

What does Russia's doping scandal tell us about the nature of political conspiracies?

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Russia's participation in the athletics events at the 2016 Olympic games remains under threat following evidence of doping by Russian athletes in previous competitions. [Joseph E. Uscinski](#) writes on what the scandal says about the nature of political conspiracies.



It has been widely reported that the [Russian Olympic team](#) may have dominated the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics by using cocktails containing steroids and human growth hormones. Cocktails appears to be the appropriate term, since the mixtures were served with [Chivas whiskey for men and Martini vermouth for women](#). This comes only years after Russian athletes were caught 'doping' by international authorities in the 2012 London Olympic Games, and subsequently banned from the upcoming [2016 Rio De Janiero games](#).

While the investigation into these new doping allegations is only getting underway, the evidence unearthed so far is shocking. The person in charge of the doping, Dr Grigory Rodchenkov, recently escaped Russia to the United States to tell his story. His account contains every element of a Hollywood conspiracy thriller, and then some.



Russian President Vladimir Putin at the gala ice show celebrating the Sochi Olympic Games one year on. Credits: kremlin.ru

As the [New York Times](#) describes it, Dr Rodchenkov worked in a dark-of-night operation in a shadowy laboratory lit by a single lamp, in which he and his colleagues would pass urine samples through a hole in the wall. Two of his colleagues in Russia, both attached to the scandal, [died unexpectedly](#) in February. While many of his assertions have yet to be independently verified, Dr Rodchenkov was recently identified by the World Anti-Doping Agency as

part of an extensive doping programme and was forced to resign his post.

The scheme has been described as one of the most “[successful doping ploys in sports history](#),” but the problem with such a characterisation is that the programme has turned out to be completely unsuccessful. The plot has been uncovered, one confession has already been made, and there will likely be serious consequences for the guilty athletes and those that aided them (two people are already dead, possibly as part of the cover-up). With almost daily coverage in the *New York Times*, there is nothing successful about it.

Russian doping and conspiracy theories

That these Russian doping schemes continue to be uncovered should give pause to those who think that such conspiracies take place all the time, and can go on indefinitely without detection. Such a viewpoint can give rise to belief in [conspiracy theories](#), which are unsubstantiated accusatory claims of conspiracy.

That conspiracies are so often exposed seems to be used by many [conspiracy theorists](#) – and [philosophers](#) for that matter – to suggest that belief in their as-of-yet undetected conspiracies are justified. And the foiling of real conspiracies can lead people to be more suspicious, distrustful, and willing to believe in conspiracy theories. However, the exposure of conspiracies should lead to the opposite effect: philosophers, conspiracy theorists, and your average man on the street should not fall into believing in unsubstantiated claims, but rather take some comfort that conspiracies tend to be exposed and fail.

There are good reasons for conspiracies to fail, and recent work in mathematics by [David Grimes](#) provides an indication of just how quickly they will do so. For conspiracies to be successful, they must remain secret, and anything worth conspiring for is also equally worth exposing. Conspiracies can be exposed by those pulling it off, and also by those who are outside the conspiracy and charged with preventing malfeasance.

The numbers matter. Each conspirator is a potential liability, as they can “spill the beans.” Each additional conspirator also provides an additional person who can potentially be caught and bring down the whole operation. Grimes’ work, which is based upon conspiracies in history that have failed, suggests that conspiracies are doomed to fail over the course of decades, and large conspiracy theories sooner than that.

For example, take Richard Nixon’s many unconstitutional activities while president, summarised with the term “Watergate.” Nixon was eventually run out of office because several of his co-conspirators were arrested during the break-in at the Watergate Hotel. Then came the investigations, several confessions, a few prison sentences, and one unprecedented resignation.

The number of people involved in Nixon’s illegal activities and subsequent cover-ups varies depending on how we define them, but it was not that many people when compared to the vast number of people that would be needed to fake global warming, for example. Grimes’ research indicates that a scheme to fake scientific findings – like climate data – over a long period of time would require thousands of independent researchers and officials to be in on it, and to never “whistle-blow.” This is unlikely given the stakes involved. Secrets are seemingly hard to keep even in small numbers; many a workplace romance has floundered on this rock.

Conspiracy theories that posit the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were orchestrated by the US government usually require the participation of hundreds of individuals – perhaps to set explosives, or to direct the airplanes. And the circle of [conspirators increases](#) as media and government officials are later needed to help cover up the operation. But even 15 years later, there are no leaks, admissions, or smoking guns.

The JFK assassination, fifty-three years later, is still plagued by conspiracy theories, and a [majority of Americans](#) remain convinced the president’s murder was the result of a larger conspiracy. Some theories, like the one detailed by Oliver Stone in his movie [JFK](#) involve hundreds if not thousands of actors. It is unlikely that this number of people could all keep a secret this long given the immense value of the information they had.

Other conspiracy theories posit even longer timeframes. Illuminati theories suggest that this secret groups has been pulling strings for centuries. Unfortunately, no one has been able to catch one of them, and not a single Illuminati has copped to their involvement. The Reptilian Elite have supposedly been ruling the planet for millennia, yet we can't seem to find anyone sane who has seen one.

In the end, doping athletes is a low stakes scheme compared to the life and death stakes in other conspiracies. But, the athletes and the offending nations seem to keep getting caught. It could tell us that civilisation has developed the tools that can ferret out such malfeasance. It could also tell us that people are not that good at pulling off conspiracies. We will never live in a world where conspiracies are not attempted: people with bad intentions will always try to get away with something. We should always be vigilant. But, the fact that bad people keep getting caught should tell us something both about the strength of our institutions, and about the limitations of supposed conspirators.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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