



## Russians aren't alone in being deluded by lies and propaganda

There is a similar effect in the United States.

By Scot Lehigh

Updated April 12, 2022, 4:50 p.m.

We Americans look at the Russian population and shake our heads in dismay. How can they support Vladimir Putin's terrible, unprovoked war on Ukraine? Yet surveys have shown that a majority apparently do; if so, they obviously think it is somehow justified. They also seem to believe that the atrocities committed by Russian troops in Bucha are fake.

Dismayed by their state of delusion, we wonder how to get through to them. After all, Putin's authoritarian regime has not only cracked down on dissent, it has long flooded the Russian airwaves with propaganda, rendering it hard for average citizens to get an accurate measure of what's actually occurring. That makes us self-satisfied about our country's free flow of information.

And yet, segments of our own citizenry are also deeply susceptible to absurd assertions and obvious lies.

Look at the percentage of Republicans who still believe the 2020 presidential election was somehow stolen from Donald Trump. As Trump's own former attorney general has noted, the Department of Justice found no evidence of widespread fraud. Dozens of lawsuits asserting illegality or fraud went nowhere and proved nothing. Several Trump attorneys have been disciplined for making false statements or advancing frivolous and unfounded legal claims.

Republican officials in Georgia and Arizona have offered lengthy rebuttals of allegations of electoral misdoings. Even the silly Cyber Ninjas' audit of pivotal Maricopa County, Arizona, confirmed Biden's victory there.

Yet that evidence-free belief has endured among many Republicans, with some 70 percent saying Joe Biden's victory was definitely or probably not legitimate.

That's hardly the only area in which Republicans have been widely and willingly deluded. In 2016, 60 percent of Trump approvers thought Barack Obama wasn't really born in this country, while two-thirds of that group thought he was a Muslim rather than a Christian. Mind you, that's not to say that wild-eyed beliefs are exclusively a conservative occurrence; as Dartmouth political scientist Brendan Nyhan has noted, Democrats disproportionately embraced the preposterous notion that the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack was an inside job.

Unlike the Russians deceived by false narratives, Americans have ample access to factual information. Even if they distrust the mainstream media, reliable organizations regularly fact-check the most prominent claims in our political debate. One excellent truth squad is PolitiFact, at Poynter; another is FactCheck.org, at the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

But as fact-checking has revealed the false or dubious nature of considerable aspects of the contemporary right-wing narrative, conservatives have started attacking the fact-checkers as biased.

Or they've simply ignored them, the way they do other diligent refutations of favored storylines. After repeated allegations that the Biden administration had implemented an "open borders" immigration policy, the libertarian-conservative Cato Institute published a careful examination of Biden's policy, one that explained in considerable detail why the open-borders charge simply wasn't true.

Its impact? Judging from, say, the pronouncement of conservative politicians or prime-time Fox News hosts, akin to that of a sparrow's feather landing in a raging sea.

Then, of course, there's QAnon, the bizarre collection of conspiracy theories built around the notion that a cabal of satan-worshipping, cannibalistic blood-drinking child-sex-trafficking pedophiles controls the government. Some 15 to 20 percent of the US population believes aspects of that. A quarter of Republicans give it credence, compared to 14 percent of independents and 9 percent of Democrats, according to a series of 2021 surveys.

That reflects a segment of the population completely untethered from reality.

It also speaks to the odd patina of authority the Internet can lend even large-scale lunacy. The web allows people to easily find communities that reinforce things they are already inclined to believe. That, in turn, makes it easy for propagandists and dispersers of disinformation to spread their falsehoods.

But why, overall, does this currently appear to be such a lopsidedly right-wing phenomenon?

The best explanation I've read comes from a 2021 study by two Ohio State University communications professors. Their conclusion: "American conservatives in the early 21st century are uniquely likely to hold political misperceptions. This is due, in large part, to characteristics of the messages circulating in the political information environment. Widely shared accurate political news disproportionately advances liberal interests, while viral falsehoods most often promote conservative interests."

To put it more simply, conservatives are more often fooled by disinformation because there are more falsehoods, fabrications, and fictions emanating from the right and reinforcing conservative storylines.

Sadly, too many Republican politicians seem willing to pander to, in order to benefit from, those false claims and warped perceptions.

Perhaps a cynic can justify that if he or she believes that the American project is immutable and therefore immune to corrosive civic maladies. But the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol suggests an alternative possibility: When a pandemic of falsity overwhelms the truth, democracy itself can come under siege.