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"All the sisters of the world": pan-Slavic conspiracies and the weaponization of womanhood

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ABSTRACT
The article looks at the development of the idea of pan-Slavism, historically dating back to the 19th century, and its reincarnation across Czech and Slovak online conspiracy spaces, particularly Telegram channels, focusing on how the notion of "sisterhood" is discussed and developed in them. The analysis highlights two dimensions of Pan-Slavic sisterhood: (a) an imagined community built on symbolic references to a shared history and (b) a unit of political organization that emphasizes the role of women in restructuring society according to a "tradition" based in this imagined history. It argues that sisterhood is, similar to the tradwife movement in the US, rooted in a deeper ideological critique of neoliberal society and, ultimately, employed as a tool of female empowerment. Methodologically, the analysis relies on ethnographic methods (participant and non-participant observation and ethnographic content analysis).

KEYWORDS
Conspiracy theories; pan-Slavism; gender; sisterhood; Telegram; ethnography

Introduction

In February 2023, the Czech pop-folk band Vesna won the popular vote to represent the Czech Republic in the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 with a song called "My Sister's Crown." The music video opens with an introduction recited in English: "Once upon a time, in a Slavic kingdom, there was love and sisterhood. Until one day, shadows crept in and everything was forgotten." The song then continues in English, Czech, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian, and the accompanying music video pictures the band members (five women, four Czech, and one of Russian origin) in costumes referencing traditional Slavic folklore costumes. The song raised controversies and caused sharp emotions in the Czech public debate. Often discussed were its numerous references to "sisterhood" – it is mentioned for the first time in the introduction quoted above, but the Czech lyrics then continued: "My sister is wild in her heart/She will not let you braid her hair/My sister will not sit in the corner/She will not listen to you" ("Moje sestra v srdci je divoká/Copy zaplést, nikdy si nenechá/Moje sestra do kouta nepůjde/Ani tebe poslouchat nebude;" English translation by the author). The refrain, sung in English, also references the same imaginary sister: "My sister's crown/Don't take it down." The song peaks with a bridge that conveys its main message (sung also in English): "All the sisters of the world/Come together with a prayer/Choose love over power."

The message was received as ambiguous because the notion of sisterhood was a powerful symbol in Soviet-era Kremlin propaganda, used by the Russians to create the impression that Ukrainians and Russians are historically members of one nation (Gautheret, 2022). In this way, the imagined sisterhood was used to marginalize and eradicate Ukrainian language, literature, and local culture (Gautheret, 2022).

While it is probable that the association of sisterhood with either Soviet-era or current Russian propaganda related to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not intentional on the part of the song's creators (the members of the band repeatedly stated that they are in support of Ukraine), these connections were made by parts of the audience. The reception, as observed on social media, was critical mostly on two fronts: among journalists (specifically among those who often investigate Russian propaganda and its influence in the Czech media space) and among the Ukrainian community in the Czech Republic – they understood the song's message as a call for tighter bonds between Slavic nations, including Russia.

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The notion of sisterhood gained popularity in the Czech and Slovak online conspiracy milieu (Harambam & Aupers, 2017) almost immediately after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. It is most often mentioned within the framework of a conspiracy narrative about the long-term oppression of Slavic people by the Anglo-Saxons, which I will call here the "pan-Slavic conspiracy theory." Within this narrative, various (mainly female) influencers and prominent personalities of the conspiracy milieu started to use the notion of sisterhood as an explanation of why Slavic nations should support the Russian side of the conflict. This (politicized) version of sisterhood also builds on earlier narratives proliferated by female influencers in the overlapping spheres of conspiracy theories and spirituality – that Ward and Voas (2011) conceptualized as *conspirituality* - during the COVID-19 pandemic. The notion of sisterhood was used in this period by the influencers as a tool to emphasize female struggles against oppressive establishment structures, represented in this case by medical authorities and pharmaceutical companies producing COVID-19 vaccines (Heřmanová, 2022a). "My Sister's Crown" uses direct references to the notion of sisterhood as well as references to pan-Slavic nationalism without its authors (and, it is safe to assume, parts of the audience as well) being aware of this historical context. In this way, it represents – as this opening anecdote is meant to illustrate – an interesting example of how propaganda and conspiracy thinking can penetrate mainstream popular culture and manifest in the collective cultural consciousness.

This article departs from these earlier analyses of the meaning of sisterhood in Czech-speaking online conspiracy spaces and follows the visual and discursive representations of sisters and sisterhood as they are emerging in these spaces, focusing particularly on how the idea of sisterhood is appropriated and propagated within the framework of pan-Slavism. Theoretically, the article builds on existing literature about the conceptualization of women and womanhood in the production of conspiracy theories (Bracewell, 2021; Murphey, 2023 among others) and gender as a category in the analysis of conspiracy thinking, narratives, and epistemologies (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Zahay, 2022). Based on long-term ethnography among female participants in the Czech online conspiracy milieu, it highlights two dimensions of pan-Slavic sisterhood: (a) its representation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of Slavic women who share a history of oppression and (b) the transformation of sisterhood into a political organization that will help liberate women and build a future in which the supposedly pure ideals of gender ("real men and real women") from the Slavic past will again materialize in Eastern Europe. Finally, it argues that the political unit of sisterhood is interpreted and employed as a tool of female empowerment, critical toward the modern feminism produced by neoliberal society.

The emergence of pan-Slavic conspiracies in the central and Eastern European conspiracy milieu

Historically, the idea of pan-Slavism dates to the 19th century. Suslov, Čejka, and Đorđević conceptualize it as one of the variants of various "pan-nationalisms" or "micro-nationalisms" that emerged in the era of national awakenings in Europe and date its first incarnations to the years 1830–1840 (Đorđević et al., 2023, p. 8 nn). The first concepts referencing pan-Slavic ideas were developed even earlier, dating to the 17th century, mostly by southern European thinkers and intellectuals from the Balkan region (Banac, 1988). In the Central European region, pan-Slavic ideas were adopted by the intellectual leaders of the national revival period. The emergence of a pan-Slavic movement in the area culminated in the organization of the "Slavic Congress" (Slovanský sjezd) in Prague in June 1848, organized by Slovak writer Jan Kollár. The aim of the congress was to unite all Slavs living within the Austro-Hungarian empire against a simultaneously emerging pan-Germanism (Kudělka et al., 1995).

Since then, the idea of pan-Slavism as an inherent equality between "fraternal" Slavic nations has been resurfacing in the Russian and Central and Eastern European (CEE) political spaces on a regular basis (Đorđević et al., 2023). In the 20th century, it became an important tool in the myth-making and nation-building propaganda of the Soviet Union (Suslov, 2012). In the Russian context, Nikolay Danilevsky's treatise *Russia and Europe*, published in 1869, is considered the most comprehensible expression of pan-Slavic ideology. As Bos (2021)

notes, Russian intellectual elites considered Slavic culture or the "Slavic spirit" to be an anti-thesis to Western capitalism and individualism, and hence, it should emphasize unity and collectivism – all Slavs are brothers, sisters, members of a big family rather than competing individuals (Bos, 2021, p. 87).

Pan-Slavism can be characterized as a political ideology that supposes cultural, linguistic, and in some cases, genetic similarity between Slavic nations and calls for the solidarity and political unity of Slavs (Đorđević et al., 2023; Suslov et al., 2023). Đorđević et al. (2023) also note that pan-Slavism has undoubtedly gained new popularity since 2000, but that it is, even in academic literature on the topic, sometimes difficult to distinguish between pan-Slavism as self-identification and pan-Slavism as a pragmatic approach frequently linked to political support for the current imperialistic tendencies of the Russian president Vladimir Putin (Đorđević et al., 2023, p. 5).

More recently, the idea of pan-Slavism started to resurface within the Czech- and Slovak-speaking conspiracy milieu, most notably after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. I first encountered the term on Telegram in the spring of 2022, when one of my research respondents directed me to the Telegram channel of a Slovak spiritual influencer Liana Laga, who shared a picture of a "Slavic woman" with an accompanying explanation of why pan-Slavism is important on a spiritual level. Within the network of conspiracy influencers and groups who operate principally on YouTube, Telegram, and independent websites, the idea of pan-Slavism merged with other popular conspiracy narratives, including overarching conspiracy theories such as QAnon. Little research has so far been carried out on these developments as they are still quite new, but some journalists have paid attention to the issue (e.g., Žabka, 2023). One interesting instance of this merging, documented by Žabka, was the narratives surrounding the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The monarch's death was interpreted on various Czech Telegram channels as a sign that Anglo-Saxon domination of the world was ending and a first step in the empowerment of the Slavs. This was also supported by the fact that the queen died on September 8th, which could be linked to the number 17, representing the letter Q in the alphabet. The interpretations of the death of Queen Elizabeth II are an illustrative example of what can be defined broadly as "pan-Slavic conspiracy theory" – a narrative that interprets the world as run by hidden elites (always) of Anglo-Saxon origin and, therefore, representatives of the West who have, for centuries, oppressed other nations and ethnicities, most notably the Slavs. The pan-Slavic conspiracy theory thus merges the historical idea of pan-Slavism with other conspiracy theories inspired by current events, such as the pandemic (orchestrated by Western political elites and pharmaceutical companies) or the war in Ukraine (interpreted as a logical result of ongoing Western oppression of Russia). The proponents of this conspiracy theory are able quite seamlessly to incorporate English-speaking influences (such as QAnon) into the pan-Slavic framework. The deep state or cabal, for example, is interpreted in this case as the whole English-speaking world. The emergence of pan-Slavic conspiracy theory in the last two years is, of course, not random and can be traced back to various Russian propaganda channels in the CEE media space (Šlerka, 2022; Žabka, 2023) that use the idea of pan-Slavism as a mobilization tool to support Russia in the ongoing war in Ukraine.[1]

At the same time, the idea of pan-Slavism started to gain traction among networks and spaces dedicated to conspiratorial content, such as the channels and profiles of spiritual influencers (Heřmanová, 2022c) as well as websites and adjacent YouTube channels dedicated to personal development, esotericism, and various New Age type spiritualities.[2] In these spaces, the idea of pan-Slavism is often interpreted as a spiritual sisterhood between Slavic nations and analyzed with references to old Slavic religions and pagan traditions from Russia and the CEE nations. Pan-Slavism is envisioned here as a way of living, organized according to an ancient "tradition" that offers clear lifestyle guidelines, including family, gender roles, homebuilding and homemaking practices, and so on. The analysis looks closely at this interconnection between conspirituality and pan-Slavism as it is represented and reproduced in the idea of sisterhood, drawing theoretically on existing

conspirituality and gender literature, as outlined in the next section.

Theoretical framing: gender and conspirituality

The term "conspirituality" was coined by Ward and Voas in 2011 and defined as a synthesis between (supposedly female-dominated) New Age spirituality and the (supposedly male-dominated) sphere of conspiracy theories. The authors note that conspirituality is a movement native to the internet and that the emergence of social media and the blogosphere enabled the synthesis of the two previously separated areas. However, they also note that the synthesis is meaningful to its adherents because of two inter-related aspects: (1) a belief in the existence of hidden elites, either political or spiritual higher beings, and (2) the importance of personal enlightenment and a specific moment of awakening and of "seeing the truth" (Ward & Voas, 2011).

Recently, more attention has been paid to the gender binarity implicated in the definition of conspirituality. Research has explored how female influencers use and weaponize the notion of womanhood to engage with conspirituality narratives and build positions as lifestyle gurus (Baker, 2022; Baker & Walsh, 2022). My previous research focused on female influencers on Instagram and their engagement with conspiracy narratives about COVID-19 while emphasizing their female intuition and motherhood (Heřmanová, 2022a, 2022b) and their engagement with the notion of sisterhood as a politicized unit (Heřmanová, 2022c).

As Thiem (2020) notes, the research has so far focused on two dimensions of gender in conspiracy theories and epistemologies: (i) how is the belief and engagement with conspiracy theories impacted by gender identity, and (ii) how do conspiracy theories as such express various notions of gender binaries. Murphey (2023) argues that these two dimensions should be seen as practically intertwined because conspiracy theories are always shaped and produced by the identities of those who engage with them as well as the environment they currently flourish in, most notably digital communications platforms (2023, p. 2nn). Gender thus plays a role not only as the identity of the recipients and producers of conspiracy narratives but also as an aspect of (male or female coded) platforms – conspirituality is shaped differently on Instagram than, for example, on Telegram (see also Heřmanová 2022a).

Academic interest in the interconnection of spirituality, lifestyle, gender, and conspiracies has also been sparked by the growing popularity of other web-based movements and online subcultures, such as so-called tradwives. Studies have so far focused mostly on the notion of a tradwife as a female identity within the alt-right and far-right movement (Leidig, 2023; Lewis, 2018; Mattheis, 2018; Tebaldi & Baran, 2023). Devries (2023) develops the notion of a "productive contradiction" to understand how tradwives incorporate the seemingly contradictory notions of submissiveness and empowerment. These contradictions are also present in the conceptualizations of sisterhood as they emerge around pan-Slavic conspiracies in the conspirituality spaces of the Czech- and Slovak-speaking conspiracy milieu. During my fieldwork, both female influencers and their followers would refer to sisterhood simultaneously as an empowered political community that unites women in their struggles against oppressive structures and as a community of gentle, pure, and female intuition that enables women to be free in their subjugation to men (much like in the tradwife ideology). While the comparison and connection between the tradwives of the English-speaking online culture and sisters of the Slavic-identifying communities on CEE Telegram is seemingly obvious, more research is needed into how these networks and subcultures interact and impact each other. The possible "tradwife influence" on the notion of Slavic sisterhood is also an interesting example of the tension between the inherent anti-West sentiments of pan-Slavic conspiracy theory and its obvious references to other conspiracies originating in the English-speaking world, such as QAnon, as mentioned above. This tension will be explored in more detail in the findings section.

Methods and ethics

The analysis presented below is based on two types of empirical data. First, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with women participating in the Czech conspiracy milieu, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. The initial group of

research informants were women between the ages of 20 and 35 who focused on lifestyle, motherhood, and spiritual content on Instagram. During the pandemic, some of them turned away from lifestyle content and started to engage with various populist conspiracies about COVID-19 (Heřmanová, 2022b). In accordance with Desmond's approach to relational ethnography (Desmond, 2014), I followed them as they left Instagram (or were deplatformed in some cases) and moved onto other platforms, most often Telegram. I conducted both participant and non-participant observation on various Telegram channels that my research informants are either founders of, members of, or regularly engaged in since the start of 2022.

This arrangement greatly influenced my positionality during the fieldwork. At the start of 2020, when I initiated the research and first contacted the research participants, most were what could be labeled typical lifestyle influencers, and their engagement with any type of political content, let alone fringe political content such as that discussed in this study, was minimal. This however changed during the pandemic – I have described the process of radicalization into the conspiracy milieu elsewhere (Heřmanová, 2022a, 2022b). I was able to maintain contact with most of the research participants until the end of 2023 because by the time they became, in their own words, "anti-system," they had already known me for a long time and trusted me sufficiently enough to continue working with me. Even though they knew, or at least suspected, that I do not share their views and opinions on issues such as vaccination or the Russian role in European politics, they trusted me when I told them that my aspiration is to understand their perspective, not to expose or judge it. I was able to complete the fieldwork because I had the one hugely significant advantage ethnographic fieldwork has over any other type of research method: its long-term nature. I simply had enough time to build trust. This is also the reason why the data from Telegram presented in this article are mostly data from content analysis and non-participant observation and not data from participant observation (unlike the data created with participants whom I already knew from Instagram). I reached out to dozens of people with requests to chat on Telegram, but only five of them ever replied to me, and out of those, only two agreed to an interview. When I tried to start fieldwork in a milieu that was anti-system and fringe by definition, my academic identity was suspicious, and earning the trust of respondents was almost impossible.[3]

It is also important to note here that after several Czech journalists interviewed me following the publication of my first article based on the fieldwork, some of my long-term research participants simply ended all contact with me – not necessarily because they were offended by my writing, but because my affiliation with "the system" (academia, mainstream media) became too apparent for them. This means that I am not continuing with the ethnographic part of my research anymore as it is not possible for me to do so.

The data from the ethnographic fieldwork (fieldnotes and interview recordings) were coded using an open coding approach in the Atlas.ti software. As the categories of sisters and sisterhood emerged as crucial in the first round of coding, I then also started manually collecting posts from Telegram channels and texts from websites and YouTube videos linked in the Telegram channels that mentioned pan-Slavism, gender, and sisters or sisterhood. The resulting dataset of roughly 120 texts (posts, videos, pictures) was then analyzed using ethnographic content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. However, in order to protect their privacy, all quotes from interviews and fieldnotes are anonymized. Real names are used for media personalities not directly involved in the fieldwork but who were quoted and referenced by my research participants. The research project obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague.

All quotes from interviews, posts, and videos were translated from Czech or Slovak to English by me.

Analysis

Women of the Slavic kingdom – sisterhood as an imagined community

During the summer of 2020, when the Czech Republic was between lockdowns and a semblance of normal life resumed between two spikes in the COVID-19 infection rates, Vanda, a lifestyle influencer based in Prague, sent me an interview with a Czech molecular geneticist Soňa Peková. "I believe that this is the first reasonable thing I have read since this madness started," Vanda told me in an accompanying message on Instagram. Over the following weeks, the interview became much quoted and referenced both on disinformation and conspiracy websites and social media channels as well as among journalists. In it, Peková propagated what was then known as the "lab leak theory" about the origins of COVID-19 and labeled by mainstream media mostly as a conspiracy theory; she also predicted that the pandemic would be over by Christmas. For Vanda, this interview was one of the first pieces of openly political content she shared about the pandemic (before that, she mostly restricted herself to posting about wearing or not wearing masks). Vanda then started to engage with other influencers spreading various conspiracy theories about the pandemic, including, for example, the US-based QAnon influencer and spiritual guru Sayer Ji. However, Soňa Peková, she told me later, was the first media personality who "made her aware that something is just not quite right about all this." Vanda had a short peak during the pandemic when she posted a lot of "anti-mainstream content" as she herself called it, but she became tired of arguing with her followers, and over the course of 2021, she mostly resolved to post her usual lifestyle content. She had, however, followed Soňa Peková, who in the meantime became a rather well-known figure in the Czech conspiracy milieu. My communication with Vanda was slowly fading by the start of 2023, but I reached out to her again when another influencer that we both follow, the Slovak spiritual guru Liana Laga, reposted another interview with Peková. This time, it was an interview for the website svedomi-naroda.cz, run by a foundation called Svědomí národa (the consciousness of the nation). In it, Peková uses her expertise (now much contested by many of her colleagues and mainstream media) as a geneticist to claim that "today, genetics and genealogy show us that Slavs are an ancient nation with a long history" (svedomi-naroda.cz 2023, translated from Czech). Later in the interview, Peková also states that based on the same "genealogy and genetics" we know that Jesus had blue eyes and blond hair, from which she makes the conclusion that he was also of Slavic origin. This claim was then picked up by some mainstream influencers and journalists, with Peková making headlines claiming "Jesus was a Slav" (which was mocked by the media and thoroughly debunked by other experts). I messaged Vanda if she had seen the interview and what she thought about it.

> I mean, the stuff about Jesus is crazy, but I don't really care about that. Maybe she said it because she wanted to say something that would be paid attention to, you know? But the whole Slavic nations thing does make sense, doesn't it? Liana has posted about that a lot recently, and some of it is, like, I don't know, just memes or whatever. But have you read this book?

Vanda replied and sent me a link to the Czech website of the Russian writer Vladimir Megre, author of the book series *The Ringing Cedars of Russia*. I had seen the book covers before, and Megre's name had been popping up on various Telegram channels that I had been following. The books are based on his supposed meeting with a female being named Anastasia, who appeared in front of him in the middle of the Russian taiga and imparted upon him the wisdom of how to live peacefully, rightfully, and in accordance with nature. The Anastasianism movement that emerged based on the growing popularity of the books follows guidelines that are in some cases very detailed (for example, Megre orders his followers to build so-called homesteads, a family dwelling that occupies exactly one hectare of land).[4] One of the channels where I have seen references to the book was, for example, on the Czecho-Slovak channel Somslovan.sk (*I am Slav* in Slovak). None of the posters engaged with the books in any thorough way; instead, they were mostly mentioned as inspiration. Miriam, one of my respondents, however, referenced the book to me in our chat on Telegram.

> I feel like people know about it but mostly have not read it. I have read it, and it has really made me think, mainly, about our lifestyle, what has been sold to us as

> a way of living. And if you look at some traditions, like, we have those traditions, you know. We have our ways as, like, Slavic people. As a woman, I feel part of these. That's what it made me realize.

Later in our conversation, Miriam makes a reference to a "sisterhood" when she says:

> The war is a lot about men, but I feel for the women, because we are all sisters. And the war is a male thing. It's violating a lot of female principles. But as a woman, I can relate to what Russian and Ukrainian women are going through. We have things in common. Even the language, I understand Russian. I don't speak any English. [Miriam is in her 50s and was taught Russian in school prior to 1989]

A similar sentiment is echoed by Soňa Peková in the aforementioned interview. She claims that Slavic nations are, in general, "peaceful, kind, good-humored and welcoming," and she emphasizes that these common traits are "not in any way worse than the West, but that's the propaganda that has been fed to us" (svedomi-naroda.cz, 2023; translated from Czech).

A key figure for many of my research participants and, consequently, myself in the introduction to the theory of Slavic sisterhood was Liana Laga. With almost five thousand subscribers on Telegram, Laga's content is a mix of reposted videos about politics (including QAnon content), spiritual advice, and musings about God and Goddess as well as memes and jokes about the role of women in the world. Both Miriam and Vanda follow her. Valerie, another of Liana's followers, who briefly chatted with me on Telegram, referenced another picture posted in the channel as "relatable and the type of content that makes my day better" – it was a post with a colorful background representing a translucent woman giving birth and the statement (in Czech): "Female beings were chosen by our creator to be the portal between the spiritual realm and the physical realm. They are the only power on this Earth strong enough to navigate unborn souls to this world." (see Figure 1).

Liana also posted the abovementioned video interview with Soňa Peková and made a direct reference to a "Slavic sisterhood." She commented, "We women know our ways, we know our traditions."

The channel Somslovan.sk also reposted the Peková interview, and one of the comments underneath makes a reference to a 'Slavic kingdom:' "It is a shame that they did not teach us about the Slavic

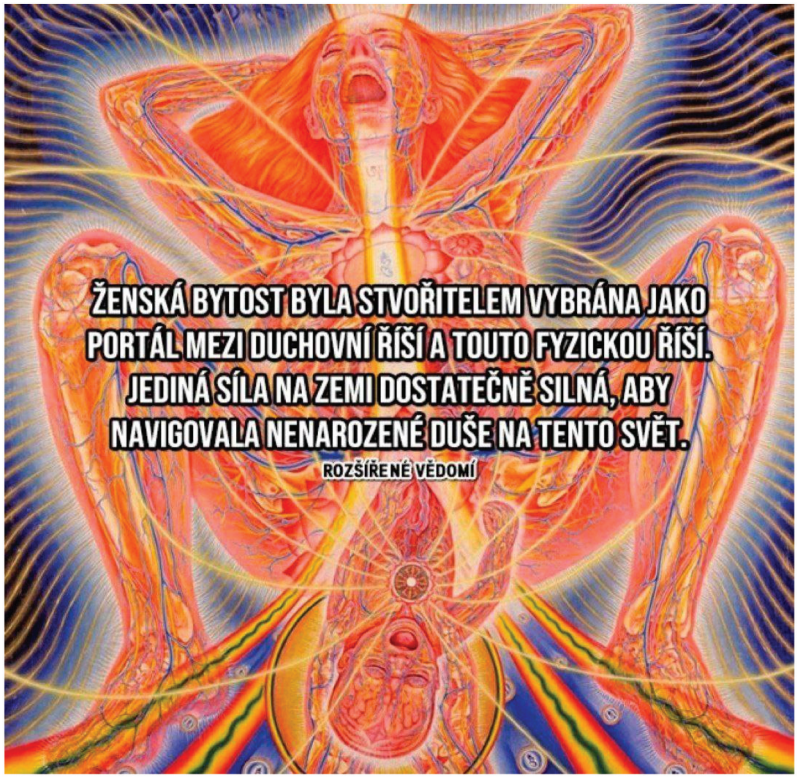

Figure 1. Post from Liana Laga's channel.

Kingdom in school, it's a result of hundreds of years of repression of the truth," the commenter writes (in Slovak).

Sometimes, to enhance the symbolism of family ties between Slavs, the notion of "Mother Russia" is also used. Miriam however mentions that this notion makes her uncomfortable as it was also often used by Soviet-era propaganda in the period before 1989, something "that was repeated to us in school back then and it was, like, propaganda, mostly, I think." Despite connecting Soviet-era propaganda and the notion of "Mother Russia," Miriam did not make a similar connection with the notion of sisterhood, even though, as mentioned in the section on pan-Slavism, this idea was very much present in the propaganda as well. During my fieldwork on Telegram, I did not encounter references to sisterhood as something connected to the Soviet period, the concept was used solely within the framework of the contemporary geopolitical situation. The past was always represented as the mythical, shared, symbolic past of the Slavic kingdom while ignoring the more recent shared history of the Soviet Bloc.[5]

These instances of relating pan-Slavism to a community of sisters and the related notions of family ties between nations, tradition, and a mythical Slavic kingdom of old are representative of how the notion of sisterhood began to emerge in the conspirituality communities. Across the posts on Telegram channels and YouTube videos, I identified several ways in which sisterhood is constructed.

Firstly, sisterhood is embedded in a supposedly shared history of Slavic nations and, within this, the shared oppression of Slavic women. The sense of belonging to a sisterhood can be based on genetics, as referenced by Peková; on linguistic closeness, as mentioned by Miriam; or on a purely symbolic historical reference, such as the Slavic kingdom (which has never existed in history – the posters on Somslovan.sk refer to it in symbolic way or, sometimes, as a mythological entity that cannot be discovered via historical expertise or modern science, the reason why today's education system is not allowed to teach about it).

These symbolic references to a shared past and inherent kinship within Slavic nations are partly drawn from the pan-Slavism movement as it was constructed in the 19th century, as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of individuals who feel a sense of belonging based on language, cultural frameworks, and interpretations of history. The online pan-Slavic community created via digital communication platforms, such as Telegram, can be interpreted as one of many possible manifestations of the imagined pan-Slavic community materialized via the affordances of the current online media ecosystem. Within an online community (Wilson & Peterson, 2002), the sense of belonging is based on a shared language of references via memes and visual material posted on the channels. For example, Valerie mentioned that she sometimes sends content to her friends, but they often do not understand it, and she needs to explain what it means: "I would think it's evident, but then they are not part of it, they do not research this, and they do not understand the meaning of it. So, sometimes you feel like the strangers on the internet understand you better than your friends do, if you know what I mean." The specific visuals (such as the pan-Slavic flag, see Figure 2), the references to the Slavic kingdom, and the digital literacy required to navigate the Telegram environment and find relevant sources of information (as Valerie puts it) create a sense of "us vs them" or "us vs rest of the world." Some posts could sometimes be defensive (for instance, when people talk about institutions such as the government or the media, the rhetoric can be outright hostile), but in general, the posters refer to the community as a safe, friendly space that offers them the feeling of being

Figure 2. The pan-Slavic flag, as seen in the profile picture of the channel Somslovan.Sk.

understood. The imagined community of the Slavic kingdom thus shares a language (mostly visual) and a common way of explaining the world and political events based on their common understanding of who they are and how they relate to the world outside the community.

Secondly, influencers like Liana Laga often emphasize that women have a different and unique experience within this community and that their ties are of a different quality than those among men. In other words, gender plays as much a part in women belonging to the sisterhood as does their nationality and language. By emphasizing the uniqueness of female experience, the notion of sisterhood constructs a very clear gender binary – male and female experiences of the world are fundamentally different, and therefore, their role in society is also fundamentally different. In this way, the imagined community of Slavic sisters not only draws on a shared past but also uses this past as a foundation for how the present and future should be organized along these fundamentally male and female experiences of the world.

The past is the future – sisterhood as a politics of lifestyle

One of the most subscribed to channels on Czech Telegram is a channel called Otevři svou mysl (open your mind), founded by David Formánek, a well-known personality in the conspiracy milieu. Formánek also has an eponymous YouTube channel and website (and mostly posts the same content across all three; however, the Telegram channel is by far the biggest of his platforms). In October 2023, Formánek posted a video called "Aragorn from The Lord of The Rings: An Archetype of The Perfect Man." The video is originally from a YouTube channel called Cinema Therapy, and Formánek added Czech subtitles. In the video, a therapist and a cinematographer talk about why the role of Aragorn embodies all aspects of what they consider "good, nontoxic masculinity" – Aragorn is brave, selfless, strong, a charismatic leader. At the same time, he is humble, tender, and loyal to one woman. The video has been reposted by several other influencers that I follow. In one discussion, a female participant mentions that she feels men like this are hard to find, but that the video is, for her, inspiration not to give up, that she still believes these men are not just fictional. Other women then reply to her comment, with many mentioning that it is not men's fault that nontoxic masculinity is hard to find today. If we want our men to be brave and strong, then we must allow ourselves to be weak and protected by them – the discussion's overarching sentiment.

In one of her posts, Kiki, a research participant who works as an influencer and yoga teacher, posting mainly on Instagram, echoes a similar position when she talks about the current political situation.

> I feel like a lot of the bad things that are happening are because the feminine and masculine energies are not balanced. If you feel like you are helpless against all the evil of the world, there is one thing you can do: find your gentleness. Find that small girl inside you, and she will know what to do.

In the comments, Kiki's followers praise her and mention their own experiences with finding their own female intuition, allowing themselves to be submissive, gentle, and protected by men. "I'm so happy that you have found your freedom, sister," writes Kiki in response to one of the comments.

The fundamental differences between men and women are a regular subject for Liana Laga as well – she often posts memes and jokes about everyday female experiences with mundane things such as cleaning, shopping, taking care of children. For example, she posted a meme stating, "It is hard to be a woman. You must think like a man, look like a young girl, and work like a horse." She accompanies it with a laughing tears emoji, and a lot of the comments under the post echo the sarcastic tone. Some of the commenters are more serious: "We keep laughing at this, but it should not be this way. We are forced to think like men, and a lot of women today just succumb to this, but sisters, please – do not lose your female spirit. Once women are like men, the civilization is lost."

When I discuss this with Kiki in an interview, she thinks for a while before she replies and then says, "You know, I have supported all these human rights things, like, gay people, I support them. But sometimes I wonder if this is, like, at the expense of the natural order, whether Western civilization hasn't

actually forgotten that the male and female principles are fundamental in how we see the world." Kiki then makes a reference to a workshop she visited that was led by a friend about female and male principles in nature. Her friend made them think about examples, and Kiki says that many of the participants talked about our ancestors, about how our grandmothers intuitively knew things we have now forgotten about what it means to be a woman.

I am reminded of a conversation after the Telegram channel Slovanské noviny (Slavic news) posted a meme in English that shows an old woman standing in front of a simple stone house with the accompanying caption: "Grandma survived the Great Depression, because her supply chain was local and she knew how to do stuff." The meme is obviously taken from an English-speaking context, yet the comments relate it to local experience – the way our grandmothers knew how to grow food and so on. In our conversation about the Anastasia books, Vanda also mentions growing food as an important aspect of what she finds interesting about the pan-Slavic idea. She mentions that a lot of the food that we eat today is synthetic, industrial food and references research that shows that industrial food is destroying the hormonal balance in both men and women. "I think a lot more people should be educated about that, the way you eat impacts the way you feel in your body, and this impacts who you are as a woman, your cycle, and everything," she says. To her, a lot of the content on Telegram is interesting because it is about "the way you do things on an everyday basis, and I think we are doing a lot of things wrong today." Vanda echoes a sentiment mentioned by many of the research participants and which is present in a lot of discussion and content on Telegram – that we have to study the way our ancestors lived because it provides inspiration for how we could also live now and in the future.

In this way, the pan-Slavic sisterhood emerges as a community based on an interpretation of ancestral tradition – mostly described as a lifestyle based on gender essentialism and gender binaries. While different participants emphasize different aspects of this lifestyle (e.g., Liana Laga pays attention to both feminine aesthetics and feminine spirituality, whereas Vanda emphasizes bodily issues and food), they can be summarized into a coherent framework, a politics of lifestyle that organizes the sisterhood. Belonging to the sisterhood thus means, among other things, dressing feminine, eating organic food, being submissive to men, not being afraid of displaying weakness to encourage men to take care of women, paying attention to nature and living in close communion with it, and building upon the wisdom of our grandmothers in all the abovementioned aspects, such as family relations or food culture.

As noted above, the politics and aesthetics of sisterhood are in this regard very close to the politics and aesthetics of the tradwife subculture. It encompasses the same contradiction of being free as a woman by being subjugated to men, and it relies on similar visuals and symbolic references to the past. While the tradwife movement is deeply rooted in US political and religious structures, and therefore, the ancestors referenced in tradwife content are often the white, European ancestors of today's American citizens, the sisterhood makes a direct connection between ancestral tradition and common Slavic cultural roots. In the politics of lifestyle that the sisterhood represents, this tension between strong anti-Western sentiments (represented in the broader framework of a pan-Slavic conspiracy theory where the Anglo-Saxons are seen as the oppressors of Slavs) and the reappropriation of English-speaking content, including memes, videos, and visuals is never addressed directly – in the same way, content creators do not address why it is important that the death of the British queen is related to the letter Q. The topic was broached once with Leila, an Instagram influencer who started a Telegram channel during the pandemic, because she wanted space for more political content. I asked her about the content that she shares from US influencers and websites even though she considers herself critical of Western imperialism. "There are probably people in the US who see these issues as well. Like, these people that I follow, they are critical of Big Pharma, they are very critical of their government! I don't see this as us being on different sides, like, the issue is bigger than this," Leila replied. As an influencer, Leila follows many people across various platforms, and she is familiar with US tradwife content. However, she thinks many of her followers are

not. In this sense, the influencers play the role of cultural translators, although the meaning of the content is often changed and recontextualized within this translation process, including the affordances of different platforms – while Leila and others rely on platforms that could be characterized as dark (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021), current research on tradwives focuses on mainstream platforms such as TikTok (Devries, 2023; Sykes & Hopner, 2024).

Leila's interpretation of the relationship of Slavic sisterhood to women living similar aesthetics and politics outside of the "Slavic Kingdom" seems representative of the general understanding within the community. The common enemy is Western capitalism, which destroys community and destroys the natural order of things, as well as the capitalist elites who lie to "us" and want to enslave "us." This enemy was created in the West – but that does not mean there are not people in the West who see the truth and are able to resist this ideology. In this way, the politics of sisterhood can be interpreted as part of the overarching critique of the neoliberal world order as employed both by US and European far-right conservative groups, particularly with regard to the notion of gender binarity that it employs, as will be discussed in the conclusion.

Discussion and conclusion – sisterhood as a critique of neoliberal order

The notion of sisterhood surfaced in the Czech and Slovak conspiracy milieu, which I have been studying for the past three years. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it was used by female spiritual influencers to mobilize their followers against anti-pandemic restrictions imposed by governments and, later, against the vaccination process. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, the conspiracy milieu in the CEE region changed significantly and gained a new dynamic as Russian propaganda intensified across many different platforms (Geissler et al., 2023). This article presents an attempt to capture one facet of this new dynamic by focusing on two aspects – the emergence and popularity of pan-Slavic conspiracy theories and the presentation of gender roles in them, formulated via the notion of sisterhood. The focus on how gender roles are represented within pan-Slavic conspiracy thinking connects the research presented in this article to a broader body of academic literature on gender as a category in conspiracy thinking and epistemologies.

As Bracewell (2021) noted, until recently the overwhelming majority of research on gender in populism, the Far Right, and conspiracy theories has focused on men and masculinities because women were, by definition, invisible in these movements. This dynamic however has changed with the emergence of social media. Stern (2019) notes that social media has enabled women within the far-right movement to become political without really leaving the kitchen – instead, via vlogging, blogging, and content creation, they have turned the kitchen into a political arena. The "productive contradictions" (Devries, 2023) of the tradwife movement are based on the fact that social media enabled women to speak publicly of their desire and need to be submissive and invisible. In a similar vein, the notion of sisterhood enables women engaged with the conspiracy milieu on Telegram to create an active political identity that still works within the logic of strict gender binaries, where the female role is that of the gentle mother, nurturer, and guardian of the home. Motherhood and homemaking become political statements and activities themselves (see also Baker & Walsh, 2022).

This interpretation of sisterhood as a tool of female empowerment also connects it to the broader context of how gender is employed in current conservative policymaking. As Graff and Korolczuk note, the current "anti-gender movement" in the CEE region cannot be explained only as a continuation of the anti-feminist backlash in the second half of the 20th century because that overlooks the aspects of it that are new and reactive to the current political landscape. (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). They propose the concept of an "opportunistic synergy" between the Far Right and anti-gender ideologies employed by contemporary right-wing populists, such as that of the former Polish prime minister Jarosław Kaczynski who employed the anti-genderism register (Borba, 2022) as an official tool of political mobilization (Baran, 2023; Grudzinska, 2021). In this context, the focus on a strict gender binarity, a fixed role of men and women in society, is connected to the backlash against LGBTQ+ rights, and it is

interpreted as a critique of societal order in general. Graff and Korolczuk analyze how the anti-gender movement offers a tool for critiquing the neoliberal order, with similar observations made by authors analyzing the tradwife movement (Leidig, 2023). This critique poses the question: how it is possible that after decades of the feminist struggle for equal rights, women now feel exhausted, overworked, unsafe, and exploited? Has the opportunity to work and earn as much as a their male partners made women free or has it just made women exhausted? Has sexual liberation made women happier or just more unsafe because women are being constantly sexualized by others? These sentiments echo across the discussions on Instagram and Telegram that I followed in the fieldwork. They are rarely articulated in those words exactly, but they follow the pattern that the opportunistic synergy between anti-gender and the conservative Far Right exploits, offering a seemingly simple answer – if neoliberal feminism has not worked for women, women need to go back and find what was lost. Accepting the female role inherited from generations of women and living according to their ancestral wisdom is seen as a way of achieving the security that neoliberal society is not providing women.

Sisterhood, as it is now emerging in the CEE conspiracy milieu and making its way into mainstream politics and popular culture, thus needs to be interpreted on this broader level, as a manifestation of a shared sentiment concerning a lack of safety and a lack of voice in mainstream society as well as an expression of the need for political organization that will stand in opposition to the neoliberal order.

Notes

1. Pan-Slavism in itself is not entirely new in the Czech- and Slovak-speaking conspiracy milieu (see, for example, Panczová & Janeček, 2015), but it has gained unprecedented popularity and attention in the last two years (Žabka, 2023).
2. For a more detailed conceptualization of New Age spirituality within the CEE region, see, for example, Kapusta and Kostićová (2020).
3. I am aware that there is an ongoing discussion among researchers of extremism, the Far Right, and other fringe political groups about using fake identities in online research, and this is sometimes considered an ethical practice, especially in an environment where research with one's real identity would not be possible or would be dangerous, yet it is in the public interest to conduct the research (AoIR 2019). I do not believe this was my case (the only real danger I was in was the threat of being kicked off of a Telegram channel). I am trained as an anthropologist and ethnographer, and reciprocity is an integral part of fieldwork for me – for this reason, I preferred to stay open about my background throughout my fieldwork, even if it meant that I could not continue doing it anymore.
4. Academic literature on Anastasianism as a new religious movement is so far very scarce in English. For an overview, see, for example, Pranskevičiūtė (2015).
5. This inherent tension between pro-Russian sentiments present in the current pan-Slavism conspiracy milieu and the general anti-Russian sentiments very much present in the Czech public debate with regard to 20th-century history is striking and poses an interesting research question in itself. I was not able to delve deeper into it – it was not discussed by my participants, and I believe it would require other methods, such as oral history, to explore it.

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