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The Rise of the Paranoid Citizen

By Ivan Krastev

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SOFIA, Bulgaria — As I follow the news and listen to politicians these days, I am struck by the extent to which America and Europe are awash in conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories have replaced ideologies at the heart of politics. They mobilize people to take to the streets; they connect political leaders to their followers. They decide the outcome of the elections.

But as the saying goes, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you.”

Russian hacking of the servers of the Democratic National Committee was not a conspiracy theory but a fact. Neither was it a conspiracy theory that the United States was snooping on the chancellor of Germany and the president of Brazil. Most of the corruption scandals in the Western world right now are not conspiracy theories, either. They are actual conspiracies.

Yet is the existence of bona fide conspiracies a good enough reason to view everything happening in the world in that light? Is the epidemic of mistrust that is tearing apart democratic societies making us more or less free? And does the rise of a new kind of citizen — let’s call him or her the “paranoid citizen” — imperil our democracies?

In Poland it was the shared belief that the death of President Lech Kaczynski along with 95 other members of the Polish elite in a plane crash near the Russian town of Smolensk in 2010 was an assassination rather than an accident (a claim that was officially rejected) that correlated with voting for the now governing right-wing Law and Justice party in the last parliamentary elections — probably more than education, income level, church attendance or any other factor.

In the United States, very few Democrats cast doubt on the argument that President Trump is in the pocket of the Kremlin. Across the aisle, few of the Republican faithful are willing to publicly disavow Mr. Trump’s unsubstantiated claim that he and his campaign were wiretapped on the order of President Barack Obama; fewer still will contest the lie that protesters against the new president are paid by leftist billionaires.

New communication technologies (social media in particular) and the hermetic media bubbles they create are probably responsible for the spread of conspiracy theories. But the vexing question is not why people are ready to believe almost anything these days, but how political

identities built around shared conspiracy theories — rather than shared ideologies — are changing the internal logic of democracy and the ability of citizens to hold their leaders accountable.

Conspiracy theories disempower people. In a worldview shaped by conspiracy theories, political leaders can get away with making bad decisions by simply blaming invisible, putatively powerful enemies conspiring against them. What makes conspiracy-theory politics more dangerous than ideological politics (and lest we forget, the 20th century showcased just how deadly extreme ideologies can be) is that conspiracy theories can be dazzling in explaining what has happened and who should be blamed. But they lack any kind of vision for the future or any claim about what kind of world we want to live in.

Ideologies produce zealots but they also produce dissidents. Many Eastern European dissidents were true believers in Communism who turned against the ruling ideology when it failed to fulfill its utopian promises of equality and justice. Conspiracy theories do not produce dissidents, they produce zombies either unwilling or too uncomfortable to challenge their political leaders.

An identity based in conspiracy theories subverts the need for self-criticism. It is easier for a citizen to keep his political leaders accountable in the frame of ideology rather than in the fog of conspiratorial thinking. If it were President Vladimir V. Putin who got Mr. Trump elected, then Democrats don't need to grapple with why Hillary Clinton lost or what may have been less than convincing about her candidacy. And if anti-Trump protesters are paid tools, Republicans are freed of the responsibility to critique the president and can more easily fall in line behind him without addressing the very shortcomings that many Americans are protesting against.

There is no shortage of yammering today about "post-truth" and "fake news." Yet the fundamental change in democratic politics is that when political identities are based on shared conspiracy theories, people are committed not to finding truth but to revealing secrets. The idea of truth appeals to our common sense. The seductiveness of conspiracy theories is that they appeal to our imaginations. A man can reach the truth on his own, but the secret can be only revealed to him. And for a secret to be compelling, it should be shocking and unexpected.

In mystery novels and crime movies, the obvious suspect is never the guilty party — but in real life it often is. Trusting your own eyes or your personal experience today has become a sign of naïveté. But ignoring personal experience and neglecting the obvious is not only making you ineffective at solving problems but also threatens your freedom of judgment.

It is far easier to identify the challenge that conspiratorial thinking presents to our democracies than to know how to respond to it. Is it better to fight conspiracy theories or to ignore them? Is it better to shout loudly or to laugh uproariously when confronted with them? And is it not time to establish Conspiracy Theorists Anonymous as a way to deal with our addiction?

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