origins than what is written in history books. These publications shared a common theme, advancing a conspiracist claim that the state of Ruskolan, considered the true origin of Russians, remains generally unknown due to a scheme in which Russian leaders and foreigners have forged history books. The story of Ruskolan was explicitly portrayed as academically valid history, or "theory", through references to sources such as archaeologists and historians. Before going further into the repeated key text snippets, we first review how the story of Ruskolan formed temporally through different variations.

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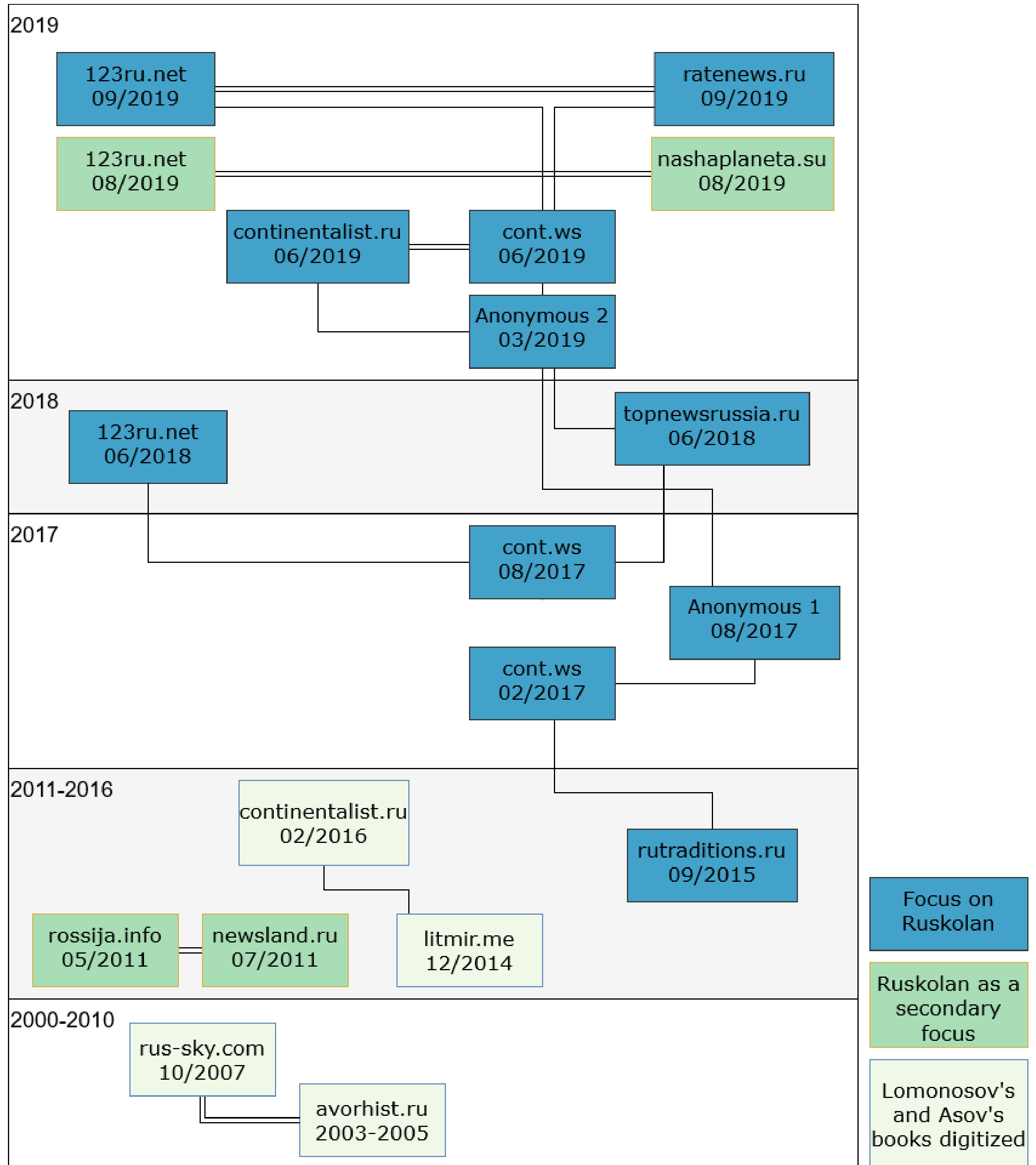
Figure 1: Temporal development of the Ruskolan cluster.

Each box indicates the publication's website and its focus. The earlier publications are located at the bottom and the later publications at the top. The publications that are, for the most part, copies of each other are marked with double line connections, and the publications sharing several paragraphs of content are marked with a single line.



The cluster's oldest publications, Avorhist 2003–2005 and Rus-sky 10/2007 present polymath Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov's (1711–1765) book "Ancient Russian History from the Beginning of the Russian Nation to the Death of Prince Yaroslav the First, or to the Year 1054" (*Drevniaia rossiiskaia istoriia: Ot nachala rossiiskogo naroda do konchiny velikogo kniazia Iaroslava Pervogo ili do 1054 goda*, first published in 1766).[6] Here Lomonosov examined the ethnic and geographical origins of people from the Baltic Sea to the Eurasian steppe. As we will demonstrate in the next section, the snippets of this book about Slavic kinship, as well as Lomonosov's own biography, were selectively used in the composition of a conspiracy theory in the cluster's later publications. Among the seventeen following publications that present the story of Ruskolan, eleven focused on Ruskolan and portrayed the main variant of its story by reusing two main branches of the textual body. Those branches themselves were composed of various layers and combinations of shorter reused texts. The smaller main branch included Cont.ws 08/2017, 123ru.net 06/2018 and Topnewsrussia.ru 06/2018 (Figure 1).

With minor variations, both branches contained the core narrative of Ruskolan, which claims that the proto-Russian Slavic peoples started their own history chronicle after winning a war against proto-China in 5508 BCE and later established the state of Ruskolan with the capital Kiyar in the Northern Caucasus region close to Mount Elbrus. Ruskolan continued to expand to the Ural Mountains, Crimea and Danube and became a highly developed civilization. The story goes into dramatic details of how a series of betrayed pacts with and wars against the Goths led to the downfall of Ruskolan, particularly after the crucifixion of Ruskolan royals in 368 CE. In the eighteenth-century, the Romanov dynasty and German scholars schemed to erase this history to claim that without Christianization and foreigners, Slavs were too uncivilized to rule themselves. Hence, they made up the Normanist theory, according to which Russia was founded much later by Scandinavian-Germanic Rurik.

Six of the cluster's publications talked about Ruskolan in a secondary role, among other claims. Textually almost identical publications on Russia.info 05/2011 and Newsland.ru 07/2011 were the oldest publications in the cluster to tell the story of Ruskolan, but they also deviated from the main story. In their version, Ruskolan was, along with the "Great Tartaria" and the Mongol Yoke, only one of the later state formations of the great Aryan-Slavic civilizations. Accordingly, the Slavic-Russian civilization had already started in 604 381 BCE, with Midgard as the eldest human civilization representing the "white race," which went through great historic wars and cosmic-natural catastrophes. Thus, the story of Ruskolan was prolonged before and after the main story variant and it had a notable racial element.

The early publications of the cluster included digitized chapters of books by Aleksandr I. Asov (1964–, aka Aleksandr Barashkov, pseudonym Busov): "The Great Secrets of the Rus: Pre-homeland, Forefathers, Shrines" (*Velikie tainy Rusi. Istoriia. Prarodiny. Predki. Sviatyni*; 2014) and "Ruskolan: Ancient Russian History and Traditions of Russian Cossacks" (*Ruskolan': Drevniaia Rus': Istoriia i traditsii russkogo kazachestva;* 2004) on Litmir.me (12/2014) and Continentalist (02/2016, later deleted). With few modifications and partially common content, his two book chapters describe first-hand observations and historical contexts from expeditions to the Caucasus mountains. Asov claimed to provide proof of the historical heartland of Ruskolan, which, according to him, contemporary historians ignored due to anti-scientific and political reasons.

The last two publications with Ruskolan as their secondary focus on 123ru.net (08/2019) and Nasha Planeta (08/2019) had an identical text, which enlisted Russia's historical names that

[6] See Table 1 for a full overview of the references in this cluster and the patterns of text reuse among them.

expanded from the Greek mythology of Hyperborea to Tartaria and others. In this list, Ruskolan's story was summarized using a snippet from the introduction of the main story variant. This was the cluster's shortest text, at a little under 2,000 words, while the rest of the publications ranged from 2,400 to 5,500 words long.

The temporal development of Ruskolan's story variants displays the prevalence of the main textual variant starting in 2015. Some publications of the two main variant branches introduced new content that was not reused in the cluster's later publications. For example, the two anonymized publications added claims that Judeo-Christians stole the Bible's crucifixion story from Ruskolan. Textually, the most identical publications were published in close dates to one another (see Figure 1), which implies coordinated publication. However, the core of the story was overall quite coherent, featuring shared conspiracist ideas about Russian origins that a cross-generational conspiracy seeks to hide from history books.

Closer look at key snippets

As shown in Table 1, the text repetition perspective on the Ruskolan cluster's development revealed several layers of copy-pasted text samples. After the two main bodies were published on Rutraditions 09/2015 and Cont.ws 08/2017, only non-essential additions were incorporated into Ruskolan's story. Our underlying assumption is that the reuser acknowledges a copied sample as a valuable addition to the conversation and the significance of this contribution in relevant discussions is strengthened by the decision to reuse it. Text reuse in online publications has moderate "fluidity" because text can be modified and deleted quickly. The development of conversational cascades on the websites of the Ruskolan cluster is generally faster than in books but slower than on most social media platforms. In this section, we identify and contextualize prominent snippets, reuse of which composed the conspiracy theory in a cluster of 19 publications. This provides a more detailed and contextualized perspective on the formation of the story variants presented above.

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Table 1: Text reuse patterns in the Ruskolan story cluster

The online publications are listed in the first column on the left, and the books that they quote (X), digital reprint of the original book (O) or paraphrase (P) are listed in the upper row in chronological order.

Online publications \ Cited books	Rutraditions.ru (2015): Lead-in	Lomonosov “ The Ancient Russian History (1766): Alans	Lomonosov “ The Ancient Russian History” (1766): Kurlanders	Lomonosov “ The Ancient Russian History” (1766): Ermanaric	Asov "The Great Secrets of the Rus (2014): archaeologists	Asov "Ruskolan: Ancient Russia" (2004): Al-Masudi	Asov "Ruskolan: Ancient Russia" (2004): archaeologists	Asov "Ruskolan: Ancient Russia" (2004): Stonehenge	"Book of Veles": the death of Ermanaric	"Book of Veles": crucifixions and defeat
avorhist.ru 2003–2005		O	O	O						
rus-sky.com 10/2007		O	O	O						
rossija.info 05/2011			P				X			
newsland.ru 07/2011			P				X			
litmir.me 12/2014					O			O		
rutraditions.ru 09/2015	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
continentalist.ru 02/2016					O	O	O	O		
cont.ws 02/2017	X	X	X				X	X		
cont.ws 08/2017		X	X	X	X	X			X	X
anonymized1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
topnewsrussia.ru 06/2018		X	X	X	X	X			X	X
123ru.net 06/2018		X	X	X	X	X			X	X
anonymized2	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
cont.ws 06/2019	X	X	X		X	X			X	X
continentalist.ru 06/2019	X	X	X			X			X	X
123ru.net 08/2019	X									
nashaplaneta.su 08/2019	X									
123ru.net 09/2019	X	X	X	X			X	X		
ratenews.ru 09/2019	X	X	X	X			X	X		

quotation	X
reprint of the original text	O
paraphrase	P

In initial observations, the Ruskolan cluster stood out from the larger clusters of our corpus through their repeated lead-in texts. While most publications within this cluster differed from one another, their lead-in introductions indicated an overarching common theme with several signs of conspiracism. Ultimately, the lead-ins created thematic coherence across all story variations. The following text was the most repeated lead-in of this cluster:

> Long before the foundation of Kievan Rus', the ancient Slavs had one of the largest state entities, which scholars believe existed from 1,600 to 2,500 thousand [sic] years and which was destroyed by the Goths in 368 CE. The chronicle of the ancient Slavic state was almost forgotten thanks to German professors who were writing Russian history (Rus *isToriia*) and aiming to rejuvenate the history of Rus' to show that the Slavic people are allegedly virgin pure, not blurred by the deeds of the Ross, Antes, Barbarians, Vandals and Scythians, who are well remembered by the whole world. The goal is to tear Rus' apart from its Scythian past. [Our] National historical school was created based on the work of German professors. All the schoolbooks teach us that until the Christianization of Rus', there were savage (*dikie*) tribes – "pagans". That is a big Lie [sic] as the history has been rewritten multiple times for the benefit of the existing regime—starting from the first Romanovs, i.e., history is interpreted for the benefit of a current ruling class (Rutradition.ru 09/2015, translated from Russian by author).

Besides being shared in the main textual branch (Figure 1), this sample solely connected 123ru.net 08/2019 and Nasha Planeta 08/2019 to the cluster that otherwise did not reuse anything else from the cluster (Table 1). Albeit not directly referring to "conspiracy" (*zagovor*), the reused lead-in(s) presented official history essentially as a long-running plan made up by outsiders, non-Russians and a few Russians from the ruling regime to disempower the Russian people with false testimony of history without Ruskolan. In addition to the conspiracy theory, this indicates conspiracism, as it involves an alternative historical reality that powerful forces have forged over several hundred years.

Conspiracism is also evident in the term "*IsToriia*" used in the cited lead-in, which refers to the Torah's books and the conspiracy of Jewish written history (Aitamurto 2011, 186). Although some of the cluster's websites included anti-Semitic content, only the two anonymized publications talked more about Jews as conspirators, while most referred to German scholars and their followers as the primary conspirators. More typically for historical conspiracy theories (Aitamurto 2011; Välimäki 2022), the story referred to, quoted, or paraphrased persons recognized as historical information authorities, such as Lomonosov, the tenth-century historian Al-Masudi, and the nineteenth-century archaeologist Dmitry Samokvasov (Table 1).

The lead-in that was (re-)used in Continentalist 08/2017, 123ru.net 06/2018, and Topnews Russia 06/2018 covered the same issues and claims as the cited lead-in, but it additionally explicitly specified that the false history rewritten by the German professors was the Normanist theory. Scholars recognize opposition to the Normanist theory as a notable aspect in historical discussions about the founders of Russia. The theory and its opposition date back to the early Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences, which was mostly established and run by German-background scholars invited by Peter the Great. Among them, a group led by Gottlieb-Siegfried Bayer and Gerhard Müller argued that Russia's founding dynasty, the Ruriks, descended from Scandinavian (Nor[r]man) instead of Slavic origins. This Normanist theory became widely debated from the Imperial to Soviet academies of sciences, but it is mostly accepted in the contemporary transnational academy (Khlevov 2018; Aali et al. 2021).

Lomonosov's conflict with his German-background peers about the Normanist theory is relatively well known and proponents of Russian nationalism have historically instrumentalized Lomonosov's name as the patriotic champion against foreigners seeking to downplay Russia's historical prestige (Usitalo 2013). The composers of the conspiracy theory about Ruskolan repeatedly referred to Lomonosov in this role. The snippets from Lomonosov's book "The Ancient Russian History" (1766) can be seen as handpicking "evidence" to support claims about history that promote a deviant doctrine of nationalist ideals of a self-governing, older and hence greater nation. Eleven publications included two quotations from the book's chapter about the tribal relations of Varyags, Rosses, Alans, Kurlanders and others interconnected by their Slavic kinship. The quotations about these relations were connected to support Sergey Lesnoy's (see "The Book of Veles") etymological claim that the name Ruskolan derives from "Rus'" and the "Alans". However, none of these snippets or anything else in Lomonosov's book mentioned "Ruskolan".

Another distinguishing source of recurring text samples in the Ruskolan cluster was digitized chapters of Asov's (Barashkov) books, originally e-published on Litmir.me (12/2014)[7] and Continentalist (02/2016) (Table 1). Asov is relatively known in the contemporary Russian alternative (or "folk") history scene. The Russian Military Historical Society's portal Istoria.RF (history.ru), for example, mentions Asov as an example of a pseudohistorian (*psevdoistorik*) in an introductory article on pseudohistory, characterizing his work as outlandish historical claims and pseudo-linguistic approaches (Suharnikov 2017).

Asov was not mentioned by name in other publications of the cluster and his texts were not the most reused in the cluster, but qualitatively, they provided notable science-imitating content from archaeology to linguistics for the story of Ruskolan. The literary references reused from these books include medieval Arab historian Al-Mas'udi's writing about an ancient Slavic astrological temple on the highest mountain of the world, which Asov (2014) claims was Mount Elbrus. Another reused snippet described the ruins of a temple site with zodiac model structures and concluded that the Ruskolani had an astrological calendar similar to the ancient sites of Stonehenge and Arkaim. The third snippet named Russian imperial and Soviet archaeologists who made kurgan stone discoveries that supported the theory about the secret past (Asov 2014). These snippets about archaeology and past scholars were the only content connecting the websites Rossia.info (5/2011) and Newsland (7/2011) with their deviant story variation to the Ruskolan cluster.

The formation of the story of Ruskolan also included completely fabricated sources, notably "The Book of Veles" (*Velesovaya kniga* or *Kniga V[e]lesa*), a cornerstone of the alternative history scene, both in Russia and in Ukraine. Asov published several editions, styling himself the book's "translator from ancient Slavic languages," from the late 1980s onwards (Tvorogov 2014). In the Ruskolan cluster, the references to "The Book of Veles" had no clarifications as to whether they referred to Asov's editions or some other versions.

The Book of Veles is claimed to be originally written on wooden planks that describe the pre-Christian history of the Slavic peoples from the seventh-century BCE to the ninth-century CE. The planks were taken to Western Europe during the Russian Civil War in 1919 and lost during the Nazi occupation. After the war, Sergey Paramonov (pseudonym Lesnoy), a self-proclaimed eyewitness of the original script, published his notes on it in Russian émigré papers (Danilevsky 2004). In 1960, Moscow's Slavic Committee concluded the book manuscript to be a forgery based on its inconsistent use of temporally mixed variants of Slavic language. However, some historians suspected that the original Book of Veles may have been written in the nineteenth-

[7] Litmir.me has since changed its domain to Litmir.club. See Asov 2014.

century (Tvorogov 2014). This background was completely ignored in the Ruskolan cluster and The Book of Veles, like the books of Asov, was used as an historical source equally valid as the books of Lomonosov.

The references to The Book of Veles provided the main story with drama, particularly relating to Ruskolan's wars against the Goths with its betrayals and crucifixions. In the cluster, six publications subsequently quoted Lomonosov, The Book of Veles, and ancient historian Jordanes's *Getica*, all writing about the Gothic king Emanarik (aka Germanareh) who killed his (Ruskolan-origin) princess bride. Later, her brothers avenged this by killing Emanarik. However, here, only the quotation from The Book of Veles referred to the opposition of the Goths as Ruskolani. Five of the cluster's publications added a quotation from another recognized forgery, the Volga Bulgar chronicle *Cäğfär Taríxı* (aka Djakfar Tarikhy; see Shamiloglu 2011). This Book of Veles quotation called Ruskolan's soldiers "our fathers," who eventually defeated the Goths militarily but suffered too heavily to recover. This connected them primordially with the assumed Russian readers.

Although this was not explained, the story of an existential war against Europeans entails an implicit analogy with Russia's great patriotic wars against Napoleon and Hitler. Consequently, this resemblance to fundamental aspects of the contemporary Russian national narrative may have increased the story's success in being copied and redistributed among an audience inclined to believe that such existential patriotic wars are a recurring feature of their history (See Golovashina 2014; Rostovtsev and Sosnitskii, 2018). Moreover, while a few websites referred to a (conventional) Zionist conspiracy in historical writing, the most widely recycled version portrayed the conspirators as Germanic.

Besides the most frequently repeated texts, some notable parts that were added to certain publications were not reiterated later. As we will discuss further in the next section, several of the cluster's websites characteristically embraced the Slavic heritage of Russians vis-à-vis other ethnicities and the Ruskolan story itself highlighted Russians' primordial struggles against malicious foreign forces. However, most of the websites did not reuse the racial additions to the story, such as additions to the two anonymized publications claiming that Judeo-Christians stole the crucifixion story from Ruskolan. The reasoning why some additions were repeated and others were not is beyond our research question and method, but we briefly return to this question in the synthesis.

Cluster's websites and networks

As we have shown elsewhere (Oiva and Ristilä 2022), websites most commonly formulate hyperlinks to other websites that share the same epistemological understanding of the world, thus leading to probable similarity of contents of websites located in the same hyperlink networks. In this section, we present the distributors of the conspiracy theory of Ruskolan by reviewing the authorship and profiles on the cluster's websites and their implicit positions in Runet hyperlink networks. Figure 2 visualizes the network of web pages in our wider corpus drawn together by common hyperlinks, and indicating the location of the websites belonging to the Ruskolan cluster.

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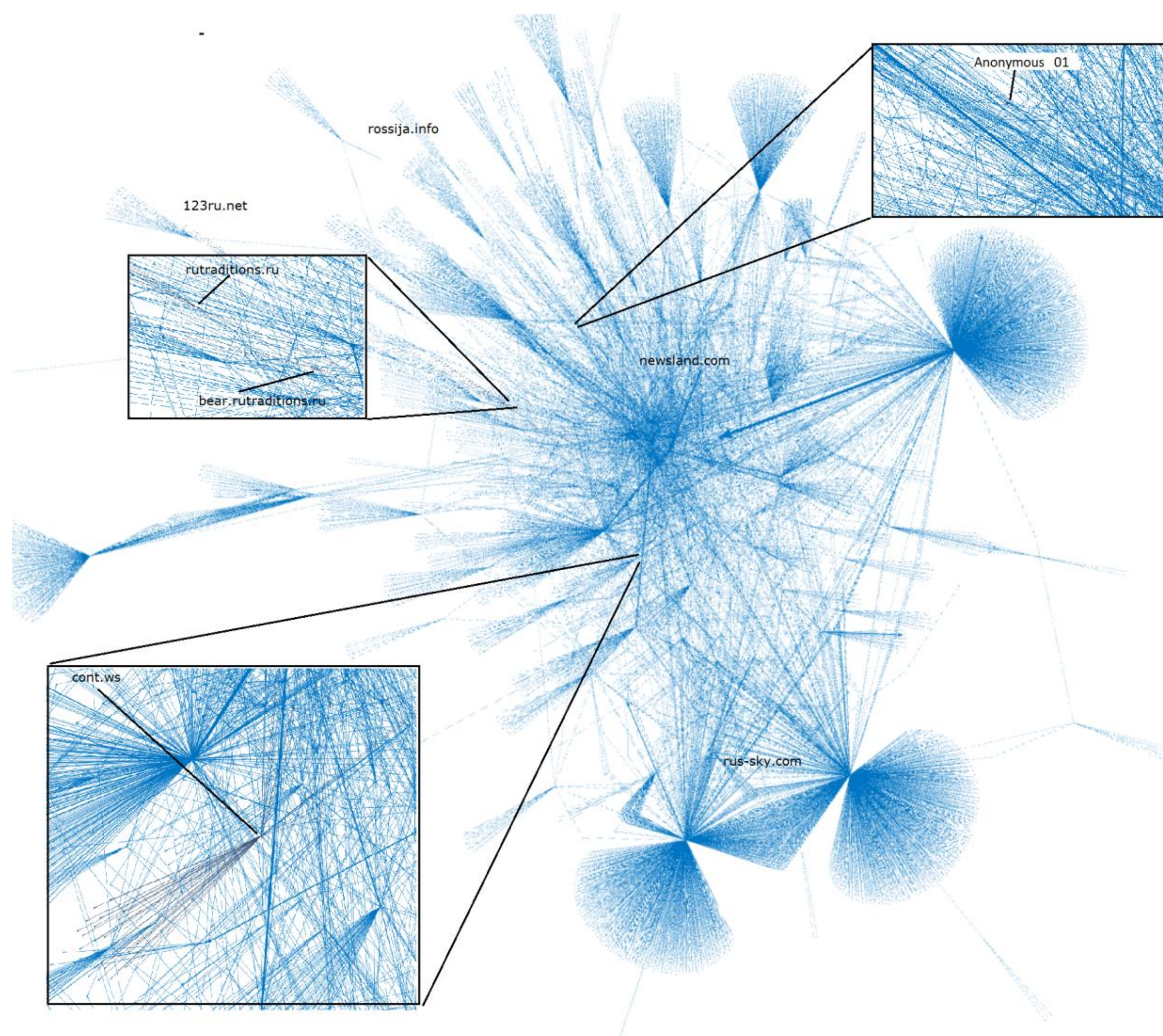
Figure 2: Directed network visualization of the domains participating in the Runet's discussions of Russia's origins

The domains of the Ruskolan cluster are labeled, and three zoomed-in examples are provided. The network visualization shows that these websites are not interlinked via hyperlinks. The visualization was made with Gephi 0.9.2 using the Yifan Hu layout (optimal distance: 100.0; relative strength: 0.2; initial step size: 20.0; step ratio: 0.95; adaptive cooling: on; convergence threshold: 1.0E-4; quadtree max level: 10; theta: 1.2). The larger the nodes, the greater the number of incoming hyperlinks.



Besides the four authored books in the Ruskolan cluster, the rest of the publications were compiled texts with ambiguous authorship: six were published under pseudonyms, three under real names and six anonymously. Overall, eight provided a source link to another website where the authorship continued to be unclear. Nontransparency of source information can make it more difficult for readers to interpret the text's contextual meanings. Falsely presenting something distributed as institutionally and politically neutral to readers is a usual astroturfing tactic, where fake accounts, such as bots or websites, forge the impression of the popularity of partisan accounts (Zerback et al. 2020).

We identified most websites in the Ruskolan cluster as amateur-produced patriotic news or educational sites without named administrators (e.g., Rutraditions, Ratenews and TopnewsRussia). They highlighted the ideals of being "patriotic," which in the 2010s could vaguely be defined as proudly embracing and defending national conservative-leaning ideas of proper Russia against its threatening liberal-globalist antagonists at home and abroad (see, e.g. Laruelle 2018).

The contents of the website that initiated the cluster's most prevalent Ruskolan story variant, Rutraditions.ru, promoted Russian traditions, nostalgia, religion and national pride. It had several articles about great ancient Slavic empires as well as poems from classical Russian authors. Interestingly, although the Ruskolan story became viral after its publication at Rutraditions.ru, the website itself did not have many hyperlink connections—neither incoming nor outgoing—to the other websites (Figure 2). This shows how hyperlink connections do not equal the direct reuse of textual content. Moreover, based on our data, we cannot say if the reused content was originally copied from Rutraditions.ru or from another web page that our data extraction could not retrieve, for example, due to deletion of the original source web page. This could explain the relatively low hyperlink connectedness of Rutraditions.ru.

Five of the Ruskolan cluster's publications were in the website group Kont, which used the domains Continentalist.ru and later Cont.ws. Kont is, by its own declaration, a social media site. Its registered users can create their own blogs, albeit without many technical possibilities for blog personalization. Juxtaposing itself to other social media sites, Kont (Krivich n.d.) announces that instead of superficial entertainment, it provides philosophical and political content and discussion for thinking people. While Kont's terms of use forbid extremist and discriminatory content, the site hosts plenty of not only anti-liberal and nationally partisan content but also anti-Semitic and pro-Stalinist content among its publications.

Kont users publish numerous posts related to history and contemporary geopolitics, with some of these publications gaining several hundreds of comments. Aptly, the only publications of the cluster with a disclaimer were from this group (Continentalist.ru, 6/2019; Cont.ws, 6/2019). These identical texts noted that the republisher (pseudonym) did not completely agree with this text but found it an interesting piece to read. In February 2019, Cont.ws was the fifteenth most cited source of the Runet (Brand Analytics 2019), but in the Runet hyperlink network discussing Russia's origins, the Kont group was relatively isolated (Figure 2).

Between 2019 and 2021, eight of the cluster's publications were deleted, but accessible on other websites. Among the deleted publications was the Ruskolan story version that was published at Rossia.info and Newsland.ru. However, between 2014 and 2020, the "patriotic news" web page Newsland published six articles mentioning Ruskolan, one of them identical to the texts at Continentalist.ru 6/2019 and Cont.ws 6/2019. With the help of the Wayback Machine (archive.org/web), we discovered that Rossia.info first changed its profile from global affairs to domestic tourism around 2020 and in 2023 the domain was in sale. Like most of the websites of the Ruskolan cluster, Newsland and Rossia.info were linked to numerous other websites but were not part of any larger hyperlink groups.

Compared to the rest of the cluster's domains, Figure 2 shows that Anonymised1 and litmir.me were in a group with the internet giants Facebook, VKontakte (vk.com) and Twitter. Besides the digitized book by Lomonosov that was quoted in the Ruskolan cluster, Litmir's online library was apparently referenced extensively across the internet. Anonymised1 was located at one of numerous Runet websites founded around the esoteric teachings of Nikolay V. Levashov (1961–2012). This website characteristically provided social commentary in the framework of global conspiracies on topical news, such as the COVID-19 vaccines. While Anonymised1 used content from all the websites of the Ruskolan cluster, the small size of its node reveals

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that few websites created hyperlinks to it. This is consistent with the fact that neither of the anonymized publications had its own added content reused in the cluster's later publications.

Synthesis

The present study addressed a research gap in scholarship on misinformation and conspiracy theories in non-English and non-Western contexts (Mahl et al. 2022) by examining Russian conspiracism, whose grassroots dimensions were underexplored despite their violent materialization in foreign affairs. Our combined method analysis focused on the acknowledged yet insufficiently studied role of text repetition in the formation and dissemination of misinformation (Fuchs 2020; Tangherlini et al. 2020). From a broader database, we identified a large cluster of publications centered on a conspiracy theory (Ruskolan) that exemplified conspiracism and examined its recurring snippets using directed content analysis. To provide context, we mapped the websites and their hyperlink networks where the conspiracy theory was developed and disseminated.

Our database included print news media publications from Integrum, but our research case was situated exclusively within the socio-cultural context of Runet, as the largest conspiracism-related cluster did not appear in print media. This suggests the relative importance of the internet in the dissemination of conspiracy theories in the 2010s Russian text-based media. The reasons for the disparity in popularity between the online sphere and print media may be manifold, beginning with potentially stricter standards of source criticism and reliability in professional journalism. Further research should explore the intermediality of conspiracy theories and examine how different media environments and formats shape their dissemination.

The composition of the story of Ruskolan can be seen as the result of countless hours of work by several people over a long period of time. While the story essentially developed in online media, the anti-Normanist conspiracy theory and its conspiracist baseline predated digital media. Through the examination of the reused texts, we discovered how these elements were based on debates in the eighteenth-century Russian academy, 1950s Russian émigré journals, and the post-Soviet alternative history scene.

In our analysis of the cluster, we found that texts were typically repeated not as complete units but as smaller snippets, and that varying compositions of these snippets formed the basis for the evolution of the story. Framings and lead introductions proved to be essential elements for conveying the main message. Importantly, they contributed to the remarkable coherence of the Ruskolan cluster, even among websites that otherwise rarely referenced each other's content and often introduced their own modifications to the disseminated story.

None of the cluster's reused text snippets occurred in every publication. Two publications were the connecting nodes, sharing snippets from every other publication of the cluster, but they were not successful in getting their own story additions redistributed. On the other hand, the practice of redistributing the story was not always done through direct text repetition. A couple of the cluster's publications (rossija.info 05/2011 and newsland.ru 07/2011) paraphrased key snippets of the story. This serves as a reminder that, while the significance of directly reused text is emphasized in the current research by design, conspiracy theories are also disseminated through newly created forms in which the core idea is still repeated. Text repetition plays a role in the formation of conspiracy theories and can assist in identifying like-minded content, particularly in a digital environment that accelerates diffusion. However, our study cannot determine its relative importance in relation to the repetition of ideas expressed through varied wording for the dissemination and evolution of conspiracy theories within a broader conspiracist information ecology.

The fact that all the websites taking part in forming the story of Ruskolan were scattered in different parts of the hyperlink network indicates that the story was not a creation of one secluded section of the Runet or fabricated astroturfing, but rather a more widely shared cultural phenomenon, particularly associated with conspiracism. The loose connections between the seemingly similar amateur-produced "patriotic" websites coincide with conclusions from previous research literature that Russian traditionalist and nationalist groups are generally fragmented (Aitamurto 2011; Laruelle 2019).

While our approach does not tackle the motives to develop and spread this conspiracy theory, the wider sociohistorical context and the profiles of the cluster's websites can provide some perspective on this aspect of Russia conspiracism. As expected from our keyword and phrase search regarding the origins and founders of Russia, we found a conspiracy theory connected to the centuries-old discussion about the Russian civilizational legacy, territoriality and ethnic group relationships. The story's message and the profiles of its distributing websites suggest that the story of Ruskolan was reproduced to restore and boost primordial Russian-Slavic national self-esteem and unity. However, besides the rather abstract ending in a few of these publications urging Russians to become prouder, united and autonomous, there were no clear mobilization calls.

The regional focus of the story of Ruskolan can be seen as relating to the discussion of territorial legacy, in which Russian ethno-nationalists have sought to associate their ancestry with the first and original inhabitants of the vast Eurasian lands (Shnirel'man 1998; Sheiko and Brown 2014). Moreover, Ruskolan's territory was said to be bordered by natural defense barriers, including seas, mountains, and rivers, which conveniently align with the envisioning of ideal state boundaries (cf. Suslov 2020). The Caucasus region holds additional sentimental value due to its long history of notorious interethnic and imperial conflicts, resettlements, ethnic cleansings, and diasporas. However, its landscape and ethnically diverse peoples have also inspired Russian golden-era authors such as Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy (Emirov 2018). The Crimean Peninsula was mentioned as part of Ruskolan's territory, but despite its vast symbolic potential for appropriation — as seen in the cultural framing of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Yefimenko 2024) — it did not notably influence the story's development on the Runet. This contrasts with the general tendency in the Runet, where the mainstream news agenda often reflects bottom-up content production (Rostovtsev and Sosnitskii 2018; Wijermars 2018).

The juxtaposition of acceptable and unacceptable history presentations has increasingly transcended Russian politics and society since the early 2000s (Koposov 2018; Wijermars 2018), which may have led to self-censoring rejections of some content. In the Russian alternative history scene, books and online posts with xenophobic contents and materials criticizing the Orthodox Church have been popular but occasionally banned and their authors sentenced to prison (Staehle 2019). Moreover, Russian internet policing has not only targeted content producers but also search engines and other content-curators (Kiriya 2021).

Discussion

A story like Ruskolan may appear marginal or even absurd when encountered online, yet its repeated textual elements reveal a remarkable trajectory of development—from émigré literature to dispersed websites over decades. By implying a cross-generational conspiracy to disempower the Russian nation, it reflects a conspiracist logic that posits a grand system of manipulated public knowledge rather than a single, isolated plot. This manifestation of conspiracism within the Russian media environment resonates with the wider "epistemic

crisis": a deep and alienating distrust toward expert knowledge and institutions (Benkler et al. 2018; Gray 2010; Välimäki 2022).

Although not entirely unique to Russia, the "Ruskolan" conspiracy theory is better understood as a manifestation of Russian conspiracism rather than as an unequivocal example of conspiracism *in* Russia. Based on the websites analyzed, Ruskolan appears to have primarily national appeal. However, such conspiracy stories can easily transcend borders—as the *Book of Veles* did even before the internet—provided that this national appeal resonates among Russophones across different countries.

If we consider the existential crisis triggered by the loss of historical narratives following the fall of the Soviet Union, then stories like Ruskolan may have provided a sense of historical meaningfulness and existential security for some Russians, as Sheiko and Brown (2014, 213) suggest. However, conspiracism tends to result in harmful and even violent outcomes as demonstrated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine as part of its broader history politics and more globally by movements such as climate denialism. As Bernd Stahl (2006) notes, misinformation ultimately disempowers, and this frequently applies to conspiracy theories. A related paradox, highlighted by Peter Knight (2000), is that people often adopt conspiracy theories to gain agency but end up losing it through them.

Before the digital media, conspiracy theories such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* required organized efforts to print and distribute texts. In contrast, contemporary individuals who might never have encountered narratives about "conspiring German professors" or the *Book of Veles* are able to participate in their redistribution and even modification. While later technological development has amplified audiovisual content online, text-based narratives remain resilient—and will likely persist. Important questions about whether emerging information technologies—particularly AI—will mitigate, reproduce, or even accelerate the circulation of misinformation are rightly posed in both public and academic discussions.

Ruskolan's image of conspirators aligns with the Kremlin's rhetoric, in that the enemy's essence is not only foreign—following nationalist logic—but also concealed among the domestic elite—following populist logic (Tipaldou and Casula 2019). However, the absence of targeted attacks on specific contemporary Russian institutions or individuals allegedly involved in covering up "real Russian history" makes it difficult to assess the opposition-mindedness of those engaged in the theory's dissemination. This may indicate a degree of self-censorship within this conspiracist discourse. On the other hand, as Maxim Alyukov's (2022) study on Russian TV audiences suggests, people may not hold coherent or consistent worldviews.

Upon revisiting the websites of the Ruskolan cluster in 2023, we found that *Cont.ws* (Kont) hosted several bloggers commenting on developments in the war against Ukraine who propagated conspiracy theories about American biolaboratories and alleged plans to stage false-flag operations at nuclear plants to blame Russia. These theories also appeared in Russia's federal news at the time, and, as usual, their origins are difficult to trace. Platforms such as Kont, Pikabu, and others exhibit a strong conspiracist culture and are likely to disseminate and continue evolving conspiracy theories originating from both pro- and anti-establishment perspectives.

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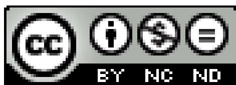

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