

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The great replacement of narrative: Conspiratorial thinking and collective anxiety in wartime Russia

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Abstract

This article examines the rise of conspiratorial thinking in wartime Russia as a response to a deeper collective anxiety – not merely the replacement of people, but the erasure of narrative agency. While the Russian version of the ‘Great Replacement’ echoes familiar Western themes such as elite betrayal, cultural erosion, and demographic decline, its central concern shifts towards symbolic displacement. Drawing on Mark Sedgwick’s interpretation of the Great Replacement as a stable narrative structure and J.V. Wertsch’s concept of narrative as a cultural tool, this article argues that conspiracy operates here as a means of reclaiming authorship in a national story whose core meanings have grown unstable. The analysis draws on social media discourse, pro-war commentary, volunteer statements, and nationalist media, showing how anxieties are shaped through emotionally resonant storylines of betrayal and erasure. Yet the reassertion of control paradoxically intensifies fragmentation, turning the Great Replacement into a narrative of narrative disappearance – where the gravest loss is not demographic, but symbolic.

Keywords: collective anxiety; conspiracy; the great replacement; Russia; Russo-Ukrainian War

Introduction

Conspiratorial thinking has long been the subject of scholarly analysis. Psychologists (Goertzel 1994; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018), political scientists (Hofstadter 1964; Uscinski and Parent 2014), anthropologists (Barkun 2003; Pelkmans and Machold 2011), and historians (Byford 2011) have examined its cognitive patterns, cultural roots, and political functions. Yet comparatively less attention has been paid to the affective charge that makes conspiratorial narratives resonate – particularly in relation to national and historical context. (For cultural and context-specific approaches to conspiracy beyond cognitive or universalist models, see Susan Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), which situates conspiracy narratives within lived cultural worlds; Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), which treats conspiracism as embedded in social and historical contexts spanning multiple national settings; and Marlène Laruelle, ‘Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?’ (*The Russian*

Review 71, no. 4, 2012), which examines conspiratorial narratives and alternate histories in post-Soviet Russia.)

While the architecture of conspiracy thinking often appears transnational – revolving around deep states, shadowy elites, or the spectre of civilizational collapse – its affective logic is profoundly shaped by national context. These narratives draw their emotional force from collective memory and culturally specific anxieties anchored in distinct historical imaginaries, functioning as “collective symbolic resources for dealing with crises and discontinuities in the social and historical fabric” (Wagoner et al. 2026, 3).

Beyond explanations grounded in cognitive bias or ideological persuasion, this article approaches conspiracy as an expression of collective anxiety – not as fleeting fear, but as a political force embedded in symbolic and narrative structures (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Eklundh et al. 2017). As Batiashvili et al. (2025) emphasize, anxiety should not be reduced to an individual psychological state. Rather, it emerges as a collective condition rooted in memory practices and carried through narrative forms. This perspective, which aligns with Navaro (2017) call to ‘diversify affect’, draws attention to the ways anxiety is culturally articulated – through stories of identity, betrayal, and loss.

From this standpoint, anxiety is not merely future-oriented fear but a persistent state of symbolic instability that arises when authorship over national meaning becomes contested. Conspiracy, in turn, functions not only as a belief system, but as a structure that organizes memory and emotion under a perceived threat of displacement. It gives shape to unease, offering a sense of coherence amid disrupted identity scripts and unresolved historical claims.

A related but distinct argument is made by Sedgwick (2024) who argues that the Great Replacement should not be treated primarily as a conspiracy theory but as a powerful narrative template. Its structure resonates because it draws on ‘a serious hypothesis based on apparently sound data that is widely believed’ (562) and because it maps onto broader civilizational anxieties. The theory’s popularity in European contexts reflects not only far-right ideologies but a mainstream cultural mood shaped by post-9/11 Islamophobia, a Huntingtonian understanding of global conflict, and a widespread fascination with irreversible decline. The appeal of the Great Replacement, then, lies not in its marginality, but in its capacity to normalize extreme conclusions through the language of demographic realism and cultural urgency.

Yet, as Sedgwick shows, the template acquires conspiratorial force through its local adaptations. In France, figures such as Gisèle Littman layered the narrative with claims of an antisemitic European Union–led conspiracy. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s rhetoric transformed it into an openly antisemitic account centred on George Soros and liberal institutions. In each case, the structural anxiety – replacement – remains constant, while the imagined agents, victims, and modes of sabotage shift to reflect national political cultures and internal divisions.

The Russian version, as analysed in this article, constitutes an extreme variation of this template. Here, conspiracy becomes not a layer but its essence. The perceived threat is not merely demographic, but symbolic and ontological: the replacement of Russianness itself. What is imagined as being erased is not only the ethnic Russian population, but the right to define the national narrative – who counts as a historical subject, who belongs to the nation, and who has the authority to write its future. The agents of this supposed replacement are both external (the United States) and internal (liberal elites, national minorities, former Soviet republics), seen as coordinated participants in a demonic Western plan. In this configuration, the conspiracy narrative fuses anxiety over demographic decline with deeper anxieties of narrative displacement and symbolic loss.

This framing situates the Russian Great Replacement as a fully conspiralogical formation – rooted in a recognizable narrative template, but reshaped by national memory,

authoritarian epistemology, and wartime affect. This interaction between a recognizable narrative template and its radicalized Russian adaptation highlights how collective anxiety is not merely expressed but actively structured through narrative, making the Russian case a valuable site for examining the memory–anxiety nexus.

Conspiracy, narrative, and anxiety

This article analyses conspiratorial thinking in wartime Russia as a site where anxiety and memory converge through narrative and media circulation. Drawing on a curated corpus of nationalist and pro-war Telegram channels active between February 2022 and July 2025, it argues that conspiracy does not merely reflect anxiety – it absorbs, structures, and redistributes it.

The analysed materials include statements and commentaries from high-visibility figures and Telegram channels such as Readovka (~2.0 million subscribers), Mikhail Zvinchuk (*Rybar*, ~1.3 million), Pavel Gubarev (*Ryadovoi Gubarev*, ~33,000), Alexey Zhivov (*Zhivov*, ~112,300), Apti Alaudinov (Apti Alaudinov ‘*Akhmat*’, ~242,825), Alexander Dugin (*AGDchan*, ~85,600), Roman Antonovsky (*Syny Monarkhii* [Sons of Monarchy], ~88,500), Alexander Kartavyh (~110,640), *Tsargradtv* (~377,385), *Russkaya Obschina ZOV* [Russian Community] (~660,000), *Russkii Mech* [Russian Sword] (~190,000), Dmitry Steshin (*Russkii Tarantas*, ~141,300), and Alex Parker (*Alex Parker Returns*, ~275,650), along with several smaller channels that circulate the same affective logic.

While these sources do not represent the full spectrum of Russian public discourse, they are emotionally resonant and politically influential within pro-war digital environments. Posts were selected for how they narrate loss – not only of geopolitical territory, but of symbolic authority, the right to define who belongs, who speaks, and who remembers.

This paper contributes to scholarship on memory and anxiety by shifting attention from trauma rooted in a shared past to anxiety over narrative authorship. Much of memory studies assumes a contested but already-formed past. This study instead engages with a more precarious symbolic terrain: the fear that one’s group may be denied authorship in the national narrative altogether. In such moments, conspiracy emerges not only as a belief system, but as a narrative technology for managing memory in formation – channelling diffuse anxiety into emotionally charged, shareable storylines of betrayal, erosion, and replacement.

Theoretically, the article draws on J.V. Wertsch’s concept of narratives as cultural tools – devices used to construct collective identity through time (Wertsch 2002). Wertsch emphasizes the stabilizing role of narrative in national memory: its capacity to locate actors within a coherent story of past, present, and future. But this paper focuses on what happens when that stabilization fails. In the Russian case, multiple visions of Russianness coexist in unresolved tension. The analysed materials show a contested memory in formation, where roles in the master narrative – such as who embodies the legacy of victory over Nazism or who defends the Motherland – are not clearly assigned. This uncertainty generates anxiety, which conspiracy narratives attempt to resolve by offering narrative clarity.

In doing so, the article also builds on Sedgwick’s (2024) analysis of the Great Replacement as a widely circulating narrative form, often mischaracterized as a marginal conspiracy theory. Sedgwick shows that this narrative provides a stable structure for channelling fears of cultural erosion and civilizational decline – particularly in Western contexts shaped by Islamophobia, migration anxieties, and elite distrust. This study presents a case of the narrative’s Russian adaptation, which on the surface reproduces similar thematic elements. Yet in the Russian context, the Great Replacement functions within a distinct set of national memory scripts and unresolved identity narratives. As a result, the central anxiety shifts: from demographic replacement to symbolic displacement. The fear is not only of being

outnumbered, but of losing the right to define Russianness itself – of becoming invisible within one's own national story.

The analysis also engages Melley's (2016) concept of 'agency panic', understood as the fear that one's capacity for autonomy and intentional action is being undermined by hidden or impersonal forces. While Melley conceptualizes panic primarily as an acute response to perceived loss of control, the Russian case points to a more chronic form of agency panic, sustained by authoritarian conditions and long-term narrative instability. In political systems where initiative is structurally constrained and meaningful participation is limited, individuals and groups experience a persistent erosion of agency – not only in practice, but in representation.

This condition is better understood as anxiety – a structural affect that emerges from narrative ambiguity and fragile authorship over social meaning – rather than as episodic fear or panic in response to discrete threats.

Wartime intensifies this dynamic. Mass mobilization removes men from their local communities for prolonged periods, while non-Russian ethnic groups – particularly from the Caucasus and national republics – are increasingly conscripted and publicly valorized. For some ethnic Russians, this unsettles established hierarchies of symbolic power and belonging. The resulting anxiety is not limited to concerns about demographic change. Rather, it takes the form of a perceived loss of symbolic centrality: a fear of being displaced within the nation's moral and historical core.

This process unfolds within what media theorists and memory scholars describe as mediated reality. Rather than serving as neutral platforms, digital media operate as narrative infrastructures – structures that facilitate the co-authorship, circulation, and emotional charge of specific storylines. In the Russian pro-war context, Telegram does not merely transmit ideological content; it enables users to participate in shaping emotionally resonant narratives of betrayal, loss, and symbolic disintegration. These narratives are not simply pushed by propagandists – they respond to genuine affective demand.

While early critiques characterized platforms like YouTube as 'radicalization machines' (Lewis 2018; Tufekci 2018), more recent research complicates this assumption. Munger and Phillips (2020) argue that political radicalization online is not solely a product of media supply, but of audience demand. Extremist content circulates not because algorithms impose it on passive users, but because it aligns with widespread anxieties already present in society. Likewise, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) emphasize that the populist and authoritarian turn across Europe and beyond should not be dismissed as a reactionary outburst, but understood as the expression of deeper symbolic dislocations – anxieties about identity, legitimacy, and belonging.

In this light, Telegram becomes a medium of emotional co-authorship, where narratives of grievance are not only consumed but co-constructed. Through reposts, affectively charged memes, and shared tropes of symbolic replacement, users collectively transform diffuse unease into structured plots of betrayal and loss. What emerges is not simply a set of conspiracy beliefs, but what this article terms imagined grievance communities – networks united not by ideology or region, but by a shared fear of erasure.

Narrative replacement and the anxiety of disinheritance

Conspiratorial thinking in Russia draws much of its force from an anticipatory logic of threat – one oriented not towards a loss that has already occurred, but towards a future imagined as imminent and irreversible unless decisive action is taken. The Great Replacement narrative operates in this forward-looking mode, organizing anxiety around the expectation of symbolic and demographic displacement. In the Russian case, this anxiety does not stem from numerical marginalization. According to the 2020–2021 Russian census ([https://](https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2026.10027)

rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020), ethnic Russians comprise 80.85% of the current day population of the country. But these numbers are based on self-identification and citizenship, not on ancestry or ethnic origin. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ‘nationality’ line once printed in Soviet passports was removed during the liberal reforms of the 1990s (the liberal reforms of the 1990s in Russia, often associated with Boris Yeltsin’s presidency, included rapid privatization, constitutional changes, and a shift towards market capitalism). What was framed as a move towards civic equality has since been reinterpreted by Russian nationalists as evidence of betrayal. The erasure of ethnic designation is seen as part of an elite conspiracy to dissolve the boundaries of Russian identity.

Post-Soviet identity itself has been widely described as unsettled and contested rather than fixed along clear ethnic lines. Scholars have shown that Russia’s nation-building project since 1991 has been marked by competing conceptions of what constitutes ‘Russianness’ – ethnic, civic, imperial, and multinational – without any single model achieving definitive dominance (Blakkisrud 2023). In this context, identity is experienced as layered and dynamic: some individuals draw on Soviet-era affiliations, others emphasize regional or ethnic identities, and many navigate hybrid positionalities shaped by language, culture, and historical memory. The difficulty of defining a coherent national subject reflects broader debates about the content of Russian identity and its symbolic foundations and invites both political contestation and emotional anxiety (Likhacheva et al. 2015; Blakkisrud 2023). What fuels contemporary conspiratorial anxiety is not only concerns about numerical or demographic change, but the impossibility of fixing who ‘really’ belongs to the nation amid overlapping and often conflicting identity narratives.

A central axis of post-Soviet debates over identity in Russia has been the unresolved distinction between *russkii* (ethnic Russian) and *rossiyanin* (citizen of the Russian Federation). Scholars of Russian nationalism have shown that this distinction reflects a deeper tension between ethnic and civic conceptions of the nation that has never been fully resolved (Laruelle 2009; Blakkisrud 2023). While *rossiyanin* was promoted by political elites in the 1990s as an inclusive civic category capable of holding together a multiethnic federation, *russkii* has remained a powerful marker of cultural, historical, and symbolic centrality.

Within nationalist and pro-war discourse, this distinction is frequently mobilized in oppositional terms. Commentators associated with ethnic nationalist currents – ranging from Orthodox conservatives to imperial revanchists – tend to portray *rossiyanin* as an empty legal designation, detached from ancestry, culture, and historical continuity, while *russkii* is framed as a category rooted in blood, language, and civilizational mission (Laruelle 2015). What was initially framed as a tool of civic integration is thus reinterpreted as a mechanism of dilution. The possibility that citizens of non-Russian ethnic backgrounds – Chechens, Tatars, Dagestanis, Armenians, or Central Asian migrants who have acquired citizenship – may legally claim Russianness becomes, in this discourse, evidence of symbolic dispossession rather than inclusion.

This anxiety is closely tied to institutional changes following the Soviet collapse. The removal of the ‘nationality’ line from internal passports in the early 1990s, intended to dismantle Soviet ethnic hierarchies and promote equality, has been retrospectively reframed by nationalist actors as an act of elite betrayal (Brubaker 1996; Blakkisrud 2023). The disappearance of formal ethnic markers is read not as neutral administration, but as a deliberate attempt to erase the boundaries of the titular nation. In conspiratorial interpretations, this administrative ambiguity becomes proof that Russianness itself is being hollowed out under the guise of civic universalism.

It is within this symbolic terrain that the Russian variation of the Great Replacement narrative takes shape. The perceived threat is not simply demographic decline, but the loss of narrative authority: the fear that the meaning of ‘Russian’ will be redefined by others and that historical legitimacy will be redistributed away from ethnic Russians as the imagined

core of the nation. The lack of consensus over who constitutes the ‘real Russians’, and what privileges follow from that status, transforms identity from a shared reference point into a contested and unstable field.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a critical point in this dynamic. On the one hand, it forced the question of identity into an ambiguous space. Ukraine, after all, is a country with deep linguistic, cultural, and historical entanglements with Russia. Many Ukrainians share Slavic roots, language, and Soviet memory. For years, Putin repeated the claim that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are ‘one people’. Yet the invasion demanded an enemy. It transformed former kin into traitors and exposed the instability of the identity categories that had once bound them together. Debates followed: Are Ukrainians still part of the Russian world? Can they be reintegrated? If so, how do we distinguish those who can from those who cannot?

Independent investigations suggest that the burdens of military recruitment and war-time loss have fallen disproportionately on Russia’s poorest and most structurally dependent regions – particularly in national republics such as Buryatia and Dagestan, as well as among migrant communities from former Soviet states who recently obtained Russian passports. While comprehensive data on recruitment itself remain limited, casualty tracking by *Mediazona* and the *BBC Russian Service* – based on obituaries, court records, and social media reports – reveals significant overrepresentation of these regions in confirmed fatalities (Russian losses in the war with Ukraine. *Mediazona* count, updated: https://en.zona.media/article/2025/12/05/casualties_eng-trl). These men are fighting alongside Russian nationalists, dying in uniform, appearing on billboards, in textbooks, and in patriotic events across schools and municipalities. Some viewed military service as a way to prove their belonging – to demonstrate that they were ‘better Russians’ than ethnic Russians who refused to fight.

The sharpest resentment is often directed at groups perceived to enjoy disproportionate state support or symbolic power. Chechens, in particular, have been portrayed in nationalist and far-right Telegram discourse as a ‘privileged’ group, allegedly granted special status by the Kremlin following the Chechen wars in exchange for loyalty under Ramzan Kadyrov. Similarly, Tatars are sometimes imagined as politically overrepresented due to their population size and elite connections, including persistent conspiracy theories that link high-profile figures such as Alina Kabaeva to Tatar networks within Putin’s inner circle. (Alina Kabaeva is a former Olympic rhythmic gymnast, State Duma deputy (2007–2014), and Vladimir Putin’s long-term partner, though their relationship has never been officially confirmed.)

In this context, it was a Chechen general who most visibly challenged the ethnic boundaries of Russian identity. Lieutenant General Apti Alaudinov, commander of the *Akhmat* special forces, has repeatedly declared that he is both Russian and Chechen and has questioned the right of ethnic Russians to monopolize the definition of Russianness. In a December 2024 interview with military blogger Semyon Pegov, Alaudinov responded to critics by stating: ‘Let them prove they are Russians. Russianness is not in a passport—it is in the soul and in loyalty. Many so-called Russians ran abroad and threw dirt at their homeland. And we, who stayed and stood up for Russia—are we not Russian?’ (Alaudinov 2024).

While Alaudinov’s assertion of dual identity may appear inclusive from a patriotic or civic nationalist perspective, it provoked sharp backlash within Russian ultranationalist circles. For many nationalist actors, especially those aligned with ethnic essentialism, declarations of loyalty or military service are insufficient to claim membership in the symbolic core of the nation. Alaudinov’s statement was interpreted not merely as a gesture of national unity, but as an attempt to overwrite existing ethno-symbolic hierarchies.

One of the most forceful responses came from Dmitry Bastrakov, editor-in-chief of the far-right monarchist press *Chernaya Sotnya* [Black Hundred] and commander of the

volunteer formation Tyl-22 ('Rear-22'). On his Telegram channel, he condemned Alaudinov's comments as a deliberate provocation:

The most destructive leitmotif in Apti Alaudinov's video sermons is his obsession with dismantling Russian identity. For reasons unknown, Chechen nationalists believe it acceptable to regularly challenge Russian identity itself—declaring that Russians must 'deserve' their Russianness, that Tajiks can be more Russian than ethnic Russians, that being Russian is not about blood but about spirit. Imagine a Russian doing the same to Chechens: telling them their blood does not matter, redefining their identity, appointing strangers as Chechens. Would Chechens tolerate that? Of course not. Yet Russians are expected to endure this kind of treatment constantly and in silence. (Bastrakov 2025, July 24)

Such incidents have contributed to a growing perception within segments of the Russian nationalist and Orthodox conservative milieu that more is at stake than mere political marginalization or demographic change. In June 2025, Alaudinov reignited this unease. After Igumen Gavriil, the abbot of Varlaam Monastery, warned in a sermon about rising Muslim migration – describing it as 'an army of strong young men' who could be mobilized 'at any moment' – Alaudinov responded with an unusually personal attack. He called Gavriil 'a moron in a cassock' and 'the head of the army of the Antichrist' (Alaudinov 2025). Gavriil was soon removed from his position. No official explanation followed. Alaudinov remained untouched and unapologetic.

Among right-wing Orthodox commentators and nationalist Telegram channels, the incident was not perceived as an isolated dispute. Rather, it was interpreted as part of a broader pattern: a sense that those articulating ethnically or religiously exclusive visions of Russianness are being sidelined, while actors associated with non-Russian ethnic or religious backgrounds are increasingly empowered to speak on behalf of the nation. This asymmetry – where the defence of symbolic boundaries is punished while their redefinition is institutionally tolerated or even rewarded – has fuelled further anxieties over narrative authority and belonging.

In June 2025, similar anxieties resurfaced during a federal investigation targeting the far-right anti-immigrant organization *Russkaya Obshchina* (Russian Community). While the details of the case remained opaque, several nationalist Telegram commentators interpreted the investigation as politically motivated and speculated – without direct evidence – that actors from regional power centres such as Chechnya and Tatarstan may have influenced or initiated the operation. Pavel Gubarev, once a central figure in the 2014 Donbas uprising and now a serving officer in Ukraine, echoed these suspicions in his Telegram channel:

Putin's system now functions through ethnic diasporas. Local self-government has been dismantled. Regional elites are openly anti-Russian. And at the federal level, the state has committed itself to the construction of a 'multinational Russian people.' That's why the flow of migration continues. (Gubarev 2025, June 21)

What links these episodes is not only the fear of ethnic marginalization, but a deeper concern about narrative displacement – the sense that foundational stories are being retold, institutions reoriented, and the language of belonging rewritten. These shifts are rarely addressed directly in policy but are felt through public symbols: who is elevated, who is silenced, and who is permitted to speak on behalf of the nation.

Allegations that President Vladimir Putin has secretly converted to Islam – circulated not only on fringe nationalist Telegram channels but also across broader digital platforms such

as VKontakte, TikTok, and meme-sharing communities – have become a recurring motif in Russia's online political culture. These claims are rarely treated as literal truth. Rather, they function as symbolic narratives that condense broader anxieties about cultural displacement and the shifting locus of political power. Their resonance lies not in factual plausibility but in what they suggest: that the Kremlin is no longer aligned with the values, traditions, or identity of ethnic Russians. Notably, such narratives have also surfaced in liberal and oppositional media. The YouTube channel *Populyarnaya Politika* [Popular Politics], for instance, discussed the rumour in 2023 (*Populyarnaya Politika* 2023) – not to endorse it, but to highlight the growing estrangement between the state and its citizens. What unites these diverse discursive spaces is not ideological coherence, but a shared sense of disorientation about who holds power – and on whose behalf it is exercised.

This anxiety becomes particularly visible in debates over historical interpretation. Some commentators associated with nationalist discourse have expressed concern about revisions to school curricula, particularly in Russia's national republics and neighbouring post-Soviet states. These changes are interpreted not merely as pedagogical updates but as attempts to reframe the imperial and Soviet past predominantly through the lens of domination and inequality. In these narratives, ethnic Russians are no longer presented as participants in a shared or complex history, but increasingly as default aggressors and colonizers.

Russian combatant Pavel Kukhmirov, known by his nom de guerre 'Shakespeare', reposted a television segment from Tajikistan about a Russian community 'left behind' by 'the kind country of Russia' – now supported only by the local Orthodox Church. What Russian authorities truly care about, he noted, is not the protection of Russians living there, but the construction of schools for local children – where, 'with Russian money, textbooks are published and children are taught that Russians are occupiers and colonizers'. He added that the Russian ambassador does everything possible to bring as many of these 'dear guests' as possible into Russian universities, while the 'kind Russian state' generously provides social benefits to their families – doing nothing, he wrote, for ethnic Russians, who are no longer treated as a priority (Kukhmirov 2025, July 17).

The message behind the ongoing reports about textbook reforms and history curriculum revisions in former Soviet republics is clear: while Russia has continued to fund the construction of schools, accept migrant labour, and support regional development, it has failed to control either the scale of migration or the mental frameworks migrants bring with them. The result, nationalists argue, is not cultural integration but narrative displacement or inversion. What returns to Russia through these migrant flows is not gratitude or loyalty, but a worldview in which Russia itself is the villain.

On 25 June 2025, war correspondent Mikhail Zvinchuk – the figure behind the influential Telegram channel *Rybar* – responded to reports of vandalism against Christian memorials allegedly committed by migrants. For him, these acts were not isolated incidents, but symptoms of a deeper cultural conflict. 'The problem of attacks on historical memory by newcomers', he wrote, 'is already a symptom not just of disrespect, but of deep contempt and the intention to eradicate and suppress a culture that is alien to them'. These 'newcomers', as Zvinchuk frames them, are not merely undereducated labourers but carriers of intellectual narratives shaped by national elites – elites who, in his view, were educated in the West and now act as their agents (Zvinchuk 2025, June 25).

According to this logic, Western-funded institutions – American, British, and Turkish – are actively shaping the way post-Soviet societies perceive Russia. By funding educational programmes, rewriting textbooks, and influencing digital media, they are accused of demonizing Russian history, instilling resentment, and preparing the ground for a soft narrative takeover. 'It will be no secret to anyone', Zvinchuk writes, 'that Western foundations participate in the writing of textbooks and editing of information broadcast across

Central Asia and Transcaucasia. These narratives shape how migrants see Russia—not with reverence, but with suspicion or contempt’.

In this vision, Russian elites are already compromised – either corrupt, passive, or complicit. President Putin appears not as a saviour but as either a naïve figurehead unaware of what is happening or a silent participant in a larger design. For some nationalist thinkers, this leaves only one possible path: ethnic Russians themselves must awaken to the nature of the threat, recognize the stealth of this replacement, and begin to organize – socially, culturally, and politically – to defend their narrative sovereignty.

This imagined struggle, however, creates a strategic dilemma. Many of those sounding the alarm over internal cultural ‘replacement’ also see themselves already fighting an external civilizational battle – namely, against the West in Ukraine. To open a parallel front at home, against what they perceive as a network of domestic collaborators, disloyal elites, and ideologically alien migrants, presents both practical and symbolic challenges. There is a sense that this internal front is already active, even if there is no clear consensus or capacity to confront it. It is this perception – of being ideologically surrounded, betrayed from above, and diluted from below – that fuels conspiratorial thinking and the urgency to reclaim not just territory, but the power to narrate the nation’s future.

The disappearance from within

The Russian variation of the Great Replacement narrative shares with its European counterparts a preoccupation with cultural survival. However, the Russian version deepens the framework: it is not only about cultural dilution through migration or intermarriage, but about a total purge of Russianness from within. This turns the anxiety inward – towards those who, though ethnically Russian, are perceived as lacking loyalty, identity, or the ‘correct’ cultural consciousness.

Here, the figure of the *noviop* becomes central. Coined from the phrase ‘new historical community’ (*novaya istoricheskaya obshchnost’*) (the abbreviation combines the initial letters of each component: *nov* from *novaya*, *i* from *istoricheskaya*, and *ob* from *obshchnost’*). However, to facilitate smoother pronunciation in Russian, the final *b* from *ob* was replaced with *p*, resulting in *noviop* rather than *noviob*), the term was used in late Soviet discourse to describe a future-oriented Soviet identity – one in which class loyalty and ideological commitment would replace ethnic or racial divisions. In theory, it marked the emergence of a unified society where ‘national’ origin no longer mattered and what did matter was one’s willingness to build socialism.

The term re-emerged in a radically different context in 2012, when Russian writer and blogger Dmitry Galkovsky revived it in a *LiveJournal* post. In his reinterpretation, *noviop* acquired a distinctly negative connotation. It no longer referred to a utopian identity, but to an artificial social type produced by Soviet policies of ‘positive discrimination’ against ethnic Russians. The supporting evidence, frequently cited in nationalist discourse, includes the fact that Russians – despite being the largest ethnic group in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – had neither their own national republic nor their own Communist Party. This absence reflected the Soviet logic that Russians were to function not as one ethnic group among others, but as the integrative ‘glue’ binding the multiethnic union together. After the Soviet collapse, they again received no privileged status, even though the new state bore their name.

According to Galkovsky, the *noviop* type was engineered by the Bolsheviks as a counterweight to the Russians themselves. It was composed of those from mixed Ukrainian-Jewish-Caucasian-Central Asian backgrounds, along with religious minorities like Old Believers and sectarians. In this interpretation, the Soviet project was not a utopian dream that failed but a calculated anti-Russian design from the beginning – a betrayal embedded in the very architecture of Soviet multinationalism.

When first introduced, Galkovsky's concept gained limited traction, briefly discussed among monarchists and fringe far-right groups before fading into obscurity. But after 2022, the term reappeared – quietly at first, then with growing intensity – circulating through pro-war nationalist Telegram channels, repurposed and reposted across networks of Z-patriots, pro-war supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Now, it is no longer just an ethnic theory. It had acquired the political edge necessary to mark the boundaries of Russianness not by bloodline alone, but by ideological loyalty.

In this evolving version of the conspiracy, the *noviop* became a way to distinguish between the 'real' and the 'false' Russian – not just across ethnic groups, but within a single ethnic category, between those who fight and those who doubt, between those who serve the state and those who betray it from within.

As of now, the term *noviop* has come to be used by Z-community as a catch-all label for anyone perceived as outside the imagined ethnic and ideological core. It applies to members of diasporas, those who obtained Russian citizenship not by birthright, and those who support leftist or liberal ideas – or who oppose Russian expansionism and the war in Ukraine. In this worldview, such people are seen as playing into an anti-Russian conspiracy, either knowingly or by nature – often, as it is implied, because of their 'wrong genes'. Dmitry Galkovsky once put it bluntly: 'Scratch the surface of a Georgian in Russia, and out tumble a Buryat and a Turkmen—who, in turn, bring with them a Tofalar (a small Indigenous Siberian group of Turkic origin, residing primarily in the Irkutsk region of Russia), and, more often than not, a Jew' (Galkovsky 2012, January 25).

In this logic, anyone not ethnically Russian is automatically suspect, assumed to be either disloyal or incapable of understanding what Russia 'really is'. But relying solely on ethnic origins creates its own contradictions. A large part of Russian nationalists are self-identified monarchists, and it is well known that the Romanov dynasty – as well as the broader tsarist court and aristocracy – was overwhelmingly of mixed European descent. French, German, Dutch, and Swedish names filled the ranks of those who ruled imperial Russia. Many barely spoke Russian.

This creates a problem: if ethnic purity cannot fully explain disloyalty, then something else must. There has to be another explanation for why some individuals – even those who are ethnically Russian – have become part of what is now imagined as the *noviop* conspiracy. Something must have distorted them. If not their blood, then their upbringing, their ideology, or their exposure to foreign influence. The target thus shifts: not only to those from outside, but to an enemy within. As Nutsa Batiashvili argues in her analysis of Georgian national identity, 'when the enemy is no longer simply the outsider but resides within, the anxiety becomes existential' (Batiashvili 2018, 152). The same logic applies to the Russian case: the more nationalism fails to produce unity, the more it fuels a paranoid search for internal corruption. The conspiracy must keep expanding – until it risks devouring the nation from within.

Across Russian digital platforms – VK, Yandex Zen, Pikabu, Telegram, Facebook, as well as on numerous author-driven websites and news outlets – discussions of the term *noviop* are widespread. Although no singular definition prevails, the proliferation of commentary has produced a set of recurring themes. One common assertion among contributors is that *noviop* does not refer to ethnicity or bloodline but to a particular mindset – a mental orientation perceived as alien to 'true' Russian identity. This *noviopic* mindset is often depicted as an artificially implanted condition: for some, its roots lie in the intellectual experiments of the Soviet state, while others trace it to Western cultural influence. In either version, the mindset is imagined as a kind of psychological virus – one that does not merely influence behaviour but alters an individual's inner essence. Its effects, according to these narratives, vary by degree: some are mildly affected, and others seen as entirely 'consumed'.

The nationalist-leaning media outlet *Readovka*, founded in 2011 and boasting a Telegram following of over two million subscribers, has repeatedly published commentary framing *noviops* as a primary threat to Russian sovereignty and image – both domestically and abroad. In May 2023, it published Svyat Pavlov's piece titled *Noviopomodern Rules Everything on Both Sides of the Frontline* (Pavlov 2023), in which he linked the origins of *noviopic* identity to the legacy of the Soviet man. According to Pavlov, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialistic Republic not only inherited nuclear weapons but also a 'biological weapon' – the decomposing body of the *Homo Sovieticus*. From this corpse, he argues, oozed the mental residue of the *noviops*. Ethnic background, Pavlov insists, is not determinative: even ethnic Russians can become *noviops* if they fully reject Russian identity and Russian Orthodoxy.

He also introduces the term *turbo-noviop* to describe the post-2022 intensification of this mindset, a satirical echo of *turbo-patriot*, often used for hyper-loyalist pro-war figures. The *turbo-noviop*, in Pavlov's telling, is particularly dangerous because they mimic patriotic behaviour while hollowing it from within. They 'rename Russian cities with Soviet names, paint them red, and sing covers of songs by terrorist Timur Mutsuraev' (Timur Mutsuraev is a Chechen singer-songwriter who sang in Russian and, rarely, in Chechen. Most of his songs are about the conflict in Chechnya), he claims, all to alienate ordinary Russians from their own country's cause. The effect, he warns, is the creation of a grotesque patriotism that repels rather than unites. In his conclusion, Pavlov contends that for Russia to prevail in its war, it must first defeat the *noviops*, who represent the 'cadaveric poison' of a discredited past turned mental subversion.

A few months later, in October 2023, *Readovka* published a response essay by Yaroslav Belousov titled *Self-Devourers, or Why Liberals Hate Russia So Much* (Belousov 2023). Belousov expands the genealogy of the *noviop*, arguing that such figures long predate the Soviet Union. In his view, the true origins of the *noviopic* disposition lie in the Russian Empire, with the Westernized elites that emerged under Peter the Great. The intelligentsia's children, sent to study abroad, became estranged from the Russian people and subsequently passed on their alienation through generations of elite culture. Belousov argues that this heritage of disdain culminated in a pervasive cultural self-hatred, embedded in institutions and media: 'The masses of Russians were washed over by tons of filth constantly spewing from television and agreed that they were indeed "slaves".' For Belousov, those who perpetuate this worldview – regardless of ethnicity – can no longer be considered Russian. The cultural narratives they authored must be purged entirely. True Russians, he concludes, must be proud of their nation and its exceptional history: 'We have a heroic history with the most fantastic stories that have come true.'

A paradigmatic example that is broadly used intensively in debates over how to identify a *noviop* and what drives a person to become one is Kseniya Sobchak, the journalist, influencer, and daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, former mayor of St. Petersburg and early mentor of Vladimir Putin. Since Sobchak is clearly ethnic Russian, discussions about her identity went far beyond questions of ethnic background or personal ambition.

Mariam Blynovskikh, a clinical psychologist and author of the Telegram channel *Neyropsikhologiya i Prilozheniya* [Neuropsychology and Applications], compared Sobchak's biography to that of Andrei Makarevich, a Russian rock musician and outspoken liberal, and concluded that *noviops* share three key traits: (1) they position themselves in opposition to the Russian population, (2) they descend from privileged classes that founded the USSR, and (3) they remain fundamentally dissatisfied with their current condition (Blynovskikh 2023, May 10).

According to Blynovskikh, *noviops* habitually portray Russia as a land of slaves, casting themselves in the role of natural-born masters. Their ancestors – whether from the Soviet nomenklatura, cultural elite, or artistic intelligentsia – allegedly took part in a long-standing conspiracy to destroy the Russian imperial elite, assuming that they, being of 'mixed blood'

anyway, could seamlessly replace it. They expected to inherit privilege without responsibility, to issue commands without consequence. But, as Blynovskikh concluded with a note of scorn: ‘They were deceived. The first promise they were given—the right to rule—was fulfilled. The second—the freedom to do whatever they want—was not.’

And who deceived them? By the end of the post, Blynovskikh made her answer explicit: ‘The British.’ Behind Bolshevism, behind the post-Soviet state, behind the liberal opposition – it was always the British, she claimed, manipulating naïve Russian elites. And now, as punishment for their gullibility, *noviops* must live like the very slaves they once sought to rule – either in Russia or in exile in the West.

The beginning of the war was, logically, expected to resolve the problem of the so-called *noviops*. It offered what appeared to be a clear litmus test: those who expressed anti-war views revealed themselves as disloyal and, by emigrating, could only theoretically threaten Russia’s bright national future from afar. But as it soon became apparent, this initial test of loyalty was not enough. Additional markers of the *noviopic* mindset – now treated as synonymous with anti-Russian sentiment – were needed for further ideological purification.

As argued in Svyat Pavlov’s piece for *Readovka* and echoed across numerous social media posts, some *noviops* are believed to have remained in Russia – openly demonstrating patriotism and even expressing support for the war effort. Yet their continued presence is perceived by some commentators as deeply unsettling, precisely because their external conformity masks an internal ideological threat.

A relevant example is Russian blogger and media artist Artemy Lebedev. Despite his known far-right stance and vocal support for the war, when he criticized the nationalist organization *Russian Community*, he was swiftly labelled a *noviop*. Roman Antonovsky, host of the popular Telegram channel *Syny Monarkhii* (‘Sons of Monarchy’), accused Lebedev of being no different from the liberals who fled Russia and support Ukraine. ‘The only difference between Lebedev and the liberal *zaukrintsy* (Russians who support Ukraine) is his cunning and deeper conformism’, Antonovsky wrote. ‘He despises Russians and their Orthodoxy as much as the rest of the *noviops*’ (Antonovsky 2025, May 10).

Noviops are viewed as the bearers of the most dangerous narrative: one rooted in the deeply ingrained Soviet ideal of unity and equality among nations. It is a narrative that fuels one of the most persistent and seductive Soviet nostalgias – the memory of a multinational homeland where all peoples lived together in peace. This image remains widely popular both in Russia and across former Soviet republics (White 2009; Esanu 2022). Given that the USSR’s collapse was accompanied by a weakened central state and the eruption of local conflicts, many continue to believe that a revival of the Soviet model, or at least its mindset, could bring back stability.

Yet for Russian nationalists, the Soviet project was never about peace – it was an intentional anti-Russian design, implemented according to a Western blueprint. From this perspective, every declaration of multinational harmony and every official programme of cultural openness becomes suspect. Such policies are seen not as signs of reconciliation, but as the realization of a long-term Western strategy. And in this imagined strategy, the *noviops* are the key tool. They appear native, they speak like patriots, they may even be ethnically Russian – but they are not truly Russian. ‘*Noviops* are parasites implanted by the West into the body of the Russian people to destroy it’, Antonovsky declared in another post (Antonovsky 2025, June 8).

This is not just ethnic suspicion – it reflects a deeper fear that the very story of what it means to be Russian is being overwritten from within. In this sense, the *noviop* conspiracy becomes a central mechanism of what I call the Great Narrative Replacement Theory: a conspiratorial anxiety not about physical erasure alone, but about the displacement of historical and cultural identity by an alien, insidious narrative that mimics Russianness while hollowing it out.

Conclusion

The picture emerging from the discourse analysed in this article is stark and internally conflicted. According to the narrative shared by various pro-war commentators and ideologues, ethnic Russians are engaged in a heroic resistance – against both the cunning West and Ukraine, the latter portrayed as already overtaken by a foreign-imposed system of ‘elite selection’. Ukraine, once imagined as part of a greater Slavic unity, is recast as a conduit for ‘Ukrainian Nazism’ and cultivated hatred of all things Russian. Yet what appears even more disturbing to these voices is the notion that a parallel process of replacement is unfolding within Russia itself. This process allegedly involves not only migrants from Central Asia, national minorities, and diasporic elites, but also *noviops* – those who are ethnically Russian but ideologically estranged.

This anxiety is not confined to concerns about demography or institutional politics. At its core lies what Timothy Melley has described as agency panic: a fear of losing the capacity to act meaningfully, to author one’s own narrative, and to recognize oneself as a historical subject. Wartime intensifies this condition. Those who see themselves as true patriots – whether fighting at the front or supporting the war through volunteerism – often experience a profound sense of symbolic abandonment. While sacrifice is demanded of them, the domestic sphere appears increasingly shaped by elites, minorities, and forces perceived as indifferent or hostile to historical continuity. The result is not empowerment through mobilization, but a deepening sense of narrative dispossession.

Here, fear of physical disappearance is overtaken by a more fundamental anxiety about narrative erasure. As this article has shown, this anxiety is sustained not simply by policies or demographic indicators, but by narrative form itself. Drawing on Sedgwick’s (2024) understanding of the Great Replacement as a plot structure rather than a coherent ideology, the Russian version emerges as a flexible narrative template capable of absorbing multiple, even contradictory, grievances. It repurposes historical memory, reassigns blame, and projects betrayal both outward and inward – against enemies abroad and against imagined usurpers within.

At the same time, the Russian case sharpens our understanding of collective anxiety more broadly. In contrast to dominant approaches that conceptualize anxiety primarily as worry about an uncertain future or reaction to external threat, this analysis demonstrates anxiety as an inward-oriented condition rooted in contested identity scripts and unstable memory frameworks. Anxiety here does not arise because the future is unknown, but because the past no longer securely anchors who belongs, who speaks, and who carries the nation forward. It is not simply a feeling, but a *mode of discourse* – a narrative condition that senses vulnerability at the very core of collective self-definition.

The Russian variant of the Great Replacement thus illustrates how anxiety transpires not only through expressed fear or grievance, but through narrative structures that organize memory in moments of symbolic instability. Rather than presupposing a shared past under threat, these narratives reveal a struggle over authorship itself: over who has the right to claim continuity, to embody historical legitimacy, and to define the moral centre of the nation. In this sense, conspiracy functions as a narrative technology for managing memory in formation, transforming diffuse unease into emotionally charged storylines of betrayal, erosion, and replacement.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the Russian context, where unresolved and competing scripts of Russianness coexist under authoritarian conditions. The absence of a clearly narrated national identity intensifies anxiety, shifting attention away from external enemies towards internal purification. It is not only foreigners or minorities who are imagined as the agents of replacement, but Russians themselves. Ethnic Russians, in this view, cannot unify around basic questions of survival, ethnicity, and identity. These

divisions – political, cultural, and historical – undermine any coherent national narrative. And without such a narrative, there is little left to defend.

This is the central anxiety in the Russian Great Replacement discourse: that narrative erasure may come first and enable physical disappearance. Journalist and pro-war volunteer Alexey Zhivov captured this logic in his response to the Russian Duma's outrage over Ukraine's decision to exclude Russians from the list of Indigenous peoples: 'The Russian Duma hits out at the Verkhovna Rada. But in Russia, the Russian people are not even a subject of legal relations!' (Zhivov 2025, July 10). The paradox deepens when, in state-led efforts to 'harmonize' ethnic relations – for example, between Azerbaijanis and Russians – one group is represented by official national-cultural autonomy, while the other, Russians, is represented by nothing at all. 'You cannot harmonize relations', Zhivov wrote, 'between a legal subject and a hollow'.

That hollowness, then, is not only legal but emotional – a perceived vacuum where narrative coherence and symbolic centrality should be. The war has not alleviated this anxiety; it has amplified it. Despite being launched in the name of defending Russians in Ukraine, the war has failed to make ethnic Russians the moral or narrative core of the campaign. Instead, those most invested in ideas of national identity find themselves in narrative exile, convinced they are defending a country that is being redefined in their absence.

Ultimately, the 'Great Replacement' narrative in Russia functions not only as a theory of demographic decline or elite betrayal, but as a cultural tool – a narrative structure that mobilizes and recirculates collective anxiety. At the heart of this anxiety lies not simply the fear of population loss, but the erasure of meaning: the fear that the story of Russianness itself is being overwritten, hollowed out, or forgotten. In that void, emotion gathers. And whoever succeeds in telling the next story will not only shape the future – but define who has the right to belong within it.

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