

**Conspiracy Discourse in post-Soviet Russia:
Political Strategies of Capture of the Public Sphere
(1991-2014)**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities**

2014

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Abstract	4
Declaration.....	5
Copyright Statement.....	5
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction.....	7
Historical Background.....	9
Literature Review	10
<i>Studies of Russian Anti-Jewish Conspiracy Theories.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Studies of Conspiracy Theories in Imperial and Soviet Russia</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Studies of Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia</i>	<i>13</i>
Conceptual Framework and Methodology of the Project.....	16
Structure of the Thesis	24
Chapter 1. The Spectres of Conspiracy Mythmaking: Public Intellectuals and Anti-Western Discourse in Post-Soviet Russia.....	26
Introduction	26
1.1. Gleb Pavlovskii: Conspiracy Theories as a Political Technology	31
1.2. Aleksandr Dugin: The Eternal War of the Continents.....	37
1.3. Nataliia Narochnitskaia: Orthodox Russia vs. the spiritless West [bezdukhovnyĭ Zapad].....	43
1.4. “Most Western People Belong to a Different Humanoid Group From Us”: Maksim Shevchenko’s Battle Against Western Neo-Liberalism.....	49
Conclusion.....	55
Chapter 2. The Soviet Collapse and Its Conspiracy Interpretations in Post-Soviet Russia.....	58
Introduction.....	58
2.1. The Overture to Collapse: Conspiratorial Origins of Gorbachev’s Perestroika	59
<i>The Agents of Perestroika: Employing the Language of the Intelligence Services in Conspiracy Theories.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Andropov’s Conspiracy.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>“Westernized” Intelligentsia Against the Motherland</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>“The Manipulation of Consciousness”</i>	<i>64</i>
2.2. The Collapse of the USSR in 1991	66
<i>Mikhail Gorbachev as a Favourite Scapegoat</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>Forgeries as Main Argument.....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Competing Conspiratorial Interpretations of the August Coup</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>El’tsin’s Impeachment (1998-1999).....</i>	<i>73</i>
2.3. “A Major Geopolitical Disaster”: Framing the Soviet Collapse in Putin’s Russia	79

Conclusion.....	83
Chapter 3. Building “Fortress Russia”: Conspiracy Theories and Post-Soviet Strategies of Nation-Building	86
Introduction	86
3.1. Vladislav Surkov’s <i>Sovereign Democracy</i> : Theorizing the New Russian Identity	88
3.2. Constructing the Other: The United States as Russia’s Rival.....	96
3.3. “Nashi”: The Creation of Anti-Western National Elites	100
3.4. The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium.....	103
3.5. The Case of Pussy Riot: Making the Nation of the “Orthodox People”	107
Conclusion.....	115
Chapter 4. The Image of the Enemy: Conspiracy Narratives in Post-Soviet Electoral Campaigns	118
Introduction	118
4.1. The 2007-2008 Election Period: Combating the “Colour Revolution” in Russia	119
<i>Putin as a National Leader</i>	120
“ <i>Putin’s Enemies</i> ”	124
<i>International Observers as “Fake Structures”</i>	126
<i>The Leader Defines the Enemy: Putin’s Public Speeches on the Eve of the Parliamentary Elections</i>	128
4.2. The 2011-2012 Election Period: Splitting Russia	132
“ <i>The Voice From Nowhere</i> ”.....	132
“ <i>The White Ribbon Aims to Shed Blood</i> ”	134
<i>Moscow vs. “The Real Russia”</i>	137
<i>Michael McFaul: “Ambassador for Colour Revolutions”</i>	140
<i>Poklonnaia Hill vs. Bolotnaia Square</i>	143
Conclusion.....	146
Chapter 5. Battling Against “Foreign Agents”: Conspiracy Narratives in Domestic Politics Under Putin and Medvedev	148
Introduction	148
5.1. Russian NGOs and the “Colour Revolutions”: Defining the Domestic Threat.....	149
<i>The British “Spy-Rock”: Linking NGOs and Foreign Intelligence Services</i>	152
5.2. NGOs as “Foreign Agents”: New Developments in the Anti-Western Conspiracy Discourse	155
Conclusion.....	162
Conclusion	165
Bibliography.....	176
Primary sources	176
Secondary sources	189

Final Word Count: 80 365 words.

Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of conspiracy theories on the processes of nation-building and political developments in post-Soviet Russia. The main focus of the work is on the construction and utilization of the anti-Western conspiracy discourse by Russia's political and intellectual elites in the public sphere with the aim of fostering social and national cohesion in the country. The thesis adopts the conceptual and methodological approach which has been developed by Mark Fenster. Fenster defines conspiracy theories as a populist theory of power, which possesses an important communicative function by helping to unite the audience as 'the people' against the imagined secretive "Other". This understanding of conspiracy theories allows us to interpret the conspiratorial discourse as a means of expressing concerns about the inequities of a social system and of creating political identities by challenging the existing political order.

Through the analysis of several case studies, the thesis offers a broad reassessment of the role, which conspiracy theories have been playing in the context of post-Soviet politics. The thesis starts with the study of the role of public intellectuals in the articulation of the anti-Western conspiracy discourse and analyzes the strategies of its dissemination in the public space through the media and book publishing. It is further demonstrated how these activities supply Russia's political leadership with concepts, which are utilized to discursively polarize society between "the majority of the Russian people" and the "conspiring minority" of various civic actors with alleged links to the West. It is argued that in the past fourteen years this discursive divide has become a pivotal tool of the regime's nation-building strategies and its attempts to suppress the opposition. The thesis reveals a particular importance of such strategies during electoral campaigns.

The analysis of anti-Western conspiracy discourse demonstrates that nowadays the notion of conspiracy linked to the actions of the West has emerged as a crucial functional element of the regime's ideological underpinnings. Such a discourse exploits people's nostalgic sentiments about their country's past greatness, justifies the introduction of restrictive laws and serves as a substitute for practical actions in achieving community cohesion. The thesis shows that anti-Western conspiracy theories have been actively produced by public intellectuals since the 1990s, many of whom have become loyal to the Kremlin in the 2000s. Since Putin's first accession to power, a combined effort of these intellectuals and politicians has facilitated the shifting of conspiracy notions from the margins to the centre of the official political discourse, turning them into a major instrument of survival of the political elites.

Declaration

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my team of supervisors with whom I was very lucky to work in the last three years. Indeed, I am blessed to have the world-leading experts as my supervisors. In the first instance, I would like to thank Professor Vera Tolz, who, in the last three years, has been more than a supervisor: her knowledge and academic achievements, as well as her critical and thorough analysis of texts, have provided me with academic inspiration and a scholarly role model. Vera's kindness and willingness to help in every possible situation greatly contributed to the successful completion of my thesis. She taught me how to be a Teacher and Mentor, which I shall always remember. I am also indebted to Dr. Peter Knight for his extraordinary help in developing the project and mastering the set of conceptual tools to approach such a peculiar topic as conspiracy theories. Having a chance as an undergraduate student in Tomsk to read his insightful research into conspiracy theories, it was great fortune and a privilege to have him as second supervisor on my project. I am also thankful to Dr. Lynne Attwood for providing helpful advice on the thesis during the course of my research. As a young scholar I am also indebted to Professor Stephen Hutchings for providing invaluable academic opportunities. Stephen's critical comments and readiness to always share knowledge helped me look at my project in a different way and has laid the basis for future research. This project would never have been realized without the advice given to me in spring 2005 by Dr. Viktor Muchnik. His suggestion to look closer at conspiracy theories turned out to be decisive and laid the groundwork for past and future achievements.

The two people without whom this thesis would have never been produced are Mom and Dad. The unreserved encouragement, patience, love and time they have invested in making me a better man was a key factor in my personal development. No words would ever be able to express my gratitude to these people. However, this short paragraph is still a good opportunity to say how much I love them.

An incredibly friendly and creative atmosphere at the Department also contributed to the outcome of these three years. I am thankful to the members of staff, Dr. Elizaveta Alentaeva and Dr. Elena Simms, and the group of former/current PhD students and post-doctoral fellows. In particular, I am indebted to Alistair Dickins, who was very kind to sharpen my skills as an entry-level writer and whose heroic commitment to grasp the history of the workers movement in pre-revolutionary Krasnoyarsk is exemplary of a young historian.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my flatmates and superb friends: Ana, Piotr, Jan and Marina, whose joint endeavours turned our house into the best place to be in Manchester.

An anti-Russian conspiracy exists without a doubt.

The problem, however, is that the whole adult population of Russia takes part in it.

Viktor Pelevin, *Generation P.*

Introduction

The coup in August 1991 and the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union in December. How? Why? From top-ranking politicians down to ordinary Russians, there is bewilderment. At all levels of society one explanation acquires a particularly prominent place: conspiracy. Understood as a type of explanation which claims the existence of a malevolent plot behind historical and current events, conspiracy theories have become a popular tool with which to interpret the social and political reality of post-Soviet Russia. In the post-Soviet period, it is the West, often defined as a single, undifferentiated entity, that has emerged as the absolutely essential protagonist in conspiracy discourse.

The popularity of conspiracy theories is not confined to post-Soviet Russia. Such theories are a fundamental element of popular culture and political thinking in the United States of America, prompting some scholars even to define the country as an “empire of conspiracy.”¹ In fact, a comparison of the “American” and the “Russian” cases of conspiracy theories may be productive and provide insight into what is common and what different in the production of conspiracy theories in these two (former) superpowers, given their obvious socio-economic and political difference.

In contrast to the United States, where conspiracy theories emerge from grassroots movements and are kept at the margins of official political discourse, in post-Soviet Russia the political and intellectual elites are major producers and disseminators of conspiracy theories. This top-down spread of conspiracy theories in Russia suggests a parallel with countries in the Middle East where, in the words of Matthew Gray, the state is a “conspiracist narrator.”² According to Gray, vigorous support of conspiracy theories by the political authorities of Middle Eastern states can be accounted for by the ability of conspiracy theories to provide the legitimization of political regimes and social cohesion in the face of mounting social and political challenges and the declining popularity of political leaders.³ As will be demonstrated in this thesis, by the end of the 2000s, the Russian political authorities, with the help of the

¹ Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

² Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010), 119.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

media and public intellectuals, had found a way of transforming conspiracy theories into an essential element of official political discourse.

Anti-Western conspiracy theories have long been a feature of Russian political discourse and have had a gradually growing impact on it since the 1990s, nevertheless, the topic has largely been neglected by scholarship on Russian politics and nation-building. However, a striking shift in official political discourse during Putin's third presidential term, which started in 2012, towards a more militant anti-Western rhetoric mostly substantiated by conspiracy theories, is a clear indication of the importance of the issue.⁴

Given the above-mentioned gap in scholarship, the main aim of this thesis is to explore the ways in which the political elites of post-Soviet Russia exercise power through the utilization of anti-Western conspiracy theories. As anti-Western conspiracy rhetoric is aimed primarily at the domestic audience, the thesis will further explore how conspiracy theories become the means of achieving nation-building and community cohesion goals. In order to realize these aims, the following questions, which correspond to specific issues, are discussed in individual chapters. What is the role of public intellectuals in developing and disseminating anti-Western conspiracy theories? What are the key events in Soviet and post-Soviet history that have generated the notions of anti-Western conspiracy? How do the political and intellectual elites of post-Soviet Russia utilize concepts which emerged in Imperial and Soviet period, in the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories? How do conspiracy theories enable political elites to reinforce their power claims? What is the impact of conspiracy theories on electoral campaigns?

The timeliness of the topic and the ever-growing impact of conspiracy theories on today's Russian society explain the post-Soviet period focus of the thesis. The emergence of democratic and market institutions in Russia after the collapse of the USSR transformed society and opened the way for the democratization of the country. However, the rise of authoritarian trends, which have gradually undermined existing democratic institutions in the country, have led to doubts being cast over the Russian state's transition from state socialism to democracy. Despite that, many elements of a democratic regime remain but they have acquired a specific form in the country. In an attempt to demarginalize conspiracy theories and instead approach them as an integral part of the democratic process, this thesis will test the applicability of the models, initially developed in Western democratic countries, to the non-Western transitional political regime.

⁴ Among a few examples of research on the impact of conspiracy theories on modern Russian political discourse, see, Richard Sakwa, "Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics: The Case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War," *The Russian Review* 71, 4 (2012): 581-609, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9434.2012.00670.x.

The thesis starts with a study of the role of public intellectuals in the articulation of anti-Western conspiracy discourse and analyzes the strategies employed to disseminate this discourse in the public space through the media and book publishing. It is further demonstrated how these activities supply Russia's political leadership with concepts which are utilized to discursively polarize society between "the majority of Russian people" and the "conspiring minority" of various civic actors with alleged links to the West.

Historical Background

The phenomenon of conspiracy theory has a long and manifold tradition in Russian intellectual thought. The concept of conspiracy was transferred to Russia from European intellectual thought in the 18th century.⁵ However, it did not undergo any significant development until the mid-19th century when the combination of several factors led to its rapid growth in the public sphere. Some of the main factors included the impact of nationalist ideas which started proliferating in the Romanov Empire, the growing number of educated people able to produce these ideas and disseminate them through publications, and the rapid modernization of social, economic and political life after the Crimean war.

In the second half of the 19th century, conspiracy theories were utilized mainly by the conservative intellectual elites dissatisfied with the changes that were taking place in Russian society, whose origins were perceived to be linked to a European influence on Russia. They tended to perceive the West as a hostile entity foreign to Russian national culture. However, government officials, even those sympathising with anti-Western conspiratorial explanations, often avoided supporting conspiracy theories publicly, leaving this to journalists, writers and intellectuals whose impact on public opinion was significant. Among the first groups of intellectuals who started openly to use the idea of conspiracy in their interpretation of domestic and foreign policies were the so-called "*okbraniteli*" and late Slavophiles, amongst whom the most prominent figures were journalist Mikhail Katkov, thinker Nikolaï Danilevskii and writer Fedor Dostoevskii. Their clear anti-Western ideological framework defined the place of conspiracy theories in the political discourse of late Imperial Russia.⁶

Whereas the political and intellectual elites of Imperial Russia occasionally utilized ideas of conspiracy to secure their positions and justify the suspension of liberal reforms, in

⁵ Andreï Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla. Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossii v poslednej treti XVIII – pervoj treti XIX veka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), 67-94.

⁶ Pëtr Riabov, "Mikhail Katkov ili Ideologiia Okhranki: po povodu odnogo sbornika stateč," *Forum noveishej vostočnoevropejskoj istorii i kul'tury*, no. 2 (2010): 35-68, <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss14/2Riabov.pdf>; Vardan E. Bagdasarian, *Teoriia zagovora v otechestvennoj istoriografii vtoroj poloviny 19-20 vv.* (Moscow: Signal, 1999).

the Soviet period these ideas were put to new use. The politics of a large scale social and economic modernization led to an instrumental deployment of conspiracy discourse in Soviet propaganda, particularly manifested in the image of the “enemy of the people” (*vrag naroda*). Joseph Stalin’s *Kratkii kurs VKPb* (*A Short Course of VKPb*) provided the ultimate juxtaposition of the USSR to the forces of world imperialism and this justified the active usage of conspiratorial notions against political opponents. As a result, the trials against “enemies of the people,” especially during the Great Purge of the 1930s, fostered paranoid suspiciousness in society.⁷ On the one hand, the image of an internal, conspiring enemy had a deep effect on the Russian national identity. In the following decades the trend to shape this identity through references to the “conspiring Western rival” became the ideological foundation of Russian nationalists.⁸ Moreover, the notion of conspiracy was actively used to delegitimize political opponents and legitimize violence against various social groups. On the other hand, the political persecution of different groups within society and the atmosphere of fear also unwittingly laid the foundations of a general suspicion towards authority, effectively creating a framework for anti-government conspiracy thinking. Consequently, the legacy of both the Imperial period and, especially, the Soviet period of Russian history can be seen in popular perception of the social realm in post-Soviet Russian society, when socioeconomic and political changes are interpreted as a result of conspiracy.

Literature Review

Despite the importance of conspiracy theories in certain periods of Russian history, they are rarely examined in scholarship. The topic is gradually receiving more attention, but there are still many gaps and blank spots which demand considerate analysis. It is worth emphasizing that there is currently no detailed analysis of conspiracy theories in the context of Russian history and Russian politics. Occasional references to conspiracy theories can be found in publications that deal with Russian nationalism, anti-Semitism and various ideological aspects of domestic politics in Soviet and post-Soviet periods. These works rarely examine in depth the origins and impact of conspiracy theories on society and tend to emphasize particular social and political communities’ specific thinking patterns. Apart from that, the majority of Russian authors tend to look at conspiracy theories without taking into consideration work by their colleagues in Western academia. Still, some Russian authors have

⁷ Igal Halfin, “The Demonization of the Opposition: Stalinist Memory and the ‘Communist Archive’ at Leningrad Communist University,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 1 (2001): 45-80.

⁸ Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia. Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

paid considerable attention to certain aspects of Russian conspiracy mythmaking and, to some extent, have laid the foundations for further research of the issue.

Studies of Russian Anti-Jewish Conspiracy Theories

Most research on Russian conspiracy theories has focused on the notion of the “Jewish conspiracy,” and falls within the framework of Jewish studies. The origins of this social phenomenon have been traced to the Imperial period. Particular attention has been paid to the notorious anti-Jewish pamphlet, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which dates from the end of the 19th century, and which claims that the Jews stood at the centre of a global conspiracy causing revolutions and rebellions. The origins of this document are still contentious. Most probably, it originated from traditional anti-Jewish hatred, which increased considerably in the second half of the 19th century. However, as Michael Hagemester has demonstrated, the narrative about the emergence and dissemination of the *Protocols* itself has a strong conspiratorial character which indicates the difficulties involved in identifying the main source of the hoax.⁹

Saveliĭ Dudakov’s *Istoriia odnogo mifa*, published in 1993, made a thorough examination of anti-Jewish conspiratorial attitudes in Russian 19th century fiction, which laid the foundations for the successful dissemination of the *Protocols*.¹⁰ Dudakov argued that the striking success of the idea of a “Jewish-Masonic conspiracy” in late Imperial Russia was based on an abundance of belles-lettres literature popularizing the idea that Jews subverted Russian political stability through financial and revolutionary activities.

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the main focus of scholarly research was the reappropriation of the Russian Imperial tradition of anti-Jewish conspiracy mythmaking in the post-Soviet period. Indeed, the intellectual heritage of the radical nationalist groups of late Imperial Russia was employed by authors of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in the 1980s-1990s. The idea of a “Jewish conspiracy” against the Russian nation was adopted by national patriotic political parties at the end of the 1980s; this provoked concerns among observers. Walter Laquer’s book *Black Hundreds* provides insight into the ideology of the late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian nationalism and investigates the place of conspiracy thinking within it.¹¹ Laquer’s main focus was also on the *Protocols*, although he additionally attempted to explore political divisions among Russian right wing radicals in the context of the democratization of the late Soviet period. Laquer’s account of anti-Semitic conspiracy

⁹ Michael Hagemester, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction,” *New German Critique* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 94-95.

¹⁰ Saveliĭ Dudakov, *Istoriia odnogo mifa: ocherki russkoĭ literatury XIX-XX vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993).

¹¹ Walter Laquer, *Black Hundreds: the Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

theories was somewhat descriptive, rather than analytical, and it did not explore the ways in which conspiracy theories were employed in politics.

In the 2000s, Russian historian Victor Shnirel'man outlined a few of the elements of conspiracy thinking that could be found among Russian devotees of neo-paganism and he investigated the origins of the anti-Semitic myths which had become essential to the conspiracy narratives found in the corpus of Russian national patriotic literature.¹² At the same time, philosopher Vadim Rossman offered a comprehensive analysis of various aspects of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories among pro-communist forces (National Bolsheviks), national patriotic forces (Neo-Eurasians and Neo-Slavophiles) and Russian Pagans.¹³ This analysis demonstrated how broad and diverse the spectre of anti-Semitic conspiracy conceptualisations was among different social and intellectual groups in post-Soviet Russia.

Studies of Conspiracy Theories in Imperial and Soviet Russia

Research on conspiracy theories has not been limited to explorations of anti-Semitism, although this has had a considerable impact on the study of this phenomenon in general. By the end of the 1990s, scholarly interest in Russian conspiracy theories had expanded into the study of anti-Western attitudes. By this time, scholars had managed to collect and analyse documents previously hidden in Soviet archives and special closed library holdings (*spetskhrany*), which allowed the phenomenon to be explored from new angles.

Among the Russian works that merit consideration in this respect is Vardan Bagdasarian's *Teoriia zagovora v otechestvennoĭ istoriografii vtoroi poloviny 19-20 vv.*, in which the author documents a large set of conspiracy theories which appeared in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁴ Bagdasarian concentrated on the concept of conspiracy in the intellectual thought of Imperial and Soviet Russia, only briefly describing its evolution in post-Soviet Russia. According to Bagdasarian, conspiracy theories emerged in Russian society in the mid-19th century primarily as a result of the Russian defeat in the Crimean war of 1853-1856 and of liberal reforms of the 1860-1870s. They were then disseminated by various conservative groups in Russian society, such as the Slavophiles and radical nationalists, who were resistant to liberal changes. While offering a thorough exploration of various conspiracy concepts, Bagdasarian failed to develop a clear and systematic methodology with which to study the

¹² Viktor Shnirel'man, *The Myth of the Khazars and Intellectual Antisemitism in Russia, 1970s-1990s* (Jerusalem: The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002); Viktor Shnirel'man, *Khazarskii mif: ideologĭia politicheskogo radikalizma v Rossii i eĭ istoki* (Moscow: Mosty kultury, 2012); Viktor Shnirel'man, *Russkoe rodnoverie. Neoiazychestvo i natsionalizm v sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: BBI, 2012).

¹³ Vadim Rossman, *Russian Intellectual Antisemitism in the Post-Communist Era* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Bagdasarian, *Teoriia zagovora v otechestvennoĭ istoriografii vtoroi poloviny 19-20 vv.*

topic, and consequently produced no more than a detailed guide to Russian conspiracy theories and authors.

A lack of clear methodological framework characterizes another work on Russian conspiracy theories, published by Mikhail Khlebnikov in 2012.¹⁵ The author traced the emergence of conspiracy theories in Russia from two sources: the movement of Judaizers (*eres' zhidovstvniushchikb*) in the late medieval period and secret societies in the 18th century, primarily the Freemasons. Taking these two socio-political and religious movements as the progenitors of conspiracy theories in Russia, the author documented different facts about secret societies and various conspiracy theories, which existed in Russia in the past. As in Bagdasarian's case, the absence of any clear methodology in Khlebnikov's research significantly reduced his ability to investigate the roots and development of the phenomenon, as well as its social and political impact.

At the same time, the opening of Soviet archives allowed scholars to investigate the origins of specific conspiratorial ideas and to focus on less explored historical cases. William Fuller's study of fears of subversion in the Russian Empire on the eve of World War I demonstrated the all-pervasiveness of conspiracy theories among different groups of society at that time. Fuller argued that the pattern of conspiracy thinking, together with other social and political developments, prepared the intellectual basis of the February and October revolutions of 1917.¹⁶ Fear of treason and conspiracy, according to Fuller, became the accepted way of interpreting politics in late Imperial Russia, which foreshadowed the consequent development of a conspiracy culture in the Soviet period.

Studies of Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia

Turbulent political changes of the early 1990s in Russia and high profile activities of ultranationalist parties, which disseminated anti-Western conspiracy theories, gave rise to fears about a quick triumph of dictatorship in post-Soviet Russia. Perhaps the most famous example of such a view is Alexander Yanov's book *After Yeltsin: "Weimar" Russia*, in which the author analysed the ideology of Russian anti-Western intellectuals after the collapse of the Soviet Union. An interesting detail of Yanov's work is that while reviewing anti-Western conspiracy fears among radical Russian nationalists, Yanov himself seemed to share the conspiracy-like idea of "international fascist capital" being used to finance various ultranationalist groups in Russia, the country, he argued, that they had chosen as the stage for a "conservative revolution."¹⁷

¹⁵ Mikhail Klebnikov, *"Teoriia zagovora": opyt sotsiokul'turnogo issledovaniia* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2012)

¹⁶ William C. Fuller Jr., *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Alexander Yanov, *After Yeltsin: "Weimar" Russia* (Moscow: KRUK, 1995), 103, 106.

In 2012, Stefanie Ortman and John Heathershaw in the introductory article of a special issue of *The Russian Review* suggested that conspiracy theories in post-Soviet space should be examined within the broader context of current conspiracy culture worldwide.¹⁸ The authors argued that conspiracy theories are a product of anxiety over lost control of reality, which in the post-Soviet Russian conditions of a collapsed state lead to a conspiratorial logic appearing to be a useful means of comprehending the world. Moreover, the weakness of democratic institutions denies many people the opportunity to realize political rights, which reinforces the feeling of powerlessness and further contributes to the proliferation of conspiracy mythmaking.¹⁹ Though listing some major aspects of conspiracy thinking, this short article primarily helped reassess the role of conspiracy theories in Russia's political and social life by identifying the main gaps in existing scholarship, rather than by filling them.

In the new millennium, scholars have noted an ideological shift from fears of the “Western conspiracy,” traditionally popular amongst Russian nationalists, to fears of the “migrant conspiracy,” which seeks to destroy the Russian nation by infiltrating it.²⁰ Although this shift has not affected the entire spectrum of nationalist groups, this trend—indicating a gradual integration into Western European radical nationalist thought—has marked several conceptual changes in the pattern of Russian ultranationalist conspiracy mythmaking.²¹

The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping the ideological underpinnings of the Russian state in the 2000s also attracted scholarly attention and prompted analysis of certain aspects of Russian Orthodox ideology, which involved frequent references to the struggle with the “Western subversion” of Russia.²²

Popular nostalgia about the Soviet Union and growing anti-Western attitudes among Russians in the 2000s has attracted scholarly interest to the origins of these phenomena. Serguei Oushakine's *The Patriotism of Despair* has become one of few studies in this field to acknowledge the role of conspiracy theory in these processes and to analyse the impact of

¹⁸ Stefanie Ortman and John Heathershaw, “Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space,” *The Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 551-564, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9434.2012.00668.x.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 558-559.

²⁰ Marlène Laruelle, “The Ideological Shift on the Russian Radical Right: From Demonizing the West to Fear of Migrants,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 57, no. 6 (November-December 2010): 19-31.

²¹ Thomas Parland, *The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia: The Growing influence of Western Rightist ideas* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

²² Alexander Verkhovsky, “Holy Russia Versus the Fallen World: Conservative Orthodox Mythologies in Contemporary Russia,” in *Nationalist Myths and Modern media: Contested Identities in the Age of Globalization* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006) 229-242.

conspiracy theories on the new post-Soviet Russian identity.²³ Focusing on the traumatic experience of residents of the Russian region of Altaï, Oushakine showed that conspiracy theories could be an efficient tool for achieving social cohesion and defining the collective identities of newly emerging communities.

The rise in popularity of history writing which describes Russia as a victim of conspiracy of external forces has been analysed in several publications.²⁴ Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown explored the transformation of the neo-Eurasian ideology of mathematician and amateur history writer Anatoliï Fomenko.²⁵ The authors connected the rise of alternative history writing in Russia to the crisis of national identity and made a thorough analysis of the conspiratorial aspect of Fomenko's works. In turn, Marlene Laruelle offered a broad overview of conspiracy theories in the amateur history writings of post-Soviet Russia.²⁶ Laruelle concluded that the popularity of pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories could be explained in terms of representatives of the former Soviet intelligentsia losing their social status and value, and experiencing the Soviet collapse as a major social catastrophe. However, despite a particular focus on conspiratorial concepts, these works failed to situate the conspiratorial ideas within Russia's broad socio-political landscape and assess their impact on Russian society.

Richard Sakwa studied the role of conspiracy theories in Russian foreign policymaking based on the case of the war in Georgia in 2008. Sakwa suggested that conspiracy theories represent a "distinctive mode of engagement in international politics."²⁷ He analyzed different conspiratorial narratives used to describe the conflict both in Russia and Georgia, as well as among European political elites, thus identifying the conspiratorial underpinnings of international politics. Still, this valuable analysis does not go far enough in considering the impact of conspiracy theories on the domestic and global political level. Perceived as an element of the post-Cold war era, conspiracy theories were simply described as a narrative, which reinforced the interpretation of the conflict.

²³ Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University press, 2009). See also Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "Stop the Invasion!: Money, Patriotism, and Conspiracy in Russia," *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (2009): 71-116.

²⁴ See, for example, Francis King, "Making Virtual (Non)sense of the Past: Russian Nationalist Interpretations of Twentieth-century History on the Internet," in *Nationalist Myths and Modern media: Contested Identities in the Age of Globalization*, 215-228.

²⁵ Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, *Nationalist Imaginings of the Russian Past. Anatoliï Fomenko and the Rise of Alternative History in Post-Communist Russia* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2009).

²⁶ Marlene Laruelle, "Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?" *The Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 565-580, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9434.2012.00669.x.

²⁷ Sakwa, "Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics": 581.

This overview allows us to draw several conclusions. On the one hand, a certain foundation has already been laid in the form of existing research on Russian nationalism and Russian anti-Semitism. On the other hand, most of the aforementioned works are not concerned with conspiracy theories themselves, often treating them as a component of broader nationalist thinking. Most works simply identify the conspiratorial elements in the context of the studied issue, but they lack a clear methodology and fail to investigate the political and social roles that these theories play. The phenomenon, therefore, remains under-researched and needs further investigation in the context of Russian history and politics. Moreover, scholarly interest in conspiracy theories has mainly focused on the anti-Semitic aspect of Russian conspiracy mythmaking. The corpus of conspiracy theories in Russia is not confined to anti-Jewish and anti-migrant hatred and can easily be identified in the mainstream political discourse of the authorities and opposition. Essential research questions, such as the origins of anti-Western conspiracy theories, their role in the political development of post-Soviet Russian society and the ways in which they have been applied by the elites, have been left unexplored, and thus allow space for further study. Last, but not least, most works which refer to conspiracy theories in the Russian context do not incorporate methodological advances in studying conspiracy theories, developed on the basis of other national cases. In this context, for instance, the studies of American conspiracy culture provide an excellent opportunity to shape the methodological apparatus for studying the “Russian case” of conspiracy mythmaking.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology of the Project

Particularly heated debates related to methodological approaches to studying social and political functions of conspiracy theories have taken place around the case of the United States. Despite the obvious political and social differences between Russia and the United States the methodological framework, which can be developed in relation to the latter case, can be applied productively to the former, as this thesis aims to demonstrate. In fact, the application of the North American academic legacy of studying the phenomenon is also the way to avoid the limitations of Bagdasarian’s and Khlebnikov’s works.

The phenomenon of conspiracy theory has been an object of scholarly research in Western academia for almost seventy years. In 1945 Karl Popper’s seminal work *The Open Society and its Enemies* briefly suggested that conspiracy theories rise from the secularisation of modern society and substitute abandoned gods.²⁸ In turn, Richard Hofstadter’s concept of “paranoid style”, coined in the 1960s, became a significant frame to analyze the phenomenon. Hofstadter’s approach is sometimes called “symbolic” due to its emphasis on the symbolic

²⁸ Karl Raimund Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 2: 94-96.

dimension of politics and stress on the non-rational part of political logic.²⁹ Merging the clinical term “paranoid” with historical analysis, Hofstadter thus described conspiracy theorists’ ways of perceiving the world. Hofstadter portrayed a persecuted person caught in a rather mythological world where everything was connected and was a part of an overarching plan to rule the world. Those caught up in conspiracy fears tend to believe that the history of humankind itself is a grand conspiracy.³⁰ Hofstadter argued that a conspiracy theorist believes that he is involved in a struggle with an infallibly rational and evil enemy, “...leaving nothing unexplained and comprehending all of reality in one overreaching, consistent theory.”³¹

This judgmental conceptualization of conspiracy theories became a dominant approach to the studying of the subject for many years. In the 1990s Daniel Pipes along the same lines divided conspiracy theories into petty and world conspiracy theories, as well as extended them to the left of the political spectrum.³² Developing his idea in the era of McCarthyism, Hofstadter saw the main threat of conspiracy theories in the right-wing populism. In turn, being under the influence of the Cold War, Pipes extended the “paranoid style” to left-wing politicians, focusing on conspiracy theories popular among communists. Pipes carefully sets out the structural elements of conspiracy mythmaking, depicting the adherent of conspiracy thinking as someone who interprets history as a process directed exclusively towards the realization of a grand plan. Lust for power and a firm belief that nothing happens by accident but by the secretive agreements of powerful people become major pillars of the paranoid mentality, which causes oversimplification which conspiracy theories always entail.³³

Neither Hofstadter nor his followers proposed a robust framework for dealing with conspiracy theories. Rather than considering such framework, Pipes suggests that everyone who is concerned about the popularity of conspiracy theories should join a “perpetual struggle” whenever traces of conspiracy thinking are exposed.³⁴ As some scholars have noted, these judgemental suggestions in defining what exactly a conspiracy theory is make authors

²⁹ Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 272-300.

³⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 29-30.

³¹ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 36-37.

³² Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 21.

³³ For other examples of this approach see Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

³⁴ Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 49.

advancing such arguments not entirely dissimilar to the objects of their studies.³⁵ The “symbolic” approach is certainly helpful in detecting conspiracy theories in public narratives. However, it fails to provide the necessary tools for a balanced analysis of the causes and prerequisites for conspiracy fears in the modern world.

Another approach towards conspiracy theories shifts attention to manipulation and real political interests and is often described as “realist” or “rationalist.” Scholars who adopt this position argue that “it is neither accurate nor useful to portray right-wing populists as a ‘lunatic fringe’ of marginal ‘extremists’” since they represent ordinary people, our neighbours and co-workers, whose rhetoric and actions have mundane reasons.³⁶ According to this approach, conspiracy theories are the product of small marginal groups (mostly, from the Far Right) who exploit populist anti-elitist rhetoric to scapegoat certain groups of society. Consequently, conspiracy theories become a tool of manipulation for right-wing groups and politicians who use these notions for the purposes of mobilization and for delegitimization of their opponents. Unlike “symbolists,” scholars of the “rationalist” approach argue that popular conspiracy fears become part of comprehensible political projects that are used by the political leaders to achieve political and economic goals. Although the propagated fears could sometimes be bizarre and exaggerated, their rationalist core points to the clearly identified interests of certain groups.

Although the “realist” concept is relatively instrumentalist and is based on the perception of conspiracy theories as a political tool, the emphasis on the psychological component of beliefs in conspiracy theories gives it a common ground with the “symbolist” approach. However, the evocation of psychopathology and references to anxiety amongst advocates of conspiracy theories (which at times is indeed clearly manifested) are still unable to explain the popularity of conspiracy theories in modern culture. While the “symbolist” approach overlooks the “functional” aspect of conspiracy thinking, the “realist” approach is unable to locate clearly the conspiratorial mode of thinking in various domains of political and popular culture. A common shortcoming of the concepts we have discussed is their overstigmatization of conspiracy thinking, even though both Hofstadter and Berlet point out that sometimes conspiracy theories could be “on to something” or have some factual basis in real politics, such as existence of real conspiracies.

The extraordinary sweep of conspiracy theories in the 1990s in all spheres of public life in the USA demonstrated that conspiracy theories had more social functions in modern

³⁵ Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 63-64

³⁶ Chip Berlet and Matthew Nemiroff Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close For Comfort* (New York: The Gulford Press, 2000), 3-4.

society than being merely a tool for crackpots to comprehend the world. Hence, in the late 1990s a new approach had been introduced that suggested that conspiracy theories could be a certain defining mode of rational thinking, or a portal “through which social phenomena were discussed.”³⁷

The starting assumption for this approach is the idea that the existing interpretations of conspiracy theories are unable to explain the popularity of conspiracy theories among people with different political views. It has been pointed out that conspiracy theories, which previously had been associated with particular social or political groups, gradually evolved into a more wide-spread way of to interpret reality. After losing the label of marginality, the idea of conspiracy transformed into the regular mode of cultural life and was now employed by writers, filmmakers and even musicians who turned it into the mainstream concept of ordinary life of modern society.³⁸ Moreover, the dilemma that the academic community faced in analyzing the nature of conspiracy mythmaking in the 1990s still had no clear-cut solution: to what extent could a certain story be regarded as a conspiracy theory and to what extent could conspiracy theories contain some factual elements with the basis in politics, economics and culture? The real conspiracies of the past largely determine the perception of conspiracy ideas in the present, providing the basis for public trust in conspiratorial explanations.³⁹

The new approach to conspiracy discourse, free from the traditionally dismissive attitude, helps navigate through the complexity of popular politics of modernity and reveal more clearly some of its social functions. Acknowledging that conspiracy theories could have productive influences, one could find that it might serve as an efficient tool for the interpretation of power relationships in the modern world. At the same time conspiracy notions within the context of open, democratic society could be revealed as a challenge to the existing social and political state of things in order to transform it in a positive (or negative) way. Placing at the centre of the approach the idea that conspiracy theory could constitute an important “creative response” to the changing life and an “everyday epistemological quick-fix to often intractably complex problems” helps scholars avoid the inevitable marginalization of conspiracy discourse and to emphasize power as a determining attribute in the division of

³⁷ Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 6.

³⁸ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 232-260.

³⁹ The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment was conducted from 1932 to 1972 in Tuskegee, Alabama, to study the impact of untreated syphilis on humans, while the patients who participated in it thought they were receiving free health care from the government.

politics.⁴⁰ Indeed, as Mark Fenster argues, conspiracy theories could serve as “a means to rally support” and at the same time to delegitimize opposition “by branding their beliefs as paranoid.”⁴¹ Thus, this new approach is based on the recognition that conspiracy theories can become an important tool for the redistribution of power and an efficient political strategy to expose inequities of political, economic and social order.

Acknowledging the possibility that the reliance on conspiracy theories can be an efficient political strategy inevitably leads us to a discussion of the forms which are used to appeal to the centres of power in order to urge it to redistribute its resources. The prevailing method of vocalizing conspiracy theories on a political level is through the use of populist rhetoric, and this allows Fenster to conclude that conspiracy theory is a populist theory of power. Conspiracy theories possess an important communicative function by helping to unite the audience as “the people” against the imagined “Other” represented by the secretive “power bloc.” Their usage in the populist rhetoric of authoritarian and fascist regimes is therefore logical due to the powerful ability of conspiracy discourse to express fears and, thus, foster the gathering of “the people.” However, since the existence of conspiracy theories, especially today, is not confined to authoritarian regimes, Fenster defines conspiracy mythmaking as an “ideological misrecognition of power relations” which may occur in any political system.⁴²

Fenster’s argument is built on the broad interpretation of populism introduced by Francisco Panizza and Ernesto Laclau who argue that populism is “a mode of identification available to any actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary.”⁴³ The important feature of this conceptualization is its antagonistic division of the social into two camps; this creation of a political frontier helps maintain the political category of “the people” by introducing the common problem in the form of demand.⁴⁴ “The people,” united on the basis of popular demand oppose the “Other,” the power bloc; this represents the typical juxtaposition of “Us” versus “Them.” In Laclau’s words, the social is divided into two camps: “the power” and “the underdog.” “The underdog’s” appeal is based on popular demands and its role is to challenge the social order

⁴⁰ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: American Paranoia from the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), 8.

⁴¹ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10.

⁴² Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 84-90.

⁴³ Francisco Panizza, “Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 4.

⁴⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 83, 224.

and gain power, thereby fulfilling popular demands.⁴⁵ In doing so, populism also performs the function of gathering different elements of the social into a new identity.⁴⁶ Accordingly, this reading of populism does not deny its presence in a democratic society; on the contrary, it can manifest a necessary challenge to the existing democratic order when the latter fails to address certain cutting-edge issues.

This interpretation of populism has an obvious connection to the functions of conspiracy theory. The invention of “the people” in its various forms (depending on a given “demand”) very often requires a clear and persuasive image of the “Other” that can efficiently be provided by the conspiracy narrative through the generation of a fear of a foreign or internal deception and subversion. This “communicative” function of conspiracy theory plays a significant role in political discourses, creating political identities. In addition, such discourses also address concerns about the inequities of a social system and occasionally pose a positive challenge to the existing social order.⁴⁷ As we shall see, this understanding of conspiracy theory can fruitfully be deployed in an analysis of the Russian case of conspiracy mythmaking and its place in domestic politics.

Fenster’s understanding of conspiracy theories provides a useful set of instruments with which to analyze the Russian case of conspiracy myth-making. First, by enabling us to abandon the traditional reading of conspiracy theories, as the easily dismissible paranoia of cranks, it serves as an efficient precondition for studying the role of conspiracy fears in the process of nation-building and the formation of collective identities. The emergence of nation-states that created sovereign people and, thus, established a path to democracy set conditions for populism. The populist rhetoric, in turn, enabled politicians to discursively divide the social into two camps in search of the Other to correspond to “the people.” In other words, it is only possible to name the people by naming its’ Other.⁴⁸

In the case of Russian national identity, the ultimate “Other,” historically, has been the West, often imagined as “a single undifferentiated entity . . . regarded either as a positive model for Russia to emulate or as a negative example to be rejected,” that has served to define the borders of national identity and its place in world history.⁴⁹ In this context, fears of anti-Western conspiracy arise as a part of the so-called “ressentiment” that was born from the recognition of the discrepancy between Russia and its ideal, the “West,” and which operated

⁴⁵ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in the Name?” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, 37-38.

⁴⁶ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 93-101.

⁴⁷ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 89-90.

⁴⁸ Panizza, “Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,” 6.

⁴⁹ Vera Tolz, *Russia* (London: Arnold, 2001), 70.

to demonstrate Russia's equality or superiority to it.⁵⁰ In the mind of a typical Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as an ultimate and insidious "Other" seeking to undermine the progress of the Russian nation to its glorious future. The appreciation of conspiracy theories as a pivotal instrument for the construction of national identity helps us investigate the division of social politics within the domestic arena and explore the genesis and discursive maintenance of Russia as "the actor" of world politics.⁵¹

Second, when used to analyse domestic politics in post-Soviet Russian society, this approach enables us to explore the creation of political identities and the struggle for power within the country. The acknowledgment that conspiracy theory is an inherent feature of the popular political discourse of most societies, even democratic ones, allows the post-Soviet Russian political process to be understood as a set of specific "demands" that reflect the vital issues of transitional society. Employed by various Russian political actors to explain the immense change and complexities of economic and social relations, domestic developments, international relations and cultural processes, the language of conspiracy offers a symbolic resolution to the issue of responsibility for problems and reflects an attempt to oversimplify the nature of events.⁵² This approach makes it possible to account for the fact that virtually all the main actors in political life in post-Soviet Russia have employed the rhetoric of conspiracy: it enables them to strengthen the basis of legitimacy in competing with each other for public support and power resources.

It should be particularly noted that the approach used by Fenster employs the theory of populism to study the division of a nation into the "treacherous elite" and the "trustworthy people." Hence, his methodology is applied to research specific aspects of domestic politics of a democratic state, in which the discursive division of society is performed to frame the discussion of various issues of domestic agenda. Acknowledging the methodological value of Fenster's study, this thesis explores the issue, which was not covered in the aforementioned book. Therefore, the thesis studies how conspiracy theory as an element of populist politics is applied to fostering national cohesion. It demonstrates that the utilization of anti-Western conspiracy theories at public level by political elites discursively divides the world between "the West" as a single entity perceived as a powerful elite, and Russian political leaders and intellectuals as speakers on the side of "the people."

This thesis analyses the role of conspiracy theories in political discourse, which consists of political documents, as well as public speeches of politicians. It shows that

⁵⁰ Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 234.

⁵¹ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37.

⁵² Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 32.

politicians often selectively use conspiratorial concepts, ideas and theories, which have been already elaborated by public intellectuals, whose writings also constitute the source base for this thesis. The sources are analysed through a close and informed reading of texts, which are contextualized within the historical and political situation of their time of publication.

Particular attention in the thesis is paid to the interpretative frames which authors and various distributors of conspiracy theories use in order to explain their arguments. Using a set of analytic tools drawn from a mainstream type of discourse analysis, the primary sources in this thesis are analyzed to see how a particular type of discourse, the anti-Western conspiracy discourse, attempts to constitute social reality.⁵³ Following Erving Goffman's definition of frames, namely, one particular scheme of interpretation of events and occurrences that prevails over other interpretations, conspiracy theories are understood as a specific type of social frame, one which identifies and discusses the origins of events as the outcome of a secret plot.⁵⁴ The application of conspiratorial frames allows various social actors and social movements to define and problematize social, political and economic issues thus pursuing political goals.⁵⁵

For the analysis of texts, this thesis also applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provides a wide set of tools to study both language and the societal developments reflected through it. CDA understands discourse as a form of social practice "which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices."⁵⁶ At the same time, CDA is a key methodological tool able to reveal the means by which language is employed to exercise power and the extent to which linguistic elements can determine social reality. This approach implies that discourse possesses an ideological effect contributing to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between different social groups, which means that in practice the goal of the approach is to uncover how language contributes to the maintenance of power in society.⁵⁷

Given that this thesis is primarily concerned with the employment of conspiracy theories by political and intellectual elites in Russia, three groups of carriers of the conspiracy

⁵³ Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 10.

⁵⁴ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 21.

⁵⁵ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611-639.

⁵⁶ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 61.

⁵⁷ Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 63.

discourse are identified and analyzed in terms of their salience, their impact on domestic politics and the degree to which conspiracy theories are utilized.

The first group consists of members of the executive branch of the government. This includes the President and the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and members of their Staff. This group also includes leaders of the United Russia party whose influence and decisions are pivotal for determining domestic political agenda.

The second group is public intellectuals. It consists of writers, journalists, political scientists, spin doctors and pseudoacademics who produce and disseminate conspiracy theories. In many respects, they shape the intellectual framework of conspiracy discourse and develop the conceptual apparatus, hence making it relevant to the current political agenda. They support political actions of the authorities with relevant information materials, justify political decisions and provide explanation to political events through journal articles, interviews and public appearances broadcast by the media.

The third group consists of politicians who are members of political parties and political movements, irrespective of their political views and representation in the legislative body. These include politicians of communist-patriotic parties (KPRF and Rodina), national-patriotic parties (LDPR and, centrist parties (United Russia). Compared with the previous two groups, parliamentary deputies play only a small part in the production of anti-Western conspiracy theories. Therefore, in this thesis references to them are limited. Nevertheless, their popularity in the country contributes to the further promotion of conspiratorial notions among the general public.

Structure of the Thesis

The dissertation consists of **five** chapters.

Chapter 1 studies the place of public intellectuals in the process of production and dissemination of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia. It investigates the ways of collaboration of Russian intellectuals with the authorities and discusses the means which are used by prominent public intellectuals and media persons to introduce conspiracy theories into the mainstream political discourse. A particular attention in the chapter is given to the study of the transfer of conspiracy theories from Western European countries and the US to Russia. Based on Michel Foucault concept of the knowledge-power relationship the chapter attempts to demonstrate how conspiracy discourse, if perceived as a specific type of knowledge, reinforces claims for power of the political elites.

Chapter 2 analyses conspiratorial narratives around the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and their application in domestic politics. It demonstrates how the conspiratorial reading of two events - the August 1991 coup and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet state -

became a powerful political instrument. The chapter shows how political opposition to President El'tsin in the 1990s utilized the corpus of conspiracy theories about the Soviet collapse. It then shows how the Kremlin officials borrowed the conspiratorial notions from the opposition rhetoric and used them against their political opponents in the 2000s.

Chapter 3 examines the impact of conspiracy theories on the nation-building policies of the Kremlin in the 2000s. It studies the Kremlin's attempts in the 2000s to create a consolidated Russian national identity based on the concept of sovereign democracy, which was coined by Vladislav Surkov, former Deputy Head of the presidential administration. In order to examine the means of utilizing Surkov's ideas at the political level, the chapter pays a particular attention to the creation of the pro-Kremlin youth movement *Nashi* (Ours) as an active core of the nation, which stands against the West and the United States. The chapter also studies media strategies of constructing the nation by analysing the conspiratorial aspects of the Pussy Riot trial and the controversial television documentary *Gibel' Imperii: Vizantiiskii Urok* (*The Collapse of Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*).

Chapter 4 investigates the domestic application of anti-Western conspiracy theories and examines the role of conspiratorial narratives in the electoral campaigns in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012. Following Fenster's definition of conspiracy theories as a tool for redistribution of power between political actors, the chapter looks at how conspiracy theories were used to undermine public credibility of the Kremlin's political opponents in the critical periods for the regime. It shows the crucial effect which conspiracy theories can have on the results of elections and demonstrates a significant capacity swiftly to boost social cohesion within a short period of time.

Chapter 5 continues the focus on the means of the utilization of anti-Western conspiracy theories in domestic politics. Its primary focus is on the three campaigns against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which were based on the notion of the subversive "fifth column" within the state. The chapter examines the dynamics of the development of anti-Western conspiracy narratives and the evolution of political strategies applied against political opponents of the Kremlin. The chapter shows how the capacity of anti-Western conspiracy theories to undermine political legitimacy had a significant impact on the development of civil society in Russia.

Chapter 1. The Spectres of Conspiracy Mythmaking: Public Intellectuals and Anti-Western Discourse in post-Soviet Russia

Introduction

The role of public intellectuals in the development and promotion of conspiracy theories can hardly be overestimated.⁵⁸ The typical features of conspiracy theories, such as an excessive number of references and conformity to pseudoscientific approaches in writing, as described by Hofstadter in the 1960s, is an indication of intellectual work.⁵⁹ In order to be successful among the general public, conspiratorial explanation of changes taking place in society have to be at least superficially convincing and well-executed – two goals which intellectuals are particularly good at accomplishing. At the same time, a conspiracy theorist with high social status is, at least in theory, able to endow his or her interpretation with a certain academic credibility.

The development of Russian anti-Western conspiracy discourse is no exception. The core notion that the West is plotting against Russia started to be developed by Russian intellectuals in the second half of the 19th century and since then it has gained significant popularity among the Russian population, at times even enjoying the support of the government.⁶⁰ During the Soviet period, a corpus of anti-Western conspiracy notions was developed as a part of Stalin's propaganda; this later resurfaced in the ideology of the Russian nationalist movement, which was supported by prominent Soviet intellectuals as well as various factions within the Soviet government and disseminated by popular literary magazines.⁶¹ Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union created fertile ground for the dissemination of conspiracy myths among the Russian public through the proliferation of book publishing and the active utilization of conspiratorial myths in political debates. The idea of the conspiring West, articulated by national-patriotic forces, which was added to the ideological arsenal of El'tsin's opposition, rapidly received the support of several

⁵⁸ Given the fact that the phenomenon of the public intellectual attracted significant scholarly attention, for the purposes of this research I define a public intellectual as a renowned person whose activities are primarily aimed at the production and dissemination of knowledge among the general public.

⁵⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 35-38. On the pseudoscientific characteristics of modern conspiracy theories see, for example, David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories. The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 9-14.

⁶⁰Pëtr Riabov, "Mikhail Katkov ili Ideologija Okhranki?": 38.

⁶¹ For a detailed analysis of the role of intellectuals in the Russian nationalist movement during the Soviet era, see Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia. Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia Partia. Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR 1953-1985 gody* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003).

prominent academics, writers and public figures. Through this collective intellectual effort, anti-Western conspiracy discourse was turned into one of the main tropes figuring in the perception of history and global politics among Russians after 1991.

This chapter seeks to contextualize the role of public intellectuals in the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories as an element within a broader anti-Western ideological movement in post-Soviet Russia. Scholars in Russian studies have traditionally focused on concrete personalities and movements within the anti-Western intellectual camp, usually saying little about the conspiracy theories commonly deployed by their objects of study.⁶² This chapter goes beyond this traditional framework of analysis of anti-Western public intellectuals and looks precisely at the conspiratorial elements of their concepts in order to better understand the place and impact of conspiracy thinking on the Russian intellectual elite. Selected intellectuals are analyzed within the context of their political and public careers to enable an examination of their concepts that permits conclusions to be drawn about the interplay of conspiracy discourse and official political discourse.

In arguing that conspiracy theorists were adherents of the paranoid style, Hofstadter allocated a marginal role to conspiratorial views in American society. Fenster claimed that Hofstadter had been frightened by a rise of populist demagoguery in the 1950s, which he saw as disrupting the borders between the acceptable rationale of the mainstream politics and extreme populist utterances.⁶³ As a result, Hofstadter drew on the formula of the “paranoid style” as a means of excluding conspiracy theorists from mainstream politics. This exclusion and public criticism of individuals found promoting conspiracy theories took place in American society despite the high social and academic status of those involved. For that reason, conspiratorial discourse in the United States takes the form of an ostensibly anti-intellectual critique of political elites and conspiracy theorists often represent themselves as spokespersons of “ordinary people” and against the establishment.

In contrast to the United States, as the chapter will demonstrate, post-Soviet Russia saw its home conspiracy theorists often occupy high social and academic positions, with the

⁶² See, for example, Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: an Ideology of Empire* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); Laruelle, “Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia”; Andreas Umland, “Post-Soviet “Uncivil Society” and the Rise of Aleksandr Dugin: A Case Study of the Extraparliamentary Radical Right in Contemporary Russia” (PhD, Cambridge, 2007), http://www.academia.edu/2635113/Post-Soviet_Uncivil_Society_and_the_Rise_of_Aleksandr_Dugin_A_Case_Study_of_the_Extraparliamentary_Radical_Right_in_Contemporary_Russia_Ph_D_in_Politics_University_of_Cambridge_2007_; Stephen D. Shenfield, *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements* (Armonk: M.E.Sharpe, 2001); Keith Livers, “The Tower or the Labyrinth: Conspiracy, Occult, and Empire-Nostalgia in the Work of Viktor Pelevin and Aleksandr Prokhanov,” *The Russian Review* 69, (July 2010): 477-503.

⁶³ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theory*, 39.

view to raising the profile of their ideas. Academic credentials and proximity to power thus become key facilitators of anti-Western conspiracy discourse.

The role of public intellectuals in the process of the dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia can be analyzed through the application of Michel Foucault's concept of the relationship between power and knowledge. In Foucault's view, knowledge is an integral part of any struggle for power, and this understanding offers a framework through which to explore how the production of knowledge is able to reinforce power claims.⁶⁴ The study of the power/knowledge relationship can thus clarify the role intellectuals play in establishing power by means of intellectual endeavour. According to Foucault, intellectuals perform an important function in supporting a regime's claim to power and generating the concepts which structure society and its functions. A regime's stability is thus achieved at least partly through intellectuals' production of a discourse that helps define true and false statements, a process Foucault described as "the regime of truth."⁶⁵ Accordingly, as argued by Fenster, conspiracy theories become a type of knowledge produced by intellectuals in order to redistribute power between different political actors.⁶⁶ Conspiratorial discourses are populist discourses as they describe the division of society into "the people" and the "Other," and thus reinforce the claim for power on the part of the group which producers of the discourse currently represent.

Some scholars maintain that the application of Foucault's theories to a study of power relations in Russia is inherently problematic given the liminality of Russian culture, its position on the threshold of East and West.⁶⁷ This ambiguity makes Foucault's theories, which are rooted in analyses of Western European, particularly problematic to deploy in non-Western contexts. Laura Engelstein has gone even further in arguing that Foucault's theories cannot be applied in the case of Russia because of its cultural and political backwardness in comparison to Europe.⁶⁸ Although this study acknowledges the value of this debate in pointing out potential problems that might be encountered when drawing on Foucauldian methodology, it is nevertheless cognisant of the richness and complexity of analysis facilitated by this branch

⁶⁴ Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1980), 131-132.

⁶⁶ Fenster, *Conspiracy theories*, 89.

⁶⁷ Jan Plamper, "Foucault's Gulag," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 3, no. 2 (2002): 256.

⁶⁸ Laura Engelstein, "Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia," *The American Historical Review*, 98, no. 2 (1993): 342-343.

of social history; through a careful selection of its elements, scholars are able to produce valid and insightful results.⁶⁹

Therefore, basing my analysis of anti-Western conspiracy discourse after 1991 on Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, I argue that intellectuals from the opposition set out by first creating the main concepts of Western conspiracy against Russia and successfully disseminated them among the public, thus, reinforcing the opposition's power claims. However, by the 2010s a large proportion of the intellectuals deploying anti-Western conspiracy notions, and representing different political groups, had become connected to the Kremlin and had begun using their efforts to strengthen the political regime.

Finally, as the term "public intellectual" emerged in the Western intellectual tradition, the notion did not correspond entirely to the persons within the Russian sociocultural context chosen for this chapter. In general, public intellectuals are people whose professional occupation is connected to intellectual work (such as academics and writers). Their opinions, which are voiced in the public sphere, are either related to general ethical, aesthetic and philosophical issues, or they convert their knowledge of abstruse, often scientific, subjects into intelligible language for ordinary people. The value of the opinion of public intellectuals is corroborated by their excellence in their profession. Over the past few decades, American scholars have debated the changes in status of public intellectuals in American society and even suggested that these intellectuals are a "dying species" who will soon be replaced by bloggers.⁷⁰ However, other observers have suggested that the Internet has stimulated rather than retarded public debate and has lowered the barriers for informed discussions of non-academics on pressing issues of American society, hence further extending the category of public intellectuals.⁷¹

In the Russian case, the role of public intellectuals has been assigned to the representatives of the social group which could broadly be named the intelligentsia. Since the time of its emergence in Imperial Russia, the intelligentsia has considered itself part of the elite; it has often perceived itself as isolated from the masses and it has been preoccupied with

⁶⁹ Rudy Koshar, "Foucault and Social History: Comments on 'Combined Underdevelopment,'" *The American Historical Review*, 98, no. 2 (1993): 354-363. For an example of seminal application of Foucauldian theories to study Russian history, see, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ For the discussion, see, for example, Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), Russel Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), Russel Jacoby, "Big Brains, Small Impact," *The Chronicle Review*, January 11, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/article/Big-Brains-Small-Impact/11624>.

⁷¹ Daniel W. Drezner, "Public Intellectuals 2.0," Daniel W. Drezner official web-site, <http://chronicle.com/article/Public-Intellectual-20/25334/>.

politics.⁷² The Soviet regime mobilized a large part of the intelligentsia to serve the cause of the revolution and contribute to the creation of the state ideology thus again involving its members in politics.⁷³ However, dissent voices of the intelligentsia, who opposed the Soviet regime, emphasized the moral aspect of their activities and adopted a critical position to Soviet reality.⁷⁴ As a result, the involvement in politics of educated professionals, both on the side of the regime and in opposition to it, became an integral part of the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia.⁷⁵

Given the differences between socio-political and cultural contexts of the US and Russia, in this thesis public intellectuals are broadly defined as professionals who have achieved success in their occupation and contribute actively to the debates on burning issues of Russian politics, social, economic and cultural life.

The chapter will focus on four prominent public intellectuals who gained a high public profile post-1991 and invested heavily in the dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy notions. It will start by considering the role of Gleb Pavlovskii and his work as a leading pro-Kremlin spin doctor, whose *Foundation of Effective Politics*, a think tank which has been advising the presidential administration for over 15 years, was pivotal in shaping the ideological framework of Putin's regime. He used conspiracy theories instrumentally, applying them both in election campaigns and in shaping the ideological agenda of the Kremlin in the 2000s. He also enabled a number of public intellectuals who spread conspiracy theories attain influence in the media. This chapter will also study the works of a number of other intellectuals who have actively participated in the shaping of anti-Western conspiracy discourse: the philosopher Aleksandr Dugin; the writer and amateur historian Nataliia Narochnitskaia, and the journalist Maksim Shevchenko. Each of these intellectuals has spent a great deal of time promoting a specific set of conspiracy ideas and gained a high profile by being zealots of anti-Western ideology. All three represent one of the main visions of Russian nationhood: Dugin views Russia as a Eurasian empire, mostly leaving out the religious component. Narochnitskaia and Shevchenko, by contrast, put particular emphasis on the religious aspect of Russian nationhood. Narochnitskaia's vision of Russian identity is built upon Orthodox Christianity, while Shevchenko constantly stresses the importance of Islam for Russia. Despite this

⁷² Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 258.

⁷³ Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: the Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4-8.

⁷⁴ Jay Bergman, "Soviet Dissidents on the Russian Intelligentsia, 1956-1985: The Search for the Usable Past," *Russian Review* 51, no. 1 (January 1992): 18-19.

⁷⁵ See, for example, the interview with Maria Stepanova, a former editor-in chief of the web-site Openspace.ru which in 2009 published the first list of Russian public intellectuals of the post-Soviet period: Maria Stepanova, interview with Iurii Saprykin, *Bol'shoi gorod*, November 18, 2009, http://bg.ru/society/mariya_stepanova-8311/.

difference of views, all three perceive the West as the ultimate Other and stress Russia's superiority over and greatness in relation to the West.

1.1. Gleb Pavlovskii : Conspiracy Theories as a Political Technology

In his study of post-Soviet Russian elections, Andrew Wilson devoted a whole chapter to the role of political technologists in electoral politics. In his words, “the political technologists . . . apply whatever ‘technology’ they can to the construction of politics as a whole. The manipulation of the media is central to their work, but by definition it extends beyond this . . .”⁷⁶ Having a particular interest in electoral campaigns, political technologists actively participate in all aspects of the political process. By the end of the 2000s, they had become an integral part of the domestic political landscape. Pavlovskii, a long-time adviser to the presidential administration and a pioneer of political technologies in Russia, was among the most influential intellectuals in Russian domestic politics for two decades.

A political dissident during the Soviet period, Pavlovskii was arrested in 1982 for publishing the samizdat journal *Poiski* and spent five years in prison.⁷⁷ Shortly after his release, he opened a news agency, which later evolved into the first independent publishing house, *Kommersant*, and at the beginning of the 1990s, he became involved in political consulting after the opening of the Foundation of Effective Politics.⁷⁸ His skills of political manoeuvring can be seen in his initial successes: on the one hand, the electoral campaign of the anti-El'tsin nationalist party, *Kongress russkikh obshchin* (*The Congress of Russian Communities*) in 1995, and, on the other, the turning round of El'tsin's own presidential campaign in 1996. At the start of the campaign, the then-president dramatically lagged behind all other major candidates and had only a 6 per cent public approval rating, but he went on to win the elections with 53.8 per cent of votes. As Pavlovskii has admitted, this was the beginning of his cooperation with the presidential administration, which eventually allowed him to increase his intellectual influence on the Kremlin.⁷⁹ In 2004 he was one of the advisers sent to Ukraine during the presidential elections to give support to the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich's failure at the polls triggered a massive campaign within Russia to ensure the smooth transfer

⁷⁶ Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 49.

⁷⁷ Sergei Shargunov, “Gleb Pavlovskii: ‘Tak ne tsarstvuiut!’,” *Medved*, December 20, 2011, http://www.medved-magazine.ru/articles/article_270.html.

⁷⁸ Gleb Morev, “Pavlovskii: my pervymi ispol'zovali internet v politike SSSR,” *RIA-Novosti*, September 17, 2013, http://ria.ru/media_Russia/20130917/962975894.html#ixzz2hmzK3drI.

⁷⁹ Maksim Shevchenko, “Shevchenko vs. Pavlovskii. Razluchennyi s Putinyim” *Russia.ru*, October 26, 2012, <http://www.russia.ru/news/politics/2012/10/26/3447.html>.

of power from Putin to his successor in 2008. Pavlovskii, as a self-proclaimed expert on “counter-revolutions,” became one of the key intellectuals to shape the conceptual framework of Putin’s political regime.⁸⁰

Formed in dissident circles in the 1970s, Pavlovskii became a close disciple of Mikhail Gefter, a revisionist Soviet historian and philosopher who, among other subjects, studied the history of the Bolshevik revolution, of Russian intellectual thought and of Stalinism. Gefter was ousted from the Institute of History at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in the 1970s after his more conservative colleagues criticized his works for being “ideologically detrimental” to the regime.⁸¹ He continued his research independently and became involved in publishing the journal *Poiski* where he met Pavlovskii. The latter acknowledged that Gefter had a crucial influence on his personal development as a political technologist: “Gefter picked me up and invented me (*Gefter menia podobral i pridumal*). I spent a lifetime in conversation with him. . . . All my “politics” is from Gefter.”⁸²

Among the topics which Gefter discussed in his works were the nature of Russian totalitarianism and the possibility of reconciliation with the Stalinist past. This issue lay at the centre of his work in the 1980s and became even more significant when Gorbachev’s reforms started the process of democratization. In Gefter’s view, Soviet society did not undergo a process of national reconciliation following the repressions of the 1930s. Even though Khrushchev began such a process in the 1950s, the results proved to be very limited. A lack of clarity about the causes of the Great Purge in Khrushchev’s discourse enabled the proliferation of ideas about returning to the “glorious past” and nostalgia for past stability, when a strong leader ruled the country.⁸³ In Gefter’s view, despite opportunities to debate these difficult issues about the past during *perestroika*, a national consensus regarding the origins of the Stalinist repression had not been reached. Moreover, Pavlovskii admitted that Stalin’s repressions created a persistent fear of conspiracy among Soviet people which did not exist before. According to Pavlovskii, the belief in conspiracy theories reemerged after the fall of the Communist ideology at the end of the 1980s and gradually obtained a dominant influence in post-Soviet society and politics.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Robert Horvath, “Putin’s ‘Preventive Counter-Revolution’: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 1 (2011): 14-15.

⁸¹ Kurnosov A.A., “Ob odnom iz epizodov razgroma istoricheskoi nauki 1960-1970-kh gg. (Po materialam Tsentra khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii),” *Voprosy obrazovaniia*, no.4 (2006): 363-389.

⁸² Aleksandr Morozov, “Gleb Pavlovskii: ‘Podtirat’ za geroiami – eto obiazatel’naia chast’ politraby,” *Openspace.ru*, April 27, 2012, <http://os.colta.ru/media/net/details/36463/page1/>.

⁸³ Mikhail Gefter, “Destalinizatsiia,” *Gefter.ru*, January 18, 2013, <http://gefter.ru/archive/7321>.

⁸⁴ Gleb Pavlovskii, in discussion with the author, June 13, 2014.

Gefter thought that the tradition prominent during the time of Stalin, that is, the hunting out of internal and external enemies, had survived and could be reintroduced and promoted for political purposes, if needed. In his dialogue with Pavlovskii at the end of the 1980s, Gefter stated that Stalin had “died yesterday,” implying that Soviet society had not yet grasped the origins of the massive repressions and still held rather positive sentiments about the totalitarian past.⁸⁵ Gefter emphasized the fact that late Soviet and Russian political elites also utilized certain notions of Stalinist ideology in their political discourse, thereby reinforcing the memory of the totalitarian past for current political purposes. In Gefter’s view, El’tsin’s desire for power made him particularly keen on using totalitarian rhetoric against his political enemies.⁸⁶

El’tsin’s signing of the Belovezha accords in December 1991 signified the collapse of the Soviet Union, which, in Pavlovskii’s own words, became the turning point in his life.⁸⁷ The political and intellectual crisis of the 1990s, which was also accompanied by a crisis of national self-identification, led him to the conclusion that the state could be saved by the implementation of “the intellectual mechanism which would help generate Russian power (*vlast*).”⁸⁸ It seems that Pavlovskii was inspired by Gefter’s ideas in his deployment of various narratives of the past in the Kremlin’s political campaigns. Pavlovskii acknowledged that he knew more about the history of Stalin’s totalitarian regime than about any other period of Russian or Soviet history, which helped him employ narratives of the Stalin era in political campaigns of the 1990s and, most importantly, to strengthen Putin’s regime after 2000.⁸⁹

The ideological underpinnings of Putin’s regime—in the development of which Pavlovskii played a key role—were the creation of a strong state, supported by the majority of Russian people, and the representation of the Soviet collapse as the most tragic event in post-Soviet history. These two narratives framed many of Pavlovskii’s arguments. According to him, the Belovezha accords destroyed both the state and the nation in Russia while the Soviet Union’s successor, the Russian Federation, was an artificial “state formation” (*gosudarstvennoe obrazovanie*) throughout the 1990s. In an essay entitled *Slepoe piatno (A Blind spot)*, published in 1995, Pavlovskii criticized Russian society for its lack of national sentiment, describing post-Soviet Russia as “the Soviet Union dripping with blood.” In his view, the emergence of a new

⁸⁵ “Stalin umer vchera. Beseda s zhurnalistom G. Pavlovskim,” in Mikhail Gefter, *Iz tekh i etikh let* (Moscow: Progress, 1991), 243-248.

⁸⁶ Gleb Pavlovskii, *1993. Elementy sovetskogo opyta: Razgovory s Mikhailom Gefterom* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Evropa, 2014), 132-137, 218-223.

⁸⁷ Gleb Pavlovskii, Aleksandr Filippov, *Tri doprosa po teorii deistviia* (Moscow: Evropa, 2013), 94.

⁸⁸ Aleksandr Chudodeev, “Inakomyshchii,” *Itogi*, December 2, 2012, <http://www.itogi.ru/spetzproekt/2012/49/184673.html>.

⁸⁹ Gleb Pavlovskii, *Tri doprosa po teorii deistviia*, 106.

Russian nation would take place only when the state acquired power (*vlast'*) and the nation recognized its past glory (for example, its victory in World War II).⁹⁰

Putin's victory in the presidential elections in 2000 allowed Pavlovskii to contend that Putin "is introducing a state" in Russia (*Putin vvodit v Rossii gosudarstvo*) and was uniting the majority of Russian people, thus creating a new Russian statehood after years of chaos.⁹¹ Pavlovskii's use of the verb "introduce" in the interview, in relation to the state, merits particular consideration. One can introduce a law or a particular policy; the notion of "introducing a state," on the other hand, needs to be interpreted as a metaphor which aims to personalize political power and rule. Similar metaphors were used in the past in relation to prominent political leaders of the past, like Peter the Great. So, the combined effort of Pavlovskii and other pro-Kremlin intellectuals to discursively equate Putin to remarkable historical figures of the past sought to boost the popularity of the new president.

The stability of the regime from 2000 onwards was partly based on mass public support for the president, a phenomenon defined by Pavlovskii as "Putin's majority."⁹² In their effort to construct the image of Putin as a national leader, Pavlovskii and other public intellectuals utilized a populist discourse to unify a set of highly diverse groups and thus to bring about their social cohesion. As Francisco Panizza noted, a populist leader emerges—an ordinary person who is attributed with extraordinary abilities—when a nation suffers a collapse of political and social institutions, or when belief in existing political elites is lost due to mass corruption scandals.⁹³ Putin's appearance as president in 2000 took place in a similar context.⁹⁴ As Pavlovskii stated in 2000:

This is a breakthrough of the masses who were not represented on the political scene after 1991-1993. And Putin is their leader. . . . Those who elected Putin

⁹⁰ Gleb Pavlovskii, *Slepoe piatno (Svedeniia o belovezhskikh ludiakh)*. Russkii Zhurnal, 1995, <http://old.russ.ru:81/antolog/inoe/pavlov.htm>.

⁹¹ Gleb Pavlovskii, "Proshchai, Belovezh'e!" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 9, 2000, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2000-12-09/3_belovejie.html.

⁹² According to the Levada Centre throughout the 2000s the average per cent of public support for Putin's policies was above 70 per cent. See, "Martovskie reitingi odobreniia i doveriia," The Levada Centre opinion poll, March 26, 2014, <http://www.levada.ru/26-03-2014/martovskie-reitingi-odobreniia-i-doveriia>.

⁹³ Francisco Panizza, "Populism and the Mirror of Democracy," 12-13, 21.

⁹⁴ For instance, according to the polling agency "Fond "Obshchestvennoe Mnenie" in December 1999 87 per cent of Russians did not trust President El'tsin. See, "Borsi El'tsin. Opros naseleniia," Fond "Obshchestvennoe mnenie," December 29, 1999. http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/eltzin_/rating_eltzin/t908020.

perceive him as a leader of the opposition, which has taken power in Russia. For Putin's majority, Putin is a leader of the party in opposition to the old regime.⁹⁵

This populist juxtaposition of the new president with the old elites helped discursively unite different social groups into "the people," who supported Putin as their leader. Moreover, the notion of the proclaimed victory of an opposition led by Putin was aimed at creating the impression that a new era of history had begun with Putin's election as president. The drama of the Soviet collapse, exploitation of the public's fear of economic failure and of the further territorial disintegration of the country, framed official discourse this sought to build support for Putin's regime, with the promise of stability and justice.

Another frame in Pavlovskii's narrative about Putin was the comparison of the new Russian president with Stalin. The latter was depicted as a strong and efficient leader who was kind to his enemies as he protected them from the anger of the Russian people. Pavlovskii's interpretations of Stalinism, which were most likely received from the conversations with Gefter, were thus utilized in the struggle against the oligarchs at the beginning of Putin's term in 2000. Two fugitive oligarchs, Boris Berezovskii and Vladimir Gusinskiĭ, who became Putin's opponents shortly after the elections in 2000, were compared to Lev Kamenev and Grigorii Zinov'ev, leaders of the Bolshevik party who were executed during the Great Purge in the 1930s on charges of conspiracy against the state. As described by Pavlovskii, Putin's enemies acted against the will of the people and thus were not only Putin's enemies but hostile to society at large.⁹⁶ It is likely that Pavlovskii instrumentally used these allusions from the time of the Great Purge in order to build public support for the Kremlin in the 2000s. In his view, Russians in the post-Stalin times tend to believe in some sort of conspiracies. At the same time, these beliefs provide certain integrity to the political regime and help the authorities polarize the society between the majority and the "conspiring minority."⁹⁷

After his departure from the Kremlin in 2011, following a disagreement with Putin's decision to return to presidency, Pavlovskii admitted that Putin's majority had become a "truncheon against our political rivals." The Kremlin started to utilize this "truncheon" in the 2000s to legitimize governmental policies and delegitimize its opponents.⁹⁸ From 2000 onwards, the discursive division of society into Putin's majority and its enemies became a dominant political tactic.

⁹⁵ Elena Tregubova, "Rossiiu legko raskrutit' na revolutsiiu," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, July 4, 2000, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/17149>.

⁹⁶ "Rossiiu legko raskrutit' na revolutsiiu..."

⁹⁷ Gleb Pavlovskii, in conversation with the author. June 13, 2014.

⁹⁸ Gleb Pavlovskii, *Genial'naiia vlast'* (Moscow: Evropa, 2012), 74.

In the period between the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the presidential elections in Russia in 2008, Pavlovskii frequently used anti-Western conspiracy allegations in his commentaries and interviews. After returning from Ukraine in 2004, Pavlovskii interpreted the defeat of Yanukovich as the first stage in a Western plan “to turn Ukraine into a huge testing area for anti-Russian technologies.” He alleged that the West was not interested in Ukraine *per se*, the real goal of the Orange revolution was revolution in Russia.⁹⁹

Pavlovskii connected criticism of Russia’s foreign policy towards Ukraine and Georgia after the regime changes in these countries to the West’s alleged “russophobia,” the aim of which was to scapegoat Russia should world economic crisis occur.¹⁰⁰ Pavlovskii further reinforced this paranoid interpretation of current relations with the West on the eve of the parliamentary elections in Russia in 2007. In a range of interviews, Pavlovskii depicted Russia as besieged by “enemies” who despised its leader and were ready to take active measures against it.¹⁰¹

The political ideology elaborated by Pavlovskii and his team to reinforce the power of the Kremlin became a prime example of the impact public intellectuals can have on political development. Knowledge of Soviet history, which Pavlovskii had acquired during his collaboration with Gefter, was turned into a tool to wield power in the country, in a manner that accords with Foucault’s understanding of the power/knowledge relationship.¹⁰² In turn, anti-Western conspiracy theories, which exploited unsettled issues of the recent past, were successfully employed to delegitimize political rivals and discursively divide society into “the people” and the conspiring Other.

To ideologically underpin Kremlin-initiated policies, Pavlovskii created a loose framework of independent foundations, employing academics, journalists and even graduates of the faculties of humanities to produce ideas later to be used for political purposes.¹⁰³ The

⁹⁹ “Sovetnik Putina Gleb Pavlovskii: ‘V Rossii nazvat’ ‘zekom’ – eto dazhe dostoinstvo,’” *Tsenzor.net*, December 3, 2004,

http://censor.net.ua/resonance/715/sovetnik_putina_gleb_pavlovskiyi_quotv_rossii_nazvat_quotzekomquot__eto_daje_dostoinstvo_znachit_on.

¹⁰⁰ Gleb Pavlovskii, interview by Vitalii Dymarskii, “Proverka slukha,” *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, April 1, 2006, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/proverka/42667/>.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Pavlovskii’s interview after Putin’s speech in Luzhniki in November 2007, days before the parliamentary elections. Gleb Pavlovskii, interview to Evgeniia Al’bats, “Polnyi Al’bats,” *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, November 25, 2007, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/albac/56546/>.

¹⁰² Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 51.

¹⁰³ For example, as Russian historian Aleksei Miller noted in his description of the Russian version of the politics of history, among the authors of alternative discourses on Russian history were independent foundations connected with Pavlovskii and the presidential administration. Their accounts of Russian history, widely

network of intellectuals set up by Pavlovskii and his aides in the 2000s was instrumental in the construction of the official political discourse that helped the Kremlin strengthen control over the country. Possessing almost total control over television, which remained most citizens' main source of information, the authorities were able to promote their desired agenda and its interpretation, often relying on conspiracy mythmaking to achieve both social polarization and social cohesion.¹⁰⁴ These activities were carried out most efficiently by a number of public intellectuals, who represented different political points of view and had permission to participate in numerous television shows. Among the most prominent were Aleksandr Dugin, Nataliia Narochnitskaia and Maksim Shevchenko, all of whom will be discussed next.

1.2. Aleksandr Dugin: The Eternal War of the Continents

No discussion of anti-Western conspiracy theories would be complete without an analysis of Aleksandr Dugin's works; these became emblematic in debate about the relationship between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet period. Dugin is one of the few post-Soviet Russian public intellectuals to have been extensively discussed in Western scholarship, and whose philosophical concepts and political activity have drawn the attention of scholars of both right-wing ideologies and of Russian intellectual history.¹⁰⁵ Yet surprisingly, Dugin's conspiracy mythmaking has not yet received much scholarly attention; what has been given has mostly been limited to a simple description of the conspiratorial notions in his works. In contrast, this part of the chapter will focus particularly on Dugin's conspiracy theories and the impact this public intellectual has had on the promotion of conspiracy theories in the aftermath of 1991.

In the late Soviet era, Dugin was involved in a group of dissidents, known as the Iuzhinskiĭ circle, whose members were interested in mysticism and occult sciences. During

published in the 2000s with the support of Pavlovskii, put particular stress on external and internal enemies who strove to destroy the memory of the Great Patriotic War. See Alekseĭ Miller, "Istoricheskaia politika: update," ("Publichnye lektsii Polit.ru" public lecture, Bilingua, Moscow, Russia, October 22, 2009), <http://polit.ru/article/2009/11/05/istpolit/>; on Pavlovskii's employment of the graduates of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Moscow State University see, Viacheslav Danilov, "Gleb Pavlovskii i russkaia filosofia," *Liberty.ru*, <http://www.liberty.ru/layout/set/print/Themes/Gleb-Pavlovskij-i-russkaya-filosofiya>.

¹⁰⁴ According to the Levada Centre, in 2013, 88 per cent of Russians received news from television and 51 per cent considered television a reliable source of information. See, "Otkuda rossiiane uznaiut novosti," The Levada Centre opinion poll, July 8, 2013, <http://www.levada.ru/08-07-2013/otkuda-rossiyane-uznayut-novosti>.

¹⁰⁵ For discussion about Aleksandr Dugin's ideology of Eurasianism, see, among others, Mark Bassin and Konstantin E. Aksenov, "Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse," *Geopolitics* 11, no.1 (2006): 99-118; Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 107-144; Umland, "Post-Soviet "Uncivil Society" and the Rise of Aleksandr Dugin; Shenfield, *Russian Fascism*, 190-220.

Gorbachev's *perestroika*, Dugin joined the far right nationalist organization *Pamiat'*, which was known for its crude anti-Semitic propaganda. However, he left the organization after disagreements with its leader, Dmitrii Vasil'ev.¹⁰⁶ Sometime around 1989, he travelled to Western Europe to take part in events organized by the groups comprising the European New Right, which served as a prelude for his close collaboration with the main figures in this movement.¹⁰⁷ It is very likely that these acquaintances introduced Dugin to the various conspiracy theories popular among the European New Right and neo-fascist writers at that time.¹⁰⁸ He combined these with a pre-existing body of ideas of esotericism and mysticism, which he had developed during the time of his membership of the Iuzhinskiĭ circle: together these helped him establish the basis of his conspiratorial notions. In 1991, Dugin joined the editorial board of the newspaper *Den'* (*The Day*), a flagship of the Russian nationalist movement at that time, which provided him with access to the wider public. In the same period, he set up the publishing house *Arctogeia* and the think tank *The Centre for Special Meta-Strategic Studies*, both which he actively used to promote his views.¹⁰⁹

Dugin was able to attract a readership and became a notable speaker who quickly found his way onto radio, television and popular magazines during the 1990s by virtue of his ability to link a wide range of topics relating to politics, history, international relations and even popular culture with the mysterious world of interconnections between secret societies. Simultaneously, and giving him appeal to a different audience, his book, *Osnovy geopolitiki* (*The Foundations of Geopolitics*), published in 1997, shaped his public image as a prominent scholar who advised the Speaker of the Duma, Gennadiĭ Seleznev, and taught in the General Staff Academy.¹¹⁰ Regarded as Dugin's most influential work, *Foundations* described global history as a permanent battle between two secret societies, which represent The Land and The Sea. In Dugin's view, geopolitics is a kind of universal science, which allows everyone to analyze the

¹⁰⁶ Andreas Umland, "Aleksandr Dugin's transformation from a lunatic fringe figure into a mainstream political publicist, 1980-1998: A case study in the rise of late and post-Soviet Russian fascism," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1 (2010): 145-147.

¹⁰⁷ Shenfield, *Russian Fascism*, 194.

¹⁰⁸ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Western Sources of Neo-Eurasianism: Recent Findings on Alexander Dugin and the European New Right, 1989-1994." Paper presented at the workshop "New Developments and Investigations in Russian Moderate and Radical Nationalism," National Research University "Higher School of Economics," Moscow, Russia, October 25, 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Umland, "Aleksandr Dugin's transformation..." 147, 149.

¹¹⁰ Umland, "Post-Soviet 'Uncivil Society'," 118-120.

history of humankind and to trace the genuine causes of events in the past and present, thus discovering the true nature of things.¹¹¹

In his collection of essays entitled *Konspirologiia (Conspirology)*, published in 1992 and reprinted in 2005, Dugin acknowledges the global popularity of conspiracy theories and presents his own reading of this phenomenon. He argues that conspiracy theory is a product of postmodernist culture, which gathers various facts of a given reality into a single self-referential theory.¹¹² Dugin explained the global popularity and relevance of conspiracy theories as a result of historical and social prerequisites rooted in the human subconscious. In Dugin's view, a belief in conspiracies was already part of ancient human being's perception of the world, and the existence of this belief nowadays mentally connects modern man with his ancestors.

Paradoxically, whilst Dugin's actual justification for the popularity of this phenomenon is rather unusual, it is still typical of a conspiracy theorist. According to Dugin, the very fact that people have believed in conspiracies for hundreds of years proves the existence of secret plots. In turn, even members of real secret societies might not be aware of the hidden mechanics of the world, although they usually attract conspiracy theorists' greatest attention.¹¹³ These arguments make Dugin confident that conspiracy theories should be taken seriously. At the same time, Dugin discursively distances himself from conspiracy theorists and calls himself a "psychiatrist" who studies "weird pictures of social delusions."¹¹⁴ However, the aforementioned collection of essays, consisting of various conspiracy theories, supports the idea of an anti-Russian plot, which Dugin seems to treat seriously.

Dugin contends that Russia is an "axis of the Eurasian civilization" which represents the powers of the Land, and is opposed to the powers of the Sea, which are represented by the United States. According to Dugin, it was this geopolitical standoff that caused the collapse of the Soviet Union; this was mainly brought about by socio-economic factors and was partly the result of the activities of internal enemies.¹¹⁵ The fact that he admits that the Soviet Union collapsed due to socio-economic reasons indicates his attempts to position his work as a pseudo-academic endeavour; it also shows his peculiar handling of conspiracy

¹¹¹ Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki* (Moscow: Arktogeia, 2000), <http://www.arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/geopol0.htm#1>.

¹¹² Dugin, *Konspirologiia (nauka o zagovorakh, sekretnykh obschestvakh i taĭnoi voĭne)* (Moscow: ROF Evraziia, 2005), 8-11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁴ Dugin, "Konspirologiia stala poshloĭ," *Russia.ru* video, 08:44, June 18, 2010, http://russia.ru/video/diskurs_10526/.

¹¹⁵ Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, <http://www.arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/geopol3.htm>; <http://www.arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/geop4-7.htm#3>.

theories. The two aforementioned powers represent different models of society: the first is that of a community-based society, ruled by a monarch, while the second promotes individualistic aspirations in society and financial reward for its rulers.¹¹⁶ This division provides the conspiratorial framework through which he interprets the current state of world politics. He has been inspired by Halford Mackinder's theory of geopolitics, which introduced the concepts of Sea and Land powers in world politics.¹¹⁷ However, as Mark Bassin and Konstantin Aksenov note, Dugin's reading of Mackinder's theory reflects a Cold War vision of world politics where the United States and Russia represent the two world superpowers.¹¹⁸

Dugin reproduces the spirit of the Cold War in his description of US attempts to build the New World Order to the detriment of Russia. In this description, the US, or, at times, more broadly, the Anglo-Saxon world, which includes the United Kingdom, represents the West. In turn, Western Europe is Russia's ally against North American hegemony. Hence, this ultimate juxtaposition of Russia and the US is one of the ideas introduced by Dugin to the philosophy of Eurasianism.¹¹⁹ The founders of Eurasianism in the 1920s juxtaposed the Romano-Germanic nations with the multiplicity of nations led by Russia, and perceived Russia as a mixture of Slavic and Turkic cultures. By contrast, Dugin developed his own concept of geopolitics, combining it with Cold War thinking, and merging it with the body of anti-American literature popular among the European far right.

Among Dugin's most significant contributions to Russian anti-Western conspiracy discourse is his appropriation of conspiratorial ideas from European and, paradoxically, American conspiracy theorists. His vigorous engagement with Western conspiratorial discourse began in the late 1980s, after his first meetings with European right-wing politicians. As Andreas Umland has demonstrated, the journal *Elementy: Evrazijskoe obozrenie* (*Elements: Eurasian Review*), was influenced by Alain de Benoist, a French New Right intellectual.¹²⁰ In the second issue of *Elementy*, several articles were devoted to the description of the New World Order and its threat to Russia's security. These articles provided a detailed description of what the alleged achievements of internal and external conspirators had done to tailor the world in accordance with US ambitions. The editorial of this issue briefly outlined the main aspects of the New World Order, such as world government led by the Trilateral Commission, market

¹¹⁶ Aleksandr Dugin, *Konspirologiia*, 191-192, 209-210.

¹¹⁷ H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no.4 (1904): 421-437.

¹¹⁸ Bassin and Aksenov, "Mackinder and the Heartland Theory," 109.

¹¹⁹ Shtefan Viderker, "'Kontinent Evraziia': klassicheskoe evraziistvo i geopolitika v izlozhenii Aleksandra Dugina," *Forum noveishā vostochnoevropeiskoi istorii i kul'tury*, no. 1 (2010): 8, <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss13/1Wiederkehr.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Umland, "Post-Soviet 'Uncivil Society'", 106-108.

liberalism, and ethnic mixing, which aimed at the destruction of religious and national uniqueness.¹²¹

It is noteworthy that narratives concerning the New World Order, the foundations of which allegedly had been laid in the US in the 1970s, also reappeared in the US at the beginning of the 1990s. This theory claims the existence of a single overarching organization that aims to seize global power. As Michael Barkun notes, the New World Order conspiracy in the US emerged in the 1990s as a substitute for the image of the conspiring Other that had earlier been embodied in the Soviet Union as the US main enemy. The Soviet collapse in 1991 left a vacuum in conspiratorial theorizing, which a new overarching concept of a single world government eventually filled.¹²²

Dugin's active employment of the New World Order theory, almost in parallel with his Western European and American counterparts, demonstrated his engagement with foreign countercultural life. Furthermore, the introduction of a genuinely American conspiracy theory in Russia offered an additional framework for traditional Russian anti-Western attitudes. As Barkun noted, the concept of a New World Order includes every possible facet of the domestic and international agenda in its structure of New World Order organizations; it is this all-encompassing quality that makes this theory virtually unfalsifiable.¹²³ Dugin used this advantage to the full. He merged his occult knowledge, his basic Eurasianist concepts and his work on geopolitics into an overarching concept of the Manichean division of the world between Russia and the US.

Dugin's *Foundations* proved to be popular among Russian political and academic elites in the 1990s and it facilitated the development of a conspiratorial perception of global politics at the high political level. John Dunlop suggests that in 2000 Pavlovskii helped Dugin get access to the presidential administration.¹²⁴ In 2001, Dugin established a political movement, *Eurasia*, the executive board of which included a number of high-ranking politicians, academics, and journalists.¹²⁵ In 2008, despite not having sufficient academic credentials, Dugin was appointed head of the Centre for Conservative Studies in the Faculty of Sociology

¹²¹ "Ideologiya mirovogo pravitel'stva," *Elementy*, no. 2, 1992. <http://arcto.ru/article/409>.

¹²² Michael Barkun, *The Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 62-64.

¹²³ Barkun, *The Culture of Conspiracy*, 64.

¹²⁴ John Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations of Geopolitics," *Democratizatsiya* 12, no.1 (2004): 49.

¹²⁵ Andreas Umland, "Patologicheskie tendentsii v russkom "neoevraziiztve". O znachenii vzleta Aleksandra Dugina dlia interpretatsii obshchestvennoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii," *Forum noveisheĭ vostochnoevropĕjskoĭ istorii i kul'tury*, no.2 (2009): 133-135. <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss12/8Umland%20Pathological.pdf>.

at Moscow State University.¹²⁶ This appointment was the climax of his pseudo-academic career, reflecting the prominence of Dugin's concepts among the Russian political and intellectual elites.

Dugin's conspiratorial ideas immensely influenced Russian anti-Western discourse and have been reflected in popular television talk shows and programmes. For instance, Mikhail Leont'ev, a prominent pro-Kremlin journalist and a member of Dugin's *Eurasia* movement, hosted a television documentary entitled *Bol'shaia igra* (*The Great Game*) on the state-aligned Channel One.¹²⁷ Broadcast two months before the parliamentary elections in December 2007, the series of eight episodes presented a conspiratorial outline of the struggle between Russia and the West (represented by Britain and the US) for world dominance. This idea of Russia's ultimate standoff with the West was overtly inspired by Dugin's theory of geopolitics and, at the same time, articulated one of the main narratives of the parliamentary campaign in 2007.

At the same time, Dugin is very receptive to changes in the political sphere and successfully engages with mainstream political discourse; this is especially evident at times of tension between Russia and the US. During the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, Dugin was among the first public intellectuals to claim that Ossetians had become victims of "the Georgian genocide," which was allegedly backed by the US.¹²⁸ In fact, the accusations of genocide against the Ossetians were first levelled by the Ossetian political elites.¹²⁹ A few days later, the claim of genocide was reiterated by Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, and President Medvedev, who hinted at the West's possible interest in the conflict.¹³⁰ Thus, Dugin's take on the situation in South Ossetia could be seen as an attempt to give a high

¹²⁶ Andreas Umland, "Fascist Tendencies in Russian Higher Education: The Rise of Aleksandr Dugin and the Faculty of Sociology of Moscow State University," *Democratizatsiya*, (Spring 2011), http://www.academia.edu/854121/Fascist_Tendencies_in_Russian_Higher_Education_The_Rise_of_Aleksandr_Dugin_and_the_Faculty_of_Sociology_of_Moscow_State_University.

¹²⁷ "Bol'shaia igra – vse 8 Serii fil'ma Mikhaila Leont'eva," Youtube video, 07:49:34, broadcast by *Channel One*, October 5, 2007, posted by "PolitRussia04," April 8, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poVG_NhI4cA.

¹²⁸ Aleksandr Dugin, interview by Matvei Ganapol'skiĭ, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/532383-echo/>.

¹²⁹ Emma Marzoeva, "Uchastniki mitinga v Severnoi Osetii v kategoricheskoi forme osudili deistviia Gruzii," *Kavkazskii uzel*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/140183/>; "Kokoity: v Tskhinvali sotni pogibshikh mirnykh zhitelei," *Interfax*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/news/25935>.

¹³⁰ Sergey Lavrov, "Minister faults West in Georgia," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 1, 2008, http://rbth.co.uk/articles/2008/09/01/310808_west.html; Dmitrii Medvedev, interview by Margarita Simonyan, *Russia Today*, August 26, 2008, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/c78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/5891ab6c64b90ca9c32574b200226455?OpenDocument.

media profile to an extremely controversial allegation, which the Kremlin was ready to incorporate in official discourse.

Dugin's rise as a public intellectual whose works are based on the conspiratorial division of the world into Russia and the West is paradoxical and symptomatic at the same time. Dugin's *Foundations* evolved into a highly influential pseudo-academic work, which sought to erect a scientific-sounding framework for an anti-Western outlook, one popular among the post-Soviet political elite. This goal has been achieved largely through the active adoption of American and Western European conspiracy theories. However paradoxical it may look, Dugin's adoption of foreign ideas offers yet another example of the ways in which non-Western intellectual elites use Western intellectual heritage against the West itself and with the purpose of boosting social unity.

As we have seen, the transfer of conspiracy theories from the West and their adaptation to the Russian context helped weave diffuse strands of narrative about the threat to Russia from the West into a mainstream trope of political thinking. At the same time, Dugin's rise as a prominent intellectual with reputedly academic credentials, whose public career was mainly based on conspiracy mythmaking, was not a one-off event.

1.3. Nataliia Narochnitskaia: Orthodox Russia vs. the spiritless West [bezdukhovnyĭ Zapad]

Amongst the pro-Kremlin public intellectuals specializing in the interpretation of history for nation-building purposes, Nataliia Narochnitskaia occupies a particularly significant place. She often takes part in television discussions on various aspects of Russian history and regularly publishes books and articles devoted to the bravery of Russians, which has saved the world from global catastrophes in the past. Tragic and glorious moments in Russian history—as well as an emphasis on disparity between Russia's past and its present state—frame Narochnitskaia's arguments.¹³¹

Narochnitskaia constantly reminds her readers and viewers about her pedigree, academic status and successful careers as a diplomat in the 1980s and a Duma deputy in the 2000s. These credentials serve to enhance her public profile and help strengthen her position as an expert in global politics. Her father was a prominent Soviet scholar of Russian diplomatic history. His academic merits and professional achievements provide an important point of reference to her conceptions, as she depicts him as the source of her scholarly principles and political views. Narochnitskaia claims that he discovered strategies which

¹³¹ Boris Krotkov, "Revolutsiia: do osnovan'ia, a zachem?" *Rossiĭskaia gazeta*, November 1, 2007, <http://www.rg.ru/2007/11/01/revolucia.html>.

foreign countries then used against Russia in the past, and that this helps her to decipher global politics and protect Russia from the West.¹³² Her own successful career is mobilized to add extra weight to her statements. In 2004, she established *Fond istoricheskoiĭ perspektivy* (*The Historical Perspective Foundation*), whose official aim is to carry out research projects in Russian history in order to use their findings in debates on nation-building and to promote patriotism. By the end of the 2000s, she had acquired public status as an expert in Russian history and joined the notorious Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests.

According to Narochnitskaia, Russia's territorial and geopolitical achievements in the past cannot be dismissed today as they form the basis of the country's greatness. These achievements were not realized by state rulers, but by ordinary Russians, who sacrificed their lives to save the country. In Narochnitskaia's view, Russia differs from the rest of the world because the Russian nation constitutes "the model of the world," rooted in the spiritual life, interethnic tolerance and social justice.¹³³ Narochnitskaia's eulogy to Russian culture is interlaced with comparisons to foreign countries and, primarily, to Europe and the US. In these comparisons, Western countries usually lag behind Russia in political and spiritual achievements, which is why the West strives to undermine Russia.

In her view, a nation state is a gift from God, given to the people for the purpose of their moral and patriotic development.¹³⁴ By contrast, supra-national institutions, like the EU and the UN, have been created by the Freemasonry and seek to achieve global domination by erasing the borders between nations.¹³⁵ According to Narochnitskaia, Russians have high moral standards and have inherited a genuine tolerance towards the people of different cultures and races.¹³⁶ By contrast, cosmopolitan societies, which, she argues, are under the control of foreign elites, introduce artificial concepts, such as political correctness, which do

¹³² "Nataliia Narochnitskaia: 'My dolzhny stat' natsiei'," *Narochnitskaia.ru*, March 13, 2007, <http://www.narochnitskaia.ru/in-archive/nataliya-narochnitskaya-quot-myi-dolzhnyi-stat-natsiey-quot.html?view=full>.

¹³³ Vladimir Chernov, "Za chto zhe nas ne liubiat. Interv'iu zhurnalu 'Story'," *Narochnitskaia.ru*, August 26, 2013, <http://narochnitskaia.ru/interviews/za-chto-zhe-nas-ne-lyubyat-intervyu-zhurnalu-stori-iyun-2013.html>.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Natal'ia Narochnitskaia, *Rossia i russkie v mirovoi istorii* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2003), 252.

¹³⁶ Svetlana Popova, "Ne boites', chto my russkie," *Trud*, June 21, 2007, http://www.trud.ru/article/21-06-2007/117365_ne_bojtes_chto_my_russkie.html.

not demand that citizens love their country of residence.¹³⁷ The Western type of patriotism, as Narochnitskaia reiterates, is based on the idea that the Motherland is “where taxes are low.”¹³⁸

Another crucial difference between Russians and the West is the part played by religion in the life of the nation. At the centre of Narochnitskaia’s vision of Russian identity is religion, which, she argues, defines national culture. In Russia’s case, Orthodoxy has apparently helped the Russian nation avoid the pursuit of wealth, unlike in the West, and it has peacefully integrated a range of different ethnic and religious groups within one state. On this matter Narochnitskaia is not fully consistent. On the one hand, she contends that Christianity unites Russia with Europe because the value of human life originates from the word of Jesus.¹³⁹ This could form the basis for the pursuit of common goals and mutually beneficial policies with European countries. However, in Narochnitskaia’s understanding, all major branches of West European Christianity hate Russia and wish for its destruction.

Narochnitskaia perceives the Vatican as Russia’s permanent adversary since it always considered Russia’s territory to be an appropriate area for colonization. According to Narochnitskaia, within Russia, the main ally of the Vatican is a “fifth column of liberals,” who criticize the Russian Church and thereby undermine the ultimate bond of the Russian nation.¹⁴⁰ Hence, Narochnitskaia confirms anti-Catholic fears of subversion, which were widely prevalent among Russian conservative thinkers in the aftermath of the Polish uprising of 1863. The image of the conspiring Polish priest even appeared in Dostoevski’s writings, which bear witness to the rapid development of conspiracy mythmaking in the second half of the 19th century.¹⁴¹ Thus, Narochnitskaia has utilized the existing conspiratorial idea and adapted it to the current political agenda.

Protestantism is viewed in Narochnitskaia’s works with the same misgiving. She contends that Anglo-Saxon Calvinism is traditionally indifferent to other nations, regarding them solely as a source of profit. Merging apartheid in South Africa, British colonialism and repressions against native Americans in the US, in which, allegedly, Calvinists were involved,

¹³⁷ “Za chto zhe nas ne liubiat...”

¹³⁸ “Natal’ia Narochnitskaia: ‘Natsional’noe chuvstvo – tvorcheskii instrument v gosudarstvennom stroitel’stve,’” *Politkom.ru*, May 11, 2007, <http://www.politcom.ru/4547.html>.

¹³⁹ Nataliia Narochnitskaia, interview by Vladimir Pozner, *Channel One*, March 4, 2007, <http://www.narochnitskaia.ru/in-archive/quot-vremena-quot-quot-pochemu-rossiya-ne-evropa-quot-04-03-07-stenogramma.html?view=full>.

¹⁴⁰ Narochnitskaia, “Deiatel’nost’ Vatikana na territorii Rossii: geopoliticheskii aspekt,” *Pravoslavie.ru*, August 27, 2002, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/analit/vaticanprozel.htm>.

¹⁴¹ For further discussion on that see, for example, Mikhail Dolbilov, *Russkii kraĭ, chuzhaia vera* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 227-296.

Narochnitskaia claims that their origins can be found in religious principles.¹⁴² US domination of global politics, in Narochmitskaia's view, is a hallmark of Calvinist philosophy; this eventually evolved into messianic neo-liberalism, which aimed at restructuring the world into one atheist country without real faith.¹⁴³ Hence, drawing on a diverse set of tragic events in world history, Narochmitskaia attempts to use religion as the basis for the social and national cohesion of Russians. Despite her claims about Russia's unity with Christian denominations in Europe, she clearly points to other religions' hostility towards Orthodoxy.

Narochmitskaia's philosophy also includes elements of anti-globalist conspiracy theories, which she shares with Dugin. She sees the building of the New World Order as the ultimate goal of the conspirators. In her view, the US lies at the centre of this conspiracy. Influenced, perhaps, by her father's work, as well as by Soviet anti-Western propaganda, Narochmitskaia elaborates on that heritage and adjusts it to current conspiracy theories. For instance, she discursively divides the world into ordinary people and the small, but powerful, group of countries that she describes as the "world community" (*mirovoe soobshchestvo*), which, she claims, is bent on controlling the world through the loyal elites of nation-states, a powerful group which she calls the "world elite" (*mirovaia elita*).¹⁴⁴

This discursive division is employed to stress two important ideas, both of which are characteristic of Narochmitskaia's works. Firstly, it accentuates the ultimate threat of US global domination over Russia and the possible consequences of Russia's falling under the influence of the West. Secondly, loyalty to the US and the westernized "world elite" helps Narochmitskaia identify an internal group of conspirators and demarcate internal boundaries within Russian society.

In her writings and interviews, she describes pro-Western liberals as a group of internal conspirators who have nothing in common with the Russian nation and who are doing untold harm to the Russians' memory of their great past.¹⁴⁵ Narochmitskaia compares the current intellectual and political elite with the elites of the past and, just as importantly, praises Soviet intellectuals and Russian immigrants who fled from Russia after the revolution in 1917 but remained patriots.¹⁴⁶ In this context, Narochmitskaia's concepts promote a national

¹⁴² Narochmitskaia, *Rossia i russkie v mirovoi istorii*, 67-70.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80-83.

¹⁴⁴ Narochmitskaia, "Neuderzhimaia tiaga k mirovomu gospodstvu," *Narochmitskaia.ru*, December 22, 2003, <http://www.narochmitskaia.ru/in-archive/неудержимая-тяга-к-мировому-господств.html?view=full>.

¹⁴⁵ "Nataliia Narochmitskaia: 'V SSHA mogut byt' dovol'ny Kasparovym'," *Narochmitskaia.ru*, April 11, 2007, <http://www.narochmitskaia.ru/in-archive/nataliya-narochmitskaya-quot-v-ssha-mogut-byit-dovolnyi-kasparovym-quot.html>.

¹⁴⁶ "Intelligentsiia s ogliadkoï na zapad," *Narochmitskaia.ru*, April 29, 2008, <http://www.narochmitskaia.ru/in-archive/intelligentsiya-s-oglyadkoy-na-zapad.html?view=full>.

cohesion of different social and political groups, despite their differences in political views. Even the key debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles in the 19th century regarding Russia's relation to the West is presented by Narochnitskaia as a dispute between two equally patriotic groups of intellectuals who stressed Russia's uniqueness in the world.¹⁴⁷ In comparison to the elites of the past, current pro-western liberal elites are described as people who neither love their country nor can comprehend the intellectual legacy of European intellectual thought. As Narochnitskaia puts it, they hate the Russian people and Orthodoxy and all that they hold sacred are their bank accounts in the West.¹⁴⁸ This derogatory description is usually applied to those who oppose the Kremlin and it is used to delegitimize any statements critical of Putin's policies.

As Narochnitskaia asserts, the alien character of the Russian liberal opposition in relation to the Russian nation is used by conspirators from the West to undermine Russian greatness from within. Referring to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Narochnitskaia claims that, following the advice of external forces, "liberals threw away and trampled upon three hundred years of Russian history."¹⁴⁹ Critical remarks about the Soviet past and especially Russian and Western historians' attempts to reassess the consequences of the Second World War are perceived by Narochnitskaia as an act of conspiracy that seeks to delegitimize the Soviet Union's post-1945 territorial possessions. She suggests that this could lead to Russia's expulsion from international organizations and the loss of its post-war territorial possessions on the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Pacific Ocean; this, in turn, would diminish Russia's status as a great global power.¹⁵⁰

Narochnitskaia's concepts, which praise the Russian nation and its uniqueness, have a significant influence on the politics of nation-building in Russia. In addition to her active involvement in the politics of history via the work of the aforementioned Commission, some of her ideas have been incorporated into the nation-building policies carried out by the Kremlin. Certainly, it is difficult to trace any direct connection between Narochnitskaia's writings and the Kremlin's official nation-building policies. Still, her access to the presidential

¹⁴⁷ "Vystuplenie N.A. Narochnitskoï na kruglom stole 'Fevral'skaia revoliutsiia v Rossii 1917 g.: Istoriia i sovremennost'" v RGGU. Stenogramma," *Narochnitskaia.ru*, April 29, 2007, <http://narochnitskaia.ru/in-archive/vyistuplenie-n-a-narochnitskoy-na-kruglom-stole-quot-fevral'skaya-revolyuetsiya-v-rossii-1917-g-istoriya-i-sovremennost-quot-v-rggu-stenogramma.html>.

¹⁴⁸ "Natal'ia Narochnitskaia: 'Revolutsiia – dukhovnoe detishche revoliutsii,'" *Narochnitskaia.ru*, October 31, 2007, <http://www.narochnitskaia.ru/in-archive/natalya-narochnitskaya-quot-revolyuetsiya-duhovnoe-detishhe-intelligentsii-quot.html?view=full>.

¹⁴⁹ "Nataliia Narochnitskaia: 'My dolzhny stat' natsiei?'"

¹⁵⁰ "Evropeiskie fal'sifikatory istorii," *Narochnitskaia.ru*, August 14, 2009, <http://www.narochnitskaia.ru/in-archive/evropeyskie-falsifikatory-i-istorii.html?view=full>.

administration and the fact that she holds leading positions at major Kremlin-sponsored think tanks allows it to be argued that there is a strong potential that her intellectual endeavours will shape official political discourse.

For example, Narochnitskaia's approach to Russian history stresses that all periods and events in the past are important for the nation:

We should not omit a single page from the history of the Fatherland, even those which we do not want to repeat. By accepting the sins and crimes of the revolution and of the Soviet period, we also must distinguish between [razlichat'] [these criminal deeds] and acknowledge the dramatic impact of the Soviet period of history [on us].¹⁵¹

Suggesting that a uniform history textbook be adopted by all schools in 2013, Putin similarly argued that such a publication should reflect the continuous logic of Russian history and show respect for all "pages of Russian history."¹⁵²

Narochnitskaia's activities crucially influenced the World War I commemoration held at the end of the 2000s. In her speeches and interviews, Narochnitskaia praised the heroism of the Russian soldiers who had saved Europe, claiming that their deeds had been either forgotten or obscured by both Bolshevik propaganda and the West. In her view, World War I must be returned to its place in the pantheon of heroic deeds of the Russians: this would link contemporary Russia with the glory of the Imperial times. Alongside this, she insists, the subversive forces within the country and abroad are intent on destroying recollection of the war as this would permit them to undermine Russia by depriving Russians of patriotism and their trust in the Fatherland.¹⁵³ As Vera Tolz noted, Narochnitskaia has stood at the centre of commemorative events devoted to World War I from 2009 onwards, thus attracting the attention of leading politicians.¹⁵⁴ In 2013, at a meeting of the Russian Military-Historical Society, Putin agreed to the idea of erecting a monument to commemorate World War I. His statement triggered a full-fledged state-sponsored campaign to commemorate Russia's role in World War I. The main narratives of the campaign, articulated by its participants, had been based on the concepts which were produced by Narochnitskaia in the years preceding the

¹⁵¹ Boris Krotkov, "Revolutsiia: do osnovan'ia, a zachem?"

¹⁵² Vladimir Putin, "Zasedanie Soveta po mezhnatsinal'nym otnosheniiam," (Moscow, Russia, February 19, 2013), <http://state.kremlin.ru/council/28/news/17536>.

¹⁵³ Anastasiia Pleshakova, "Pochemu do sikh por skryvaiutsia fakty o Pervoĭ i Vtoroĭ Miroyvkh voĭnakh," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 13 August 2009, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/press/detail/3186/#>.

¹⁵⁴ Vera Tolz, "Modern Russian Memory of the Great War, 1914-1920," in Eric Lohr, Alexander Semyonov and Vera Tolz, eds., *Nation and Empire at War* (Bloomington: Slavica Press, 2014, Forthcoming).

campaign.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, on 1 August 2014 at the ceremony commemorating 100 years since the beginning of World War I Putin openly admitted that Russia's victory in World War I "was stolen" by the "traitors of national interests" within Russia, thus most likely alluding to the Bolshevik peace treaty with Germany in March 1918.¹⁵⁶

The presence in official discourse—including Putin's own pronouncements—of the concepts of nation-building developed by Narochnitskaia, is hard to overlook. Her access to the media and her academic status allow her to play the role of a prominent spokesperson for Russian patriotic groups and to defend Russian political interests in debates with the opposition. Her praise of Russian émigrés and the Soviet regime equally protects her from accusations of having a clear political position and of changing her opinions in accordance with the fluctuation of the political agenda. Hence, in Narochnitskaia's writings, anti-Western conspiracy theories become an instrument of national reconciliation because they shift the blame for the country's breakdown from Russians onto conspiring enemies abroad.

1.4. "Most Western People Belong to a Different Humanoid Group From Us": Maksim Shevchenko's Battle Against Western Neo-Liberalism

One of the most outspoken figures of anti-Western conspiracy discourse in Russia since the mid-2000s has been Maksim Shevchenko, whose rise to fame on Russian television is closely connected to his evolution as a public intellectual. Shevchenko began his media career as a journalist with *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, covering issues relating to religion. He also published articles about the military conflict in the North Caucasus in the 1990s and the conflict in Afghanistan at the beginning of the 2000s. From 2006 he hosted a television talk show, *Sudite sami (Judge for Yourself)* on *Channel One*, which began his television career and helped establish his public profile as one of the main commentators on interethnic and interreligious relations in Russia. Twice, in 2008 and 2010, he was selected by President Medvedev as a member of the Public Chamber, which was created by the Kremlin in the mid-2000s as a public institution to discuss issues pertaining to Russia's "civil society": here his activities were primarily focused on interethnic relations. As a result, Shevchenko became one of the spokespersons for matters connected with the North Caucasus in the Russian press and, in 2012, became an editor-in-chief of the web-site *Kavkazskaia politika (The Politics of the*

¹⁵⁵ "Vstrecha Vladimira Putina s uchastnikami uchreditel'nogo s'ezda rossiiskogo voenno-istoricheskogo obshchestva," *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, March 20, 2013, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1035290-echo/>; for examples of commemoration, see the official web-site of the Russian Military-Historical Society, <http://1914.histrf.ru/war/>.

¹⁵⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Otkrytie pamiatnika geroiam Pervoï Mirovoï Voïny" (Moscow, Russia, August 1, 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/46385>.

Caucasus), an open forum for the discussion of issues relating to the Caucasus. As a result of these activities, Shevchenko has built a profile as a leading expert in interethnic relations; this allows him to promote his views on various television talk shows and radio programmes.

Like Dugin and Narochnitskaia, Shevchenko describes Russia as a great world power, which brought European methods of administration and cultural development to the new territories during the Imperial and Soviet periods. Ethnic Russians served in this process as a “framework of the nation” (*kostiak natsii*).¹⁵⁷ According to Shevchenko, the prerequisite for Russian greatness is a combination of the three ethno-religious groups: the Orthodox Russians, Turkic Muslims, who inhabit large areas of Siberia, and the nations of the North Caucasus.¹⁵⁸ Shevchenko insists that the absence of any of these groups will destroy Russian nationhood and Russians will fall under the control of the West. Hence, he strives to offer a theoretical framework for the national cohesion of the Russian Federation, one which centres on the idea of territorial unity. According to Shevchenko, Russia’s superiority to the nation-states of Europe is rooted in its composite quality, the inclusion of several “civilizations” into the body of one nation. It is this which guarantees social justice and interethnic tolerance. The Caucasus itself represents a model of interethnic dialogue because it incorporates various religious and ethnic groups.

Shevchenko aims at achieving a two-fold goal when he points to the Caucasus’ unique role in the process of Russian nation-building. On the one hand, he delegitimizes the arguments of isolationist Russian nationalists, whose idea of separation from the Caucasus has gained popularity from the mid-2000s onwards.¹⁵⁹ In his view, calls for separation come from a “fifth column” within Russia, which devastated a great country in 1991. According to this logic, Russian nationalists who advocate the idea of the separation of the Northern Caucasus cannot be Russian patriots as they support the plans of Russia’s enemies. On the other hand, Shevchenko’s admiration for the uniqueness of the Caucasus boosts his popularity among the elites of the North Caucasian region. When addressing these elites, Shevchenko stresses their great past and the fact that most of the cultures in the North Caucasus descend from ancient civilizations.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Maksim Shevchenko, “Kto takie russkie,” *Russia.ru* video, 15:54, November 23, 2010, http://russia.ru/video/diskurs_11273/.

¹⁵⁸ Maksim Shevchenko, “Russkiĭ vopros,” *TVTS* video, 39:02, broadcast by TVTS, November 14, 2012, <http://www.materik.ru/institute/tv/detail.php?ID=15632>.

¹⁵⁹ “Otdelenie Chechni i Severnyĭ Kavkaz,” The Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on 6-10 June, 2013, N=1601, <http://www.levada.ru/01-07-2013/otdelenie-chechni-i-severnyi-kavkaz>.

¹⁶⁰ Shevchenko, “Kavkazskaia politika kak sut’ budushchego Rossii,” *Kavkazskaia politika*, January 9, 2013, <http://kavpolit.com/kavkazskaya-politika-kak-sut-budushhego-rossii/>.

As the Russian scholar Viktor Shnirel'man notes, the idea of ancient ancestry played a key role in shaping the nationalist discourse of the North Caucasian republics as far back as the Soviet period and has been actively developed by local intellectual elites since the Soviet collapse.¹⁶¹ Shevchenko's acknowledgement of that idea, therefore, enables him to discursively reinforce the notion of Russia's greatness and claim that the great histories of individual nations within Russia combine to strengthen Russian statehood.

When addressing the situation in the North Caucasus, Shevchenko utilizes conspiratorial notions and emphasises that the West is a key influence in interethnic conflicts in Russia. As he puts it: "All attempts to present the Chechen conflict as a conflict between the Chechens and the Russians, between Chechnia and Russia, originate from Russia's mortal enemies, who wish for [Russia's] collapse and destruction. . . .This is my sincere conviction."¹⁶²

This attempt to explain interethnic unrest in post-Soviet Russia as a result of conspiracy is a recurring pattern in Shevchenko's works. Enjoying a reputation as an expert on interethnic issues, Shevchenko is approached by the media every time an interethnic conflict in Russia breaks out. This allows him to promote a conspiratorial reading of the event to the general public and to shape public perception of the conflict's causes. For instance, when, in July 2013, social unrest was triggered by a domestic fight between two men in Pugachev, one of whom was of Chechen origin, Shevchenko represented the conflict as part of a broader campaign to destroy Putin's regime and bring down Russia. In his view, the event had been planned and carried out conjointly by opposition politicians, the media and sociologists allied to them. In Shevchenko's view, sociologists confirmed to journalists the existence of strong public support for the idea of separating the North Caucasus from Russia just after the conflict flared up and thus provided a basis for the anti-Caucasian rhetoric.¹⁶³

Despite active usage of conspiracy notions in public speeches, Shevchenko attempts to tailor his arguments to the real social and political challenges that confront post-Soviet Russian society; this means that he positions himself at the centre, rather than the margins, of political discourse. In his description of the socio-economic environment in the North Caucasus, Shevchenko refers to rampant corruption and violence practiced by the law enforcement agencies against residents of the region. Similarly, he traces the sources of interethnic conflicts in other regions of Russia back to the criminal character of political elites,

¹⁶¹ Viktor Shnirel'man, *Byt' alanami. Intellektualy i politika na Severnom Kavkaze v XX veke* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006).

¹⁶² Maksim Shevchenko, interview by Tonia Samsonova, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, April 16, 2009, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/585694-echo/#element-text>.

¹⁶³ Maksim Shevchenko, interview by Tat'iana Fel'gengauer, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, July 11, 2013, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/1112516-echo/#element-text>.

whom Shevchenko regularly accuses of corruption.¹⁶⁴ These accusations are of a populist nature, as they refer to anonymous groups and individuals allegedly responsible for Russia's social problems.

The anonymity of his accusatory utterances permits Shevchenko to be flexible in his critique, and to mask his affiliation to the Kremlin. In interviews, Shevchenko presents himself as an opponent of the government through critical remarks about its policies in the North Caucasian region.¹⁶⁵ However, unlike many activists in the Russian opposition movement, including Russian nationalists, Shevchenko is a member of the Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations, established in 2012 and hosted personally by Putin.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, Shevchenko took an active part in the coalition of the pro-Putin forces during the 2012 presidential elections and supported the Moscow Mayor, Sergeĭ Sobianin, during his electoral campaign in 2013,¹⁶⁷ even though the mayor's campaign was framed within anti-migrant narratives, including statements against the North Caucasus.¹⁶⁸

Shevchenko also regularly criticizes the Russian opposition and its alleged supporters abroad. According to Shevchenko, in the 1990s the US allegedly established a semi-colonial regime in Russia.¹⁶⁹ The signing of the Belovezha Accords provided the means to set up the "oligarchic tyranny" supported by corrupt journalists and politicians who worked closely with the West.¹⁷⁰ For Shevchenko, Putin's regime symbolizes a return to independent decision-making in domestic and foreign policy, which, in his view, offers a chance for the greatness of the lost empire and its economic stability to be restored. Shevchenko contrasts the comparative socio-economic stability of the Putin regime with the oligarchal regime of the

¹⁶⁴ Shevchenko, "Kavkaz: dva mira – dve kul'tury," *Kavkazskaia politika*, March 29, 2013, <http://kavpolit.com/kavkaz-dva-mira-dve-kultury/>.

¹⁶⁵ Maksim Shevchenko, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfossli conducted as a part of the AHRC-funded research project "Mediating Post-Soviet Difference: An Analysis of Russian Television Representations of Inter-Ethnic Cohesion Issues," Moscow, April 3, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ The members of the Council could be found at the Council's webpage hosted by the website of the President of the Russian Federation, last modified October 21, 2013, accessed 29 October, 2013, <http://state.kremlin.ru/council/28/staff>.

¹⁶⁷ "Sobianin po proiskhozhdeniiu – korennoĭ evraziets," interview by Ilya Azar, *Lenta.ru*, July 30, 2013, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/07/30/shevchenko/>.

¹⁶⁸ Ilya Arkhipov and Stepan Kravchenko, "Putin's Men Targeting Migrants as Moscow Mayor Race Heats Up," *Bloomberg*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2013-08-14/putin-s-men-crack-down-on-migrants-as-moscow-mayor-race-heats-up.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Maksim Shevchenko, interview by Vladimir Pozner, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, April 20, 2009, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/pozner-protiv/586393-echo/#element-text>.

¹⁷⁰ Maksim Shevchenko, "20 let belovezhskoi tiranii," *Shevchenko_ML Livejournal* (blog), December 9, 2011, <http://shevchenko-ml.livejournal.com/3019.html>.

1990s. As Shevchenko demonstrates, public unhappiness with the recent past helps reinforce the arguments against the opposition and enacts a discursive division of the nation in official discourse.¹⁷¹

Shevchenko's radical demonization of the US also extends to a depiction of the West as a unified entity in which the majority of citizens share neo-liberal views, which he describes as sinful and criminal in nature.¹⁷² It should be noted that Shevchenko's perception of the West has changed since the mid-2000s, when he emerged as a public intellectual. Perhaps this is connected with the changing trend of political discourse formed by the Kremlin in this period. In 2004, Shevchenko called for a union with Europe against US domination, a response to interventionist US policies in the Middle East.¹⁷³ However, almost a decade later, his opinion about the West has dramatically changed. The hostile perception of the West as a single entity became dominant in his speeches in the 2010s. In an attempt to support a turn in Putin's policies away from the US and Western Europe during his third presidential term, Shevchenko published an article with the telling title *My ne Evropa? I Slava Bogu!* (*We are not Europe? And thank God!*) in which he drew a clear distinction between Russia and the West: "There is a growing feeling that most Western people belong to a different humanoid race from us."¹⁷⁴ Elaborating on this idea, Shevchenko claimed that Russia had to defend itself from the corrupt spirit of neo-liberal thought, which is solely focused on consumption and sexual promiscuity as opposed to the Russian nation, whose adherence to traditional values will save the world.

In connection with the demonized image of the US, Shevchenko, like Narochnitskaia, constructs an idea of a so-called "liberal opposition," alien to the Russian nation. According to him, the opposition, funded by the US, is relentless in its attempt to create numerous nation-states on the territory of today's Russia. US policies are allegedly carried out by disloyal "fifth columnists" within Russia, who possess dual citizenship and lack national identity.¹⁷⁵ In this context, the reference to dual citizenship serves as another marker of the "otherness" of the

¹⁷¹ For a particular attack of Shevchenko on journalists see, Maksim Shevchenko, "Sgin! Otvet Sergeiu Parkhomenko," *Shevchenko_ML Livejournal* (blog), December 24, 2011, <http://shevchenko-ml.livejournal.com/3920.html>.

¹⁷² Shevchenko, "Neoliberalizm absolutno antikristovo uchenie," *Kavkazskaia politika*, May 31, 2013, <http://kavpolit.com/neoliberalizm-absolyutno-antikristovo-uchenie/>.

¹⁷³ Shevchenko, interview by Sergeĭ Buntman, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, December 15, 2004, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/exit/33513/#element-text>.

¹⁷⁴ Shevchenko, "My ne Evropa? I slava bogu!" *Moskovskii komsomolets*, February 11, 2013, <http://www.mk.ru/specprojects/free-theme/article/2013/02/10/810258-myi-ne-evropa-i-slava-bogu.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Maksim Shevchenko, "Byt' protiv Rima, ili Makfol kak imperskii procurator," *Kavkazskaia politika*, January 19, 2012, <http://kavpolit.com/byt-protiv-rima-ili-makfol-kak-imperskij-prokurator/>.

opposition. This division is further achieved through the utilization of the corpus of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories which were popular in the Imperial and, even more so, in Soviet times. The application of the old conspiratorial notions, depicting a small but powerful group of people within the state, helps Shevchenko make his message clear and self-explanatory.

In fact, Shevchenko's crucial difference from other public intellectuals—involved in the dissemination of conspiracy discourse and loyal to the Kremlin—is in his active employment of anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli attitudes in speeches and articles. As a self-proclaimed spokesperson for the Muslim population of Russia, Shevchenko regularly provides his readers and viewers with interpretations of the Middle East conflict, depicting Israel as a “fascist state” that commits genocide against the Palestinians. Trying to promote solidarity between the Muslims in Russia and the Middle East on the basis of their common hatred of Jews, Shevchenko utilizes the narratives traditional to the anti-Zionist conspiracy discourse popular in the Middle East.¹⁷⁶ For instance, he depicts Israel as “a purely virtual state” which was created by the US with the sole purpose of military and political domination in the Middle East.¹⁷⁷

However, Shevchenko's anti-Israeli conspiracy mythmaking has a peculiar twist aimed at its domestic audience. He depicts the Russian-speaking community in Israel both as the most vitriolic in its attitudes towards the Palestinians, and mercantile. Shevchenko contends that the Jews left the Soviet Union when times were hard for the Soviet nation; they went to Israel in search of the good life. Living in Israel as colonialists, they criticize interethnic relations in Russia and make clear their hatred of Muslims, thus destroying peace between nationalities in Russia.¹⁷⁸ Shevchenko maintains that Russian citizens of Jewish origin, who oppose Putin, trigger interethnic conflicts between radical Islamists and Russian nationalists in the south of Russia. In a further conspiratorial elaboration, Shevchenko asserts that the Israelis will soon cause the disintegration of Russia and will build a new state which will be a fall-back position for Israel, in case Israel collapses.¹⁷⁹

Shevchenko's utilization of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories is an important development in the discourse of the nation and interethnic relations in Russia. Elaborating on the extensive corpus of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish conspiracy notions, Shevchenko creates the

¹⁷⁶ Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*; Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: Griffin, 1998).

¹⁷⁷ Shevchenko, “Prodiusery siriškoj vojni,” *Russia.ru*, 8:24, May 2, 2012, http://tv.russia.ru/video/diskurs_13146/.

¹⁷⁸ Shevchenko, “Kolonial'naja retrospektiva Izrailia,” *Kavkazskaja politika*, November 20, 2012, <http://kavpolit.com/kolonialnaya-retrospektiva-izrailiya/>.

¹⁷⁹ Shevchenko, interview by Natal'ia Goncharova, *Russkaja služba novostej*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.rusnovosti.ru/guests/interviews/58118/233174/>.

conspiring “Other” out of the Jews who, in his view, resist interethnic peace within Russia and instigate conflicts in the North Caucasus. The connection between Israel and the US helps embed anti-Jewish discourse within the body of anti-Western conspiracy theories. The dissemination of the aforementioned conspiracies appears to be a peculiar approach to the resolution of interethnic conflict. By introducing an additional actor into the violent and unresolved conflict, Shevchenko promotes the cohesion of the Russian nation against a common enemy: the Jews.

Shevchenko’s active employment of anti-Western and anti-Jewish narratives, set in motion to create a discourse of national cohesion, appears to be a specific example of the utilization of conspiracy mythmaking. Addressing speeches to ethnic and religious minorities, which face growing xenophobic attitudes on the part of the general Russian public, Shevchenko achieves a discursive inclusion of various minorities into the category of “the people,” who share a common “glorious past” with ethnic Russian majority. The promotion of conspiracy theories thus helps explain the growth in interethnic tension by pointing to the treasonable actions of the opposition, corrupt authorities and external powers, at the same time as it distances the Kremlin from this conflict. Shevchenko’s charisma and rhetorical skills, together with the support of the Kremlin, certainly allow him to act efficiently as an agent of conspiracy mythmaking and a contributor to the official political discourse.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, public intellectuals perform a significant role in the spreading of anti-Western conspiracy theories in Russian society. The intellectuals’ efforts to develop their own conspiracy theories or borrow them from foreign sources, as in the case of Dugin, has played a crucial role in strengthening the anti-Western attitudes of the general public during the post-Soviet period. Furthermore, their notable focus on Russia’s geopolitical domination as a superpower in the past demonstrates how strongly the Russian political and intellectual elites resent their country’s loss of international influence in the 1990s. The political elites’ inability to cope with the changing system of international relations after the Soviet collapse has, paradoxically, stimulated, rather than constrained, this “great power” mentality.¹⁸⁰

Public intellectuals, the most prominent of whom have been discussed in this chapter, have explained the dramatic domestic changes experienced by Russian citizens as the result of subversive actions of the “conspiring West.” The popularity of anti-Western conspiracy theories about Russia’s loss of superpower status and the uncontested domination of the US

¹⁸⁰ Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 74.

could thus be interpreted as a manifestation of inequality in relations between Russia and the US after 1991. Public intellectuals' criticism of the West, expressed in conspiracy theories, has provided both the population and the authorities with an image of a desired Russia. Despite the country's socio-economic upheavals, public intellectuals have managed to depict a great, multiethnic state, which resists attempts of the West to control the world and obtain Russian territories and resources.

What distinguishes Russian from American conspiracy mythmaking is the engagement of public intellectuals in politics on the side of the ruling elites. The anti-elitism of conspiracy theorists in the US serves as a sign that they belong to "the people" and strengthens the populist aspect of their rhetoric. It is likely that American conspiracy theorists aspire to become a part of the political elite and influence the political agenda in the country, but this is not how they represent themselves. Furthermore, in contrast to the situation in Russia, in the US public consensus regarding the boundaries and rules of permissible types of political rhetoric significantly lessens the chances of American conspiracy theorists acquiring high social and academic standing.

Unlike their American counterparts, Russian authors of anti-Western conspiracy theories are often ranked among the most influential public intellectuals, with access to the media, particularly those controlled by the state, and book publication. In Russia, the articulation of the most bizarre conspiratorial ideas does not lead to exclusion from mainstream politics. Instead, as early as the late 1990s, the ruling elite of Russia realized the potential of achieving social cohesion through anti-Western conspiracy discourse. This has allowed top-ranking officials to utilize the intellectual endeavour of conspiracy theorists for a number of domestic and international purposes.

The claims for power by producers of knowledge – public intellectuals – are made through their regular attempts to become part of the political hierarchy. The Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge applied to conspiracy discourse in Russia highlights the dependence of public intellectuals on the power institutions in the state. At the same time, the political elites are dependent on producers of such knowledge for their ability to intellectually support the political regime.

As we have seen in this chapter, Pavlovskii's attempts to employ public intellectuals to create a political discourse favourable to the Kremlin were realized; they took the form of a range of Kremlin-connected think tanks, foundations and concepts, which praised Putin and criticized his opponents. Through loyal media outlets, the intellectuals affiliated with these organizations spread anti-Western conspiracy theories among the general public, claiming to reveal the "genuine" causes of domestic and international events. The Kremlin's control of major information sources, and, most importantly, control over television in the 2000s, has

offered loyal intellectuals a unique opportunity to articulate populist conspiratorial notions particularly effectively. In sum, public intellectuals have become important producers of conspiratorial discourse, which has been aimed, to use Foucault's theory, at establishing a particular regime of truth.

Each of the intellectuals discussed in this chapter has contributed to the promotion of a conspiratorial perception of the West by publishing books, hosting talk shows, and supplying top rank politicians with ideas which the intellectuals either elaborated or adopted from the West. Based upon the promotion of conspiracy theories, the public careers of Dugin, Narochnitskaia and Shevchenko reveal that anti-Western conspiracy theories are among the most popular instruments of social cohesion utilized by the political elites to maintain control over the country. The opposition to the Kremlin remains the target of seemingly different populist discourses articulated by the aforementioned intellectuals with the aim of discursively constructing the "Other" within the nation. Still, none of the intellectuals openly acknowledges his or her affiliation with the authorities and at times even explicitly stresses the oppositional character of their activities. At the same time, mutual agreement on the part of the intellectuals is achieved by their active support of Putin as the single political leader of the country. In line with Pavlovskii's political projects, anti-Western conspiracy theories become a populist tool; this serves to legitimize the authoritarian rule of the president and delegitimize his opponents.

The ability of conspiracy theories to highlight social and political inequity makes them a frequently-used tool in conflict resolution, especially in the sphere of interethnic relations and nation-building. Performed through the application of anti-Western, and at times anti-Semitic, conspiracy theories, the discursive relocation of power from the West, where it is alleged to have been in the 1990s, to Russian authorities under Putin appears to be efficacious in achieving political goals. However, a shortage of real measures to improve interethnic cohesion, and in their stead the verbal interventions of pro-Kremlin intellectuals such as Shevchenko, means that no long-term solutions to the problems are offered. In this context, the growing body of conspiracy theories might in future have the opposite effect to that desired: facilitating the disintegration rather than the preservation of Russia's integrity.

Chapter 2. The Soviet Collapse and Its Conspiracy Interpretations in Post-Soviet Russia

Introduction

The coup of 19-21 August 1991 became an important turning point in Russian history. The crumbling economy, ethnic conflicts in the republics and the chance to adopt a new Union treaty, which could have turned the Soviet Union into a confederation, prompted the conservative bloc in the Soviet government to organize the State Committee of the State of Emergency (*GKChP*) and introduce a State of Emergency on 19 August. Their failure to suppress the opposition, led by the President of Russia Boris El'tsin, symbolized the victory of democratic forces over the communist regime. In the aftermath of the coup, the authorities of the Russian Federation decreed that these days would henceforth be commemorated as the starting point of a new, democratic state.

At the same time, in anti-Western conspiracy discourse, an important role has been attributed to the events of August 1991 in post-Soviet Russia, where they have been interpreted as a prime example of Western success in challenging Russia's greatness in the world. Anti-Western conspiracy theorists have contended that as a result of the August coup, the West succeeded in imposing its rule on Russia. The remarkable failure of the *GKChP* to suppress a relatively small opposition fed suspicions that the coup had been staged and that treachery was at work in the highest ranks of the Soviet ruling elites. In the 1990s, the so-called Russian patriots and supporters of the Communist Party (*KPRF*) disseminated these versions of the August coup and accused El'tsin of pursuing an anti-national policy.

In the first decade of the 21st century, a number of influential members of Putin's political elite put forward an interpretation of the August 1991 coup that accentuated the conspiratorial aspect of the events. As a result of the combined effort of the state-aligned media, book publishers and pro-Kremlin politicians this event has been reinterpreted and endowed with a new meaning. In 2013, 22 years after the August coup of 1991, Russians had come to perceive it as a tragic episode in the country's history and the result of a conflict in political leadership.¹⁸¹ Hence, the initial symbolism of the coup as a victory of democracy in Russia has been left behind.

This chapter will discuss conspiratorial interpretations of *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as well as the deployment of such interpretations in the political

¹⁸¹ See, "GKChP v pamiati rossiiian," The Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on July 18-22, 2013, N=1601, <http://www.levada.ru/19-08-2013/gkchp-v-pamyati-rossiyan>.

struggles of post-Soviet Russia. The August 1991 coup appears to be a foundational moment in the history of the new Russian state, thus triggering heated debates about its causes. In these debates, specific interpretations of the coup are often linked to particular conceptions of Russian identity. This chapter will show that throughout the post-Soviet era, the notion of the Soviet collapse interpreted through the prism of conspiracy theory has been a powerful instrument in the redistribution of power between the Kremlin and the opposition. In the 1990s, it served as an ideological platform on which the forces of opposition against the El'tsin regime were able to unite and the notion of an engineered collapse of the USSR was used to delegitimize the president. After the attempt to impeach El'tsin, in 1999, which was largely based on conspiratorial interpretations of the Soviet collapse, Kremlin officials realized the value of this idea for the purposes of nation-building and the delegitimization of political opponents. As a result, in the 2000s, attitudes towards the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were used by the ruling elites as a key marker with which to distinguish “the people” from the “conspiring Other.” State-sponsored conspiratorial discourse about the Soviet collapse, shared and developed by public intellectuals, facilitated a discursive creation of national unity, crucial to which was memory of both the Soviet past and the dramatic experiences of the first post-Soviet years.

This chapter will first discuss those conspiracy theories that account for the demise of the USSR which have been influencing the process of national cohesion in the post-Soviet period. It will then analyze how various political actors in the 1990s and the 2000s have been applying these conspiracy theories in order to gain public support and access to political power.

2.1. The Overture to Collapse: Conspiratorial Origins of Gorbachev's Perestroika

The Agents of Perestroika: Employing the Language of the Intelligence Services in Conspiracy Theories

A commonplace in conspiracy theories about the collapse of the Soviet Union is the notion of “agents of *perestroika*” (*agenty perestroiki*) who allegedly worked in close collaboration with Western intelligence services to corrupt Soviet institutions and ideology. This idea is especially popular among authors with a background in the Soviet intelligence services, who associate the break-up of the Soviet Union with pro-Western “agents of influence” (*agenty vlianiia*). The term “agents of influence” itself is often found in the lexicon of intelligence services. According to Viacheslav Shironin, a KGB general and author of three books about conspiratorial causes of the Soviet collapse, the destruction of the USSR was a top-priority

goal that had shaped American politics for decades and *perestroika* was planned from abroad to aggravate the Soviet Union's economic problems.¹⁸² Another ex-KGB officer, Igor' Panarin, claimed that in 1943 the United States and the United Kingdom started the "First Information War" against the Soviet Union. The Committee of 300, the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations reputedly waged this war by organizing subversive campaigns against the USSR. According to Panarin, "subversive agents" in the Soviet Union, who were controlled by the United States, were discovered by the KGB. However, the conspirators were not neutralized due to their connections with top-ranking Soviet leaders, for example, it is suggested that they were supported by Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev.¹⁸³

The two organizations: the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations, which are important US non-governmental and non-partisan organizations and think tanks, also occupy a significant place in the conspiracy theories widespread in the United States and Europe.¹⁸⁴ It is noteworthy that, conceptually, Shironin's and Panarin's works significantly differ. Shironin mainly develops ideas about subversive US activities aimed at global domination. He represents Russia as a crucial adversary of the US, which attempts to undermine Russia through a highly sophisticated combination of intelligence operations. Shironin's analysis is thus typical of Soviet propaganda and its elements can be traced back to the popular culture of the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁵

Panarin's work, published thirteen years after Shironin's, in 2010, is clearly inflected by the manifold foreign literature on conspiracy theories available in Russia at that later date, an influence so explicit that it can serve as a Russian guide to Western conspiracy theories. It is likely that Panarin's concept of the conspiracy of the West absorbed and was shaped by notions of global conspiracy popular in Western Europe and the US; he then went on to reinterpret these conspiracies as exclusively anti-Russian. For instance, Panarin identified an American banker, David Rockefeller, as a key mastermind behind the Soviet collapse. Rockefeller is found at the centre of numerous conspiracy theories in the US that involve the Trilateral Commission and Council on Foreign Relations. Panarin also depicted The Committee of 300, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission as the main centres of anti-Russian conspiracy in the West. Indeed, in Western conspiratorial

¹⁸² Viacheslav Shironin, *Agenty perestroiki* (Moscow: Èksmo, 2010), 21-22.

¹⁸³ Igor' Panarin, *Pervaia Informatsionnaia Voïna. Razryl SSSR* (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 154, 176-181.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, Jim Marrs, *Rule by Secrecy: The Hidden History that Connects the Trilateral Commission, The Freemasons, and the Great Pyramids* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, a typical example of these publications, Nikolai Iakovlev, *TsRU protiv SSSR* (Moscow: Pravda, 1983) and popular Soviet films, e.g. *TASS upolnomochen zaiavit'*, directed by Vladimir Fokin (Moscow: Tsentral'naia kinostudiia detskikh i iunosheskikh fil'mov im. Gor'kogo, 1984).

literature these organizations play major roles in creating the New World Order, but do not mention Russia specifically.¹⁸⁶

In texts about the Soviet collapse, subversive “agents” of the West are blamed for kindling the nationalist movements in the Soviet republics; these movements, it is claimed, destroyed the foundations of the multinational Soviet state. In this context, many authors, including Panarin and Shironin, emphasize the role of Aleksander Iakovlev, one of Gorbachev’s closest political advisers. According to the former head of the KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov, Iakovlev was an American spy recruited in the 1950s during an internship at Columbia University.¹⁸⁷ Repeating these theories, a highly controversial Russian historian, Igor Froianov, who, nevertheless, was the dean of the History Faculty at St. Petersburg State University, concluded that Iakovlev acted in agreement with Gorbachev to approve the military repressions in 1991 in Vilnius and, thus, trigger the separation of the Baltic states from the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁸

The idea of “subversive agents” who are to be blamed for the destruction of the Soviet Union is among the most popular of the conspiratorial notions. The search for a scapegoat, imagined to be a “foreign agent,” draws on a large body of publications and stories involving treason against Russia. The Russian origins of the notion of “foreign agents” can be traced back to fear of German subversion on the eve of, and during, the First World War, the show trials of the Great Purge in the 1930s, as well as a spy mania in the late Soviet period.¹⁸⁹ Overall, the concept of a “subversive agency” can be a convenient and powerful tool. Authors of conspiracy theories merge real historical facts with imagined stories of treason thus bringing into doubt former and current politicians’ loyalty to the state and its people and, thereby, undermining their reputation.

Andropov’s Conspiracy

A prominent figure in discussion of the role played by subversive agency in the Soviet collapse is that of Iuriĭ Andropov, head of the KGB (1967-1982) and General Secretary of the CPSU between 1982 and 1984. Some authors, most of whom were not involved in the intelligence services, tend to include him in their list of the “high ranked agents” of

¹⁸⁶ Panarin, *Pervaiia Informatsionnaia Voĭna*, 154-155.

¹⁸⁷ Vladimir Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2003), 324.

¹⁸⁸ Igor’ Froianov, *Rossĭia. Pogruzhenie v bezdnu* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 222-224.

¹⁸⁹ See, Fuller, *The Foe Within*; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 190-217; Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 143-163; Halfin, “The Demonization of the Opposition.”

subversion. They argue that Andropov was representative of the pro-Western forces, which worked to create a global government with its centre in the United States.

The origins of Andropov's image as an "evil mastermind" of *perestroika* are most probably to be found in the spoof novel *Operatsiia Golgofa: sekretnyi plan perestroiki* (*Operation Golgotha: the Secret Plan of Perestroika*), published in 1995 by Mikhail Liubimov, a Soviet spy and writer. The story shows Andropov hatching a plan to plunge the Soviet Union into political chaos and "wild capitalism" in order to renew Russian society without mass purges.¹⁹⁰ The plan delineates *perestroika*, the August coup and El'tsin's reforms in such detail that the novel triggered a parliamentary investigation into whether this plan was authentic.¹⁹¹ Although law-enforcement agencies repudiated Liubimov's ideas, this publication prepared fertile ground for further conspiracy theories; these in turn shaped new readings of the Soviet collapse and demonstrated how susceptible the post-Soviet political elites were to conspiratorial conceptualizations of the recent past.¹⁹²

The story about Gorbachev's promotion to the position of Party General Secretary lies at the centre of this particular corpus of conspiracy theories. Most of the authors wondered how one of the most powerful men in the Soviet Union—Andropov—could promote a person whose policies would cause the dissolution of the Soviet state a few years later. Using the fact that Andropov did indeed have good relations with Gorbachev, some Russian nationalist writers contended that Andropov was one of the key people to destroy the Soviet Union from within. For instance, Russian nationalist Roman Perin uses Liubimov's novel as evidence of a blueprint for the destruction of the Soviet state. Perin suggests that it was the practices of the KGB against dissidents that created a group of activists that undermined the USSR in the 1980s.

All these human rights campaigners, "antisovetchiks," are an element in the "Golgotha" plan. This is exactly the legion that will control the minds of the befuddled masses in the period of global *perestroika*. Andropov was intimately acquainted with the fact that in Russia martyrs are loved and trusted. The first

¹⁹⁰ Mikhail Liubimov, *"Operatsiia Golgofa": sekretnyi plan perestroiki* (Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno, 1995), <http://lib.ru/POLITOLOG/lubimow.txt>.

¹⁹¹ "Plan Andropova' desiat let spustia," by Igor' Sid, *So-obshcheniie*, no. 5, 2004, <http://soob.ru/n/2004/5/op/1>.

¹⁹² In November 2012, the Russian magazine *Russkii Reportër* published a story about Andropov's plan of reforms as the leading topic of the issue. Based on mostly anonymous interviews with former officers of KGB, the author of the article claimed that Vladimir Putin's reforms themselves represent an exemplar of Andropov's plan and its successful results.

democratic elections proved the accuracy of Andropov's plan, elaborated with the CIA and Mossad.¹⁹³

It should also be noted that in the conspiracy theories about *perestroika* that are particularly popular among Russian nationalists, Andropov is usually depicted as Jewish. The emphasis on Andropov's alleged "Jewish" origins stresses his "otherness" to the Russian nation. Russian nationalists argue that the economic disaster of the 1990s could only have been brought about by the anti-national occupational government masterminded by Andropov.¹⁹⁴ That this theory is rarely aired in the corpus of anti-Western conspiracy theories circulating in Russia today might well be connected with the relatively low popularity of anti-Jewish sentiment in post-Soviet Russia.¹⁹⁵

"Westernized" Intelligentsia Against the Motherland

While Panarin and Kriuchkov are concerned with "agents of influence," other authors, such as Sergeĭ Kurginian, political consultant and former theatre director, have focused on the societal factors of the Soviet collapse. Kurginian primarily blames the liberal intelligentsia and pro-Western political elites for allegedly selling out the interests of the country and ruining its historical mission.

Kurginian uses the term *anti-elite* to describe what he perceives to be a union of the pro-Western political elites with the liberal intelligentsia who, together, corrupted Soviet politics and "robbed" the Soviet Union of its greatness.¹⁹⁶ The *anti-elite*, according to Kurginian, consisted of top-ranking figures in the Communist Party and the KGB. They initiated the August coup to cover up the results of their destructive policies. The dramatic decline in Russians' standard of living, Kurginian explains in terms of pro-Western intellectuals making alliances with "shadowy business," whose representatives eventually destabilized the Communist Party and became oligarchs, while the intelligentsia was left

¹⁹³ Roman Perin, "Ptentsy gnezda Andropova," *Golos Imperii*, 3, March 2004, 26-27.

¹⁹⁴ "Sekretnyi plan Andropova po perestroike SSSR pod kodovym nazvaniem "Golgofa" byl razrabotan v TsRU, sluzhi satany iznachalno predpolagali ritual'no raspinat' Russkii Bogonosnyi Narod na Golgofe!," *Moskva-Tretii Rim*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.ic-xc-nika.ru/texts/2009/apr/n450.html>.

¹⁹⁵ According to the monitoring of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, the level of antisemitism in Russia in 2011-2012 is one of the lowest among European countries. See, "Antisemitizm v Rossii v 2011-2012 gg." *Euro-Asian Jewish Congress*, April 5, 2013, <http://eajc.org/data/file/Antisemitism%20in%20Russia%202011-201.pdf>; see, also the polling research made by the Levada Centre in 2011: "Rossiiane ob Izraile," the Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on April 15-18, 2011, N=1600, <http://www.levada.ru/15-06-2011/rossiyane-ob-izraile>.

¹⁹⁶ Evgenii Chernykh, "Sergeĭ Kurginian: 'Gorbachev soznatel'no razvalil KPSS i SSSR!'," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25647.4/810668/>.

behind to survive as best it could.¹⁹⁷ He claims that the American “plan” of Soviet destruction included the production of a corpus of anti-Soviet historical research that corrupted Soviet ideology and demonstrated the supremacy of Western capitalism. In Kurginian’s words, during *perestroika*: “Russians were told that there should be no dream at all,” only the interests of the individual were important.¹⁹⁸

Kurginian’s rhetoric about treacherous, pro-Western elites was threaded through with reference to the socio-economic and ideological problems that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet state. His populist appeal – to blame the *anti-élite* for the destruction of the state – was targeted at educated Russians, the so-called intelligentsia, who suffered enormously under the economic reforms of the 1990s whilst at the same time remaining interested in political issues. Exploiting the disappointment of this group within Russian society, Kurginian was able to further boost his popularity on Russian television, where he became a frequent guest of talk shows. By the end of the 2000s, he was hosting his own show, *Istoricheskiĭ protsess* (*The Historical Process*), on the state television channel Rossiia; this was dedicated to the discussion of various historical topics closely connected with contemporary political issues. Being a host of a television show provided him with an effective vehicle for disseminating conspiratorial ideas about the Soviet collapse and eventually brought him into direct contact with the Kremlin (discussed in chapter 4).

“The Manipulation of Consciousness”

Russian chemist and amateur writer Sergeĭ Kara-Murza presented another conspiratorial conceptualisation of the Soviet collapse. At the core of his concept lies the idea that a small group of people in the Soviet Union, connected with “external” partners, and deploying manipulation, have convinced the entire Soviet nation to destroy the country and abandon ambitions to build communism. “A certain influential and organized part of humankind (into which some of our compatriots have been accepted) . . . have convinced our society to act according to a programme which has brought enormous benefits to this group at enormous cost to ourselves.”¹⁹⁹

In Kara-Murza’s view, the consciousness of the Soviet people naturally combines “rationality (mind)” and “common ethics (heart),” which allows them to apprehend the sacred

¹⁹⁷ Valerĭ Legostaev, “Tseluloid GKChP,” *Zavtra*, no. 34, August 20, 2002, <http://zavtra.ru/content/view/2002-08-2041/>; Sergeĭ Kara-Murza, *Antisovetskĭĭ proekt*. (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009), http://www.loveread.ec/read_book.php?id=1359&p=46.

¹⁹⁸ “Sut’ vremeni-1,” Tsentr Kurginiana, accessed April 14, 2012, <http://www.kurginian.ru/publ.shtml?cmd=add&cat=4&id=77>

¹⁹⁹ Kara-Murza, *Manipulatsiia soznaniiem*. http://www.kara-murza.ru/books/manipul/manipul.htm#hdr_1.

meaning of the world, in contrast to the restricted vision of “technocratic Europeans.” According to Kara-Murza, a positive perception of the West first became popular among the so-called anti-Soviet intellectuals; they distorted the meaning of symbols and institutions such as the Motherland, the State and the Army, all of which were crucial for the nation.²⁰⁰

Characteristic of Kara-Murza’s methodology is a particular focus on manipulation and neuro-linguistic methods of public persuasion; this accords with an idea especially popular in Russia at the beginning of the new millennium, that “social programming” as a method of public manipulation could replace real politics and public involvement in politics.²⁰¹ In part, this idea was stimulated by the successful deployment of political technologies during the presidential elections in 1996, when within six months El’tsin transformed his position, from last on the list of candidates to the ultimate winner of the campaign.²⁰²

Kara-Murza’s focus on the employment of manipulative technologies, and the relative popularity of this explanatory framework during the 2000s, may be compared to a corpus of American conspiracy theories devoted to brainwashing technologies, which emerged during the Cold War. As Timothy Melley suggests, conspiracy narratives of brainwashing bespeak an attempt to theorize social and ideological influences on American society. For instance, the changing role of women and other progressive social changes in the 1960s were regarded by some American conspiracy theorists to be the result of communist brainwashing tactics that endangered the ultimate virtue of American culture - individualism. The essential threat of brainwashing, in their view, lay mainly in its corruption of liberal individualism, which turned rational agents into brainwashed subjects under the control of an external, communist, mastermind.²⁰³

The Russian version of the brainwashing theories, as outlined by Kara-Murza, partly repeats American fears of a less autonomous society, but with more concern regarding the replacement of a “thinking nation” by the mob (Kara-Murza uses the term mob-creation, or *tolpobrazovanie*). Kara-Murza draws attention to the population of West European countries,

²⁰⁰ Kara-Murza, *Antisovetskii proekt* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009), http://www.loveread.ec/read_book.php?id=1359&p=46.

²⁰¹ The most remarkable example of this was the book by several political consultants about the methods of public manipulation used during the elections in post-Soviet Russia. See, D.G. Gusev, O.A. Matveichev, R.R. Khazeev, S. Iu. Chernakov, *Ushi mashut oslom: sovremennoe sotsial'noe programmirovaniie* (Moscow: Alex J. Bakster group, 2006). Andrew Wilson also discusses the popularity of manipulative methods in Russian politics in his book about Russian elections. See Wilson, *Virtual Politics*.

²⁰² Lilia Shevtsova, *El'tsin's Russia: Myths and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 156.

²⁰³ Timothy Melley, “Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States,” *New German Critique*, Vol. 35, (2008): 149, 162-164.

which— under the influence of television and popular culture—had been “transformed into a huge virtual mob always ready to sanction the policies of the leaders.”²⁰⁴

In addition to this, Kara-Murza provides a mirror image of American fears about threatened individuality. He states that “Western manipulators” pose a threat to the “traditional Russian idea of the common cause” that has always bonded individuals to society and thus strengthened the state. In contrast to Russia, “Western society” lacks “the core of ethical values” due to the unprecedented atomization of society that values individual rights and private ethics above all else.²⁰⁵ This idea demonstrates that a similar shared anxiety about social influences was common among proponents of the brainwashing conspiratorial concepts in both the USA and post-Soviet Russia. The changing nature of Russian society, its gradual transition towards a market economy and the increasingly greater value placed on individual rights evoke fears of an “evil-minded manipulation” carried out by the West to destroy the “uniqueness” of Russian society. According to this interpretation, the seeming ease of the Soviet collapse in 1991 resulted from the persistent brainwashing of the Soviet people by Mikhail Gorbachev and the political elites loyal to him.²⁰⁶

2.2. The Collapse of the USSR in 1991

Mikhail Gorbachev as a Favourite Scapegoat

In the corpus of conspiracy theories centred on the Soviet collapse, Gorbachev is singled out as a figure who consciously contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union along with Iakovlev and Andropov. Gorbachev’s relentless resurfacing in conspiracy theories correlates with public opinion about his role in these events. Many Russian citizens share negative attitudes towards Gorbachev, blaming him for political weakness and for turning a blind eye to the gradual erosion of the country in the late 1980s. According to an opinion poll taken in 2001 by the *All Russian Centre for Research of Public Opinion (VTSIOM)*, Gorbachev personally was thought to be the main cause of the collapse of the USSR. Questioned about the break-up of the Soviet Union, respondents gave as their two most common answers, that it had been triggered by disorder in the country due to Gorbachev’s policies of *perestroika* (55%) and due to the conflict between Gorbachev and El’tsin.²⁰⁷ The poll conducted in 2013

²⁰⁴ Sergeĭ Kara-Murza, *Manipulatsiia soznaniiem*, http://www.kara-murza.ru/books/manipul/manipul41.htm#hdr_58

²⁰⁵ Kara-Murza, *Rossĭia ne zapad, ili chto nas zhdët* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2011), 170.

²⁰⁶ Kara-Murza, *Evrei, Dissidenty, Evrokommunisty* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2002), http://www.kara-murza.ru/books/evrei/evrei27.htm#hdr_34.

²⁰⁷ The opinion poll, conducted by VTSIOM in 2001, N=1600, quoted in Boris Dubin, “Simvolı vozvrata vmesto simvolov peremen,” *Pro et Contra* 15, no.5 (September-October 2011): 14.

by the Levada Centre confirmed this negative attitude towards Gorbachev; it demonstrated that 28 per cent of respondents shared a “rather negative” attitude, whilst 21 per cent shared “clearly negative” attitudes towards Gorbachev as a political leader.²⁰⁸ It could be suggested that this negative perception of Gorbachev among the Russian public contributes to the popularity of post-Soviet conspiracy discourse regarding the events in which Gorbachev played a central role.

The Soviet writer and political émigré Aleksandr Zinoviev wrote that Gorbachev started the epoch of “great treason” by visiting Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle in 1985 instead of paying his respects in Highgate, at the grave of the founder of communist ideology, Karl Marx.²⁰⁹ This label of treason was attached to Gorbachev in all the conspiracy writings about the Soviet collapse. Acknowledging that the economic situation in the USSR had been far from perfect, various authors (including those who were Gorbachev’s closest aides in the 1980s-1990s) have claimed that Gorbachev deliberately destroyed Soviet military strength and got rid of political rivals in exchange for the support of the West. Anatoliĭ Luk’ianov, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, wrote that there were no “objective prerequisites” for the demise of the USSR, and that the state was dismantled as a result of a struggle between irresponsible politicians, among whom Gorbachev holds one of the leading positions.²¹⁰ Russian historian Anatoliĭ Utkin asserted that Gorbachev committed a crime against the Motherland by allowing Ukraine to declare its independence, once and for all destroying any further hope of Russian greatness. According to Utkin, Gorbachev agreed to everything that his American partners suggested, thereby betraying the geopolitical interests of Russia.²¹¹ Viktor Iliukhin, a top-ranking official in the USSR General Attorney’s office in the late 1980s, filed a suit against Gorbachev for high treason in November 1991, accusing him of planning the collapse of the state at the behest of the US and of signing decrees that contradicted the Soviet Constitution and state laws.²¹² The suit was not filed because Iliukhin was dismissed from his post. However, as we shall see below, during the 2000s, in order to draw attention to their activities and delegitimize members of opposition, a number of

²⁰⁸ “Otnosheniia k lideram proshlogo: Gorbachev, El’tsin, Verkhovnyiĭ sovet,” the opinion poll conducted by the Levada Centre on April 19-22, 2013, N=1601, <http://www.levada.ru/08-05-2013/otnoshenie-k-lideram-proshlogo-gorbachev-eltsin-verkhovnyi-sovet>.

²⁰⁹ Aleksandr Zinov’ev, “Gibel’ Imperii zla” (Ocherk Rossiĭskoi tragedii),” *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, no.1, (1995): 99.

²¹⁰ Anatoliĭ Luk’ianov, *Byl li z’agovor?* (Moscow: Èksmo, 2010), 141.

²¹¹ Anatoliĭ Utkin, *Izmena genseka. Begstvo iz Evropy* (Moscow: Èksmo, 2009), 30-32, 199.

²¹² Viktor Iliukhin, “Pochemu ia vozбудil ugovnoe delo v otnoshenii Gorbacheva M.S.,” January 19, 2011, *Personalnyi sait Viktora Iliukhina*, <http://viktor-iluhin.ru/node/354>, accessed July 26, 2012.

Russian politicians accused Gorbachev of high treason and deliberately bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union.²¹³

Forgeries as Main Argument

Claims about Gorbachev's involvement in the "Western plan" to destroy the Soviet Union usually refer to a number of documents that appear to substantiate conspiracy theories regarding the Soviet collapse: this alleged documentation is spurious—they are forgeries. Most common in this body of conspiracy conceptualizations are those representing Russian nationalist sentiment; several texts confirm the fear of "Russian patriots" that Gorbachev had been in league with Western intelligence services, hatching a coordinated plan. The four main texts used to confirm the conspiracy against the USSR were most likely produced by Russian nationalist authors in the late Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. The framework for conspiratorial narratives is provided by the so-called *Plan Dallesa (The Plan of Dulles)*—a forgery that purports to be a US National Security Council directive about a strategy for the moral and cultural corruption of the Soviet people. The style of the text suggests that it could not have been an official US document:

People's brains and consciousness are subject to change. By disseminating chaos there we shall surreptitiously replace their values with fake ones and we shall force them to believe in these values. How? We shall find like-minded persons in Russia . . . Impudence and insolence, lies and deception, drunkenness and drug dependence, bodily fear of each other and barefacedness, treachery, nationalism and national conflicts, pre-eminent hostility and anger towards the Russian people, – all this we shall cunningly foster.²¹⁴

The Plan of Dulles endows the conspiracy conceptualization of the Soviet collapse with an important temporal dimension. The roots of post-Soviet Russia's socio-economic, interethnic and cultural problems are traced back to the past and connected with a foreign

²¹³ The two cases of trials against Gorbachev merit mention. At the end of 2011, the public movement *Profsoiuz grazhdan Rossii* initiated a lawsuit against Gorbachev on charges which included: the destruction of the Soviet Union, the disappearance of the gold reserve of the USSR, the breakdown of the army and the pauperization of the population (See, Nikolai Starikov, "Gorbachev. Izmena," *Nikolai Starikov* (blog), December 14, 2011, <http://nstarikov.ru/blog/14078>). More recently, in April 2014, several deputies of the State Duma sent a query to the General Prosecutor of the Russian Federation and accused Gorbachev of triggering the collapse of the Soviet Union (See, Dmitrii Runkevich, Elena Malai, "Deputaty trebuiut zavesti ugovnoe delo na Mikhaila Gorbacheva," *Izvestia*, April 10, 2014, <http://izvestia.ru/news/568959>).

²¹⁴ Allen Dulles, "Plan Dallesa po unichtozheniiu SSSR (Rossii)," *Russkoe delo*, http://www.russkoedelo.org/mysl/miscellaneous/dulles_plan.php.

plan for destruction. Other conspiracy theories, which either refer to this document or use similar arguments, simply add further details to this structure to clarify the role of particular politicians involved in the Soviet collapse.

While Russian scholars have demonstrated that *The Plan of Dulles* is a forgery, other similarly bogus sources still require close analysis.²¹⁵ One of the most cited of them is the speech *Tsel'iu moeĭ zhizni bylo unichtozhenie kommunizma* (*The aim of my life was the destruction of Communism*), allegedly delivered by Gorbachev at the American University in Turkey, in 1999, and published in the newspaper *Úsvit* in Slovakia. Russian translations of this document always include references to this issue of the Slovakian newspaper, and often refer to its publication in the Russian newspaper *Sovetskaiia Rossiia*.²¹⁶ Another is a speech allegedly delivered in November 1991 by Margaret Thatcher, in Houston, at a meeting of the American Petroleum Institute, entitled *Sovetskii Soiuz nuzhno bylo razrushit'* (*The Soviet Union had to be destroyed*).²¹⁷ The third document is a report that confirms US involvement in the Soviet collapse. This was allegedly delivered by the US President Bill Clinton at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1995.²¹⁸ As there is no evidence that these speeches were ever delivered, we are again most likely dealing with forgeries.²¹⁹ However, authors of conspiracy theories keep on referring to

²¹⁵ The comparative analysis of the fictional sources used for *The Plan of Dulles* is provided in Nikolai Sakva, "Chto takoe 'plan Dallesa?," *Nikolai Sakva's personal web-page*, <http://sakva.ru/Nick/DullPlan.html>.

²¹⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev, "Tsel'iu moeĭ zhizni bylo unichtozhenie kommunizma," *Sovetskaiia Rossiia*, September 19, 2010, <http://www.sovross.ru/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=58241>.

²¹⁷ Pavlov S. Iu., "Margaret Tetcher pro razval SSSR," *Internet protiv teleekrana*, accessed April 14, 2012, <http://www.contrtv.ru/common/2025/>.

²¹⁸ Ivan Kapitanets, *Voĭna na more. Aktual'nye problemy razvitiia voenno-morskoĭ nauki* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), <http://militera.lib.ru/science/kapitanetz/08.html>.

²¹⁹ The preliminary analysis of the forgeries conducted by the author demonstrates that they had never been either delivered at the suggested events or published. Gorbachev's speech about communism was published exclusively in *Sovetskaiia Rossiia* and there is no trace of its publication in the Slovakian newspaper *Úsvit*. Although such a newspaper most probably existed, it had a very limited circulation, restricted to Slovakian communists (See, for example, Ján Štěrba, "Dennik menom Úsvit," *Ján Štěrba* (blog), January 17, 2006, <http://sterba.blog.sme.sk/c/32738/Dennik-menom-Usvit.html>). Margaret Thatcher did not give any speech at the meeting of the American Petroleum Institute, especially not on such an irrelevant topic for that particular conference. The list of speeches on Margaret Thatcher's official website also does not suggest that she participated in this meeting. (See, Margaret Thatcher, "1991-2012: Recent history-Speeches," Margaret Thatcher Foundation Official website, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/browse.asp?t=6&pg=2>). Bill Clinton's speech, in terms of content and linguistic details, resembles *The Plan of Dulles* and has never been published either, apart from in the body of conspiratorial literature in post-Soviet Russia.

them in order to demonstrate the evil intentions of the West towards Russia and of the “real” rationale of the 1990s reforms.²²⁰

Each of the texts encapsulates popular conspiracy ideas about American (or British) involvement in the destruction of the USSR; they are characterised by an ostentatious manner and always include negative images of Gorbachev and El'tsin as key destructive individuals fully following the plan of their “American masters” (*amerikanskikh kboz'iaev*). In the 1990s, those opposing El'tsin together with certain authors from the Russian nationalist milieu used this negative image of the Russian presidents to delegitimize their policies and gain the support of both the national patriotic and the Communist electorate.

These aforementioned forgeries were often alluded to in discussion of the origins of the hardships Russia faced after 1991. As former deputy of the State Duma and a leader of the *Great Russia* party Andrei Savel'iev put it: “There are few people who doubt the authenticity of this text [*The Plan of Dulles*], because it utterly and completely reflects both the policy of the US towards the USSR and the achieved results of this policy – the breakdown of self-awareness of our people and the destruction of our country.”²²¹ Thus, Savel'iev, a prominent leader of Russian nationalists, uses the proven forgery in an argument to delegitimize the positions of pro-Western proponents in the Russian government. Moreover, the utilization of this forgery by a prominent politician authenticates the text and makes it an important point of reference for Russian nationalists.

Competing Conspiratorial Interpretations of the August Coup

It is important to note that post-Soviet political discourse contains two different conspiratorial interpretations of the August 1991 coup that have been competing with each other throughout the post-Soviet period. The first interpretation was disseminated by members of El'tsin's government as part of the official explanation of the August 1991 events. It treats the coup as an attempt by conservative forces in the Soviet government to plot against the democratically elected authorities of Russia and nullify the democratic achievements of the Russian people during *perestroika*. The citizens of Moscow, who came to the Supreme Soviet building on 19 August and helped defend it from the *GKChP*, were members of civil society who fought for freedom and democracy in Russia.

²²⁰ See, for example, how Dmitrii Iazov, Minister of Defence in the Soviet government in 1991, uses the mentioned forgeries to prove that Gorbachev was involved in the conspiracy to destroy the USSR: Aleksandr Kazintsev, “Tri dnia v avguste”, *Nash Sovremennik*, 8 (2001),

http://www.patriotica.ru/history/kazintsev_gkchp.html, accessed July 26, 2012

²²¹ Andrei Savel'iev, ““Plan Dallesa” - bred, stavshii real'nost'iu,” *Andrei Savel'iev's official website*, April 4, 2007, <http://www.savelev.ru/article/show/?id=420&t=1>.

From the very first days of the coup, El'tsin and Gorbachev refer to *GKChP* members as “plotters,” a concept that would further take hold in the body of literature written by direct participants in the events, the first accounts of which were published as early as during the investigation of the coup.²²² Days after the failed coup, members of the *GKChP* were arrested and charged with treason. However, later these charges were supplemented with another charge: conspiracy aimed at the seizure of power. The labelling, in the official interpretation of the events, of the *GKChP* as conspirators allowed pro-Kremlin speakers to discursively divide Soviet society at the time of the coup into “the people” and the powerful “Other” (the latter being the conservative bloc in the Communist party and the Soviet government). The victory of El'tsin's supporters over the alleged “conspirators” thus provided El'tsin's team with arguments to justify their actions during and after the coup.

This official version presents a coherent narrative; the conspiratorial reading of the coup helps lay the foundations of national cohesion by depicting this moment of history as the birth of the new democratic Russian state. On the first anniversary of the coup in 1992, El'tsin praised the citizens of Moscow for having resisted the *GKChP* and congratulated “the new Russia, previously unknown, the Russia that could overcome its old instinct of resigned submissiveness.”²²³ By contrast, Gennadiĭ Burbulis, the then State Secretary of Russia, drew a clear line between the new, progressive Russians and the plotting retrogressive minority:

I stand in awe of and admire those who demonstrated . . . an uncompromising devotion to freedom, and, thus, gave support to the president and to all of us, and [I feel] appalling sadness and am grossly insulted . . . by those who acted according to their repressive, smear jobbing worldview in such a fascist, conspiring manner.²²⁴

This version of the August coup is challenged by an alternative one that treats the coup as the last stage of the “Western plan” to destroy the greatness of the Soviet state and put it under the control of foreign governments thereby allowing them to plunder its national wealth. Foreign conspirators achieved such tremendous success by acting in league with

²²² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Augustovskii putch (prichiny i sledstviia)* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991); Boris El'tsin, *Zapiski prezidenta* (Moscow: Ogonëk, 1994). The expanded version of the official account of the events during the August 1991 coup was presented in Valentin Stepankov and Evgeniĭ Lisov, *Kremlenskii zagovor: versii sledstviia* (Moscow: Ogonëk, 1992).

²²³ Boris El'tsin, interview to Russian Television Network, August 21, 1992, quoted in Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 33.

²²⁴ “A vse-taki: chto vy delali 19-21 avgusta 1991goda?” *Kommersant-Vlast*, 134, August 24, 1992, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/6327>.

Gorbachev and influencing the liberal intelligentsia in the Soviet Union, which became the “fifth column” corrupting Soviet ideology during *perestroika*.²²⁵

Alternative accounts of the August events were published in the years after the coup. They are diverse, their differences largely depending on the ideological views and beliefs of the authors, as well as the extent of their involvement in current politics. These accounts were variously produced by members of the *GKChP*, those belonging to the national-patriotic opposition and supporters of the Communist Party. However, the majority of the authors consider the August coup to have been a response to *perestroika* and at the same time an interlude to El'tsin's political and socio-economic reforms. Thus *perestroika*, the August coup and the radical economic reforms of the 1990s become merged in a single narrative of an anti-Russian plot masterminded in the West. This interpretation has served as a powerful discursive tool with which to address Russian voters, most of whom experienced the economic reforms as painful.

In fact, before the coup actually happened, the grounds for the emergence of the alternative reading of the August coup had been laid. The notion of foreign powers plotting to destroy the Soviet Union had already surfaced in argument legitimizing government action in early 1991. For example, in February 1991, Valentin Pavlov, the then Soviet Prime Minister, claimed that his financial reforms were being introduced to prevent Western banks subverting the Soviet economy. According to Pavlov, these banks were ready to cause hyperinflation by pouring 7-8 billion roubles into the Russian economy.²²⁶ Later, during a meeting with West European businessmen, Pavlov apologized for these words and emphasized that he did not mean to file claims against “solid businessmen.” However, he did insist that “improper businessmen had and have ambitions to undermine *perestroika*.”²²⁷

Pavlov, a member of the *GKChP*, was arrested after the failure of the coup. In 1993 he published his own account of the events where he claimed that the *GKChP* had been created by Gorbachev and El'tsin in mid-1991 to retain their power over the state. He contended that the official version of events, actively promoted by Gorbachev and El'tsin, was produced to cover up the real reason: their lust for power. Pavlov claimed that the coup, with the *GKChP* as a figurehead, had been planned in June 1991 by Gorbachev, El'tsin and Gavriil Popov, the Moscow mayor, and was coordinated by the US president, George Bush.²²⁸ Published in 1993, soon after the shelling of the parliament in October, which led to many civilian deaths, Pavlov

²²⁵ Legostaev, “Tselluloid GKChP.”

²²⁶ Vitalii Golovachev, “Sdavaite kupiury, grazhdane!,” *Trud*, January 20, 2012, http://www.trud.ru/article/20-01-2012/271675_sdavajte_kupjury_grazhdane.html.

²²⁷ “Pavlov s’ezdil v Brussel’. Izvinilsia . . .,” *Kommersant*, April 29, 1991, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/265267>.

²²⁸ Valentin Pavlov, *Av gust iznutri: Gorbachevputch* (Moscow: Delovoï mir, 1993), 67, 79.

drew a link between the bloodshed in Moscow and El'tsin's lust for power, accusing him of disregard for both the interests and lives of ordinary Russians:

Members of the *GKChP* by no means contemplated restoring dictatorship and repression. Moreover, the main thing for us . . . was the prevention of bloodshed, the unleashing of civil war and mass purges. Power was not my personal goal for which I would be ready to sacrifice the lives and blood of innocent civilians. . . . It was indeed the strength of our weakness compared to El'tsin, who was ready to sacrifice thousands of lives in order to keep the office in the White House.²²⁹

El'tsin's attack on the parliament in October 1993 gave some credence to Pavlov's claim that El'tsin's regime proved to be more brutal than the *GKChP*. Given the conspiratorial frame which Pavlov used to describe the August coup, the argument about El'tsin's brutality and the alleged backing of the United States became a powerful notion taken up and then used by the opposition to delegitimize the president.

Pavlov's book has particular importance for establishing a conspiratorial interpretation of the August 1991 coup for several reasons. Pavlov was the first among the active members of the *GKChP* who offered an analysis of the coup shortly after it took place, and thus provided an alternative reading of the event. His insider's view and elaborated arguments supplied the opposition to El'tsin with the necessary "factual" basis for questioning El'tsin's claims to legitimacy. In particular, the conspiratorial interpretation of El'tsin's August 1991 action helped to lay the grounds for his impeachment in 1998-1999: this became an important element in transforming conspiracy theories into an instrument of mainstream politics.

El'tsin's Impeachment (1998-1999)

El'tsin became the object of conspiracy theories soon after becoming president in 1991. The opposition accused him of bringing about the demise of the USSR by signing the Belovezha accords and of an alleged "genocide of the Russian people" through economic reforms. The forces which opposed El'tsin's government formed a loose coalition that was sometimes referred to as a "revanchist party"; in the first half of the 1990s, this united the Communists (Gennadii Ziuganov), national patriots (Vladimir Zhirinovskii and Aleksandr Prokhanov), and Russian fascists (Aleksandr Barkashov), all of whom subscribed to the notion of a war of the West against Russia.²³⁰ After the parliamentary elections in 1993, a considerable number of representatives of the "revanchist party" were elected to the State

²²⁹ Pavlov, *Avugust iznutri*, 70.

²³⁰ Aleksandr Yanov, "Istoriia odnogo otrecheniia: pochemu v Rossii ne budet fashizma," *Forum novejšhej vostochnoevropejskoj istorii i kul'tury*, no. 2 (2010): 192-194.

Duma where they then had the opportunity to use anti-Western conspiratorial rhetoric within the framework of a state institution in political struggles with El'tsin's government.

The epitome of these struggles was an attempt to impeach El'tsin, made in May 1999, and initiated by Iliukhin, who had unsuccessfully tried to put Gorbachev on trial on the same charges in November 1991. The parliamentary commission, headed by a deputy from the Communist Party, Vadim Filimonov, brought forward five charges against El'tsin: the demise of the USSR, the shelling of the parliament in October 1993, the war in Chechnia, the deterioration of national military defence and the genocide of the Russian people. At least four of the five charges contained elements that pointed to a conspiracy of Western European countries and the USA against the Russian people.

According to the authors of the impeachment, the signing of the Belovezha accords by El'tsin should have been treated as high treason carried out in accordance with an organized conspiracy to seize power in the USSR and change the constitution. The accords had been signed despite the results of the all-national referendum, conducted on 17 March 1991, which supported the preservation of the Soviet Union. The accusations stated that the Belovezha accords impacted on Russia's defence potential, whilst El'tsin's policies corresponded to the geopolitical interests of the USA and should have been recognised as "rendering help to foreign countries to the detriment of the external security of the Russian Federation."²³¹

It is important to stress the fact that the accusation of treason made against El'tsin was based on the notion that the President of Russia had no right to sign the Belovezha accords. According to this argument, he had breached the law of the Soviet Union by signing the accords, thus forgoing his right to rule. Both the dissolution of the USSR and shelling of the parliament in 1993 violated criminal law (article 64 of the Criminal Law of the USSR):

The actions of B.N. El'tsin in the organization of conspiracy, aimed at the seizure of power in the Union, had a conscious, purposeful character. As part of the preparation for the destruction of the USSR, B.N. El'tsin issued a number of decrees, which overreached the bounds of his constitutional authority and aimed at the usurpation of the Union power.²³²

This claim cast doubt on El'tsin's legitimacy and emphasized his "otherness" in relation to "the people" of Russia, who in this case were being represented by his accusers. The shelling of the parliament in 1993, which eventually supplied El'tsin with greater power than he had previously, also enabled the opposition to argue that his rule was illegitimate. In

²³¹ "Vrag naroda," *Kommersant*, May 13, 1999, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/218225>.

²³² "Vrag naroda."

the words of deputies, the president had been involved in a conspiracy to turn Russia from a parliamentary into a presidential republic.

Iliukhin was basing his speech on the corpus of conspiracy theories about the Soviet collapse, which was developed in the 1990s. As he put it:

The Soviet Union collapsed not as a result of natural processes, not as a result of the August 1991 events, but as a result of political conspiracy on the part of the “fifth column,” with the connivance, and at times with the participation, of the president of the USSR M. Gorbachev and leaders of several Union ministries and agencies, as a result of conspiracy headed by B. El’tsin.²³³

The accusations were substantiated by the fact that the signing of the Belovezha accords had indeed taken a semi-legal form. As Lilia Shevtsova observed, the Soviet Union was dissolved by the decision of a handful of political leaders who “were not concerned about the legality of their actions.”²³⁴ This significant circumvention helped the opposition in the parliament to confirm their claim about the “alien” nature of El’tsin in relation to the “Russian people,” whose desire to save the Soviet Union had been betrayed.

The will of the majority was expressed in the All-Union referendum on 17 March 1991, and the state leaders of the USSR and Russia, provided they were patriots, with the fondest love of the Motherland, rather than creeping accomplices (*kholuštviushchie prispeshniki*) of the US, were obliged to realize the people’s will.²³⁵

The last of the charges against El’tsin was that of the premeditated genocide of the Russian people; this had taken the form of changing socio-economic relations in the Russian Federation to enable the liberalization of prices and the privatization of state property. Thereby, it deprived the majority of the Russian population of jobs, financial assets and social guarantees. As Iliukhin maintained, “the clan,” consisting of 200-300 families, became the main beneficiary of the privatization and usurped state power. In order to erase memory of the previous social system and Soviet patriotism, El’tsin was alleged to have planned to eliminate pensioners and the intelligentsia, that is, those who were able to pass on knowledge about the glorious Soviet past to younger generations.²³⁶ Moreover, despite the attempts of patriots, like Iliukhin, to prevent any further destruction of Russia, El’tsin, in a letter to

²³³ Viktor Iliukhin, “Obviniatsia El’tsin” (public address, Moscow, Russia, May 13, 1999), <http://www.viktor-iluhin.ru/node/328>.

²³⁴ Lilia Shevtsova, *El’tsin’s Russia: Myths and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 14.

²³⁵ Viktor Iliukhin, “Obviniatsia El’tsin.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

President Clinton on 18 September 1998, allegedly confirmed that there would be “no turning back, the reforms will continue.”²³⁷

Iliukhin likened El'tsin's social policies to genocide in a manner that pointed to their resemblance to Nazi policies against the Slavic nations during the Second World War. Drawing comparison with Nazi Germany in the post-Soviet Russian political context, where the memory of the Great Patriotic War served as the foundation for national cohesion, helped El'tsin's opponents label his policies as anti-Russian. Furthermore, as Bernard Harrison demonstrated, the label of Nazism, applied in a public speech about a group or movement, automatically stigmatizes it as an evil social agent and implies that there is nothing to be said in its favour.²³⁸ The alienation of El'tsin and his team by means of a comparison with the Nazis helped to strengthen further the populist dimension of anti-El'tsin arguments. However, the idea of genocide against the Russian people appeared to be a rather problematic political instrument in the context of post-Soviet Russia.

The notion of genocide when employed as a political instrument indeed possesses a powerful potential: it strengthens the moral and legal pretensions of the group claiming to be a victim of genocide. As Evgeny Finkel further demonstrated, in the post-Soviet world, the accusation of genocide gained popularity because it supplied the political elites of the newly founded states with a powerful tool for national cohesion.²³⁹ When Russian nationalists accused El'tsin of conspiring to bring about the destruction of the Russian nation, they were ushering the notion of genocide into the official political language of post-Soviet Russia. However, the notion of genocide can cut both ways for those who utilize it. Using the argument of genocide and claiming that elements in the government were responsible for anti-Russian conspiracy, the parliamentary opposition discursively divided Russian society into “the people” and El'tsin-led “occupational government” (*okkupatsionnoe pravitel'stvo*). In his concluding remarks, Filimonov quoted Albert Camus by saying: “If you don't fight injustice – you cooperate with it.” The journalist of the pro-Communist newspaper *Zavtra*, who covered the debates in the Duma, added: “In other words, it will not be possible for other deputies to stand aside. You cannot have it both ways.”²⁴⁰

However, the deputies did not grasp the fact that if an accusation of genocide is made, it implies that the alleged subject of genocide is required to acknowledge the status of

²³⁷ “Vrag naroda...”

²³⁸ Bernard Harrison, *The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and Liberal Opinion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 68.

²³⁹ Evgeny Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe,” *Global Society*, 24, No. 1, January 2010, 51-70.

²⁴⁰ “Impichment (Spetsial'nye korrespondenty ‘Zavtra’ vedut reportazh iz Gosudarstvennoï Dumy),” *Zavtra*, no. 20, May 18, 1999, <http://www.zavtra.ru/cgi/veil/data/zavtra/99/285/2345.html>.

defenceless victim to throw into relief the violent “Other.” As Finkel noted, in Russia, “the dominant historical myth of military strength, superpower status and victory in the Second World War is difficult to reconcile with the powerless victimhood embedded in the claims of genocide.”²⁴¹ Accordingly, Russian nationalist ideology stumbled at this point. Its main pillars came in conflict with a key element in the profile of victim of genocide: in this instance, political gain required an acknowledgement of weakness. In the context of post-Soviet Russian politics, the likelihood of such a strategic manoeuvre was poor. It is telling that of all accusations in the impeachment, it was the subsection devoted to the genocide of the Russian people that attracted the lowest number of votes²⁴²

None of the five charges against the president succeeded in gaining the 300 votes required for the impeachment.²⁴³ However, the impeachment, which rested on the claim that El'tsin had been involved in a conspiracy against the Russian people, enabled the notion of conspiracy to be seen as a fully legitimate political strategy; it was this notion that united both highly diverse opposition forces (from the Communists of *KPRF* to liberal politicians represented by *Yabloko*) and pro-El'tsin forces.²⁴⁴

The liberal forces, which opposed El'tsin, used the impeachment procedure as a vehicle by which to return the position of power they had lost in the August 1998 financial crisis. On 17 August 1998, the Russian government defaulted on its debts to a degree that seriously undermined the positions of its allies in the Duma. By voicing support for the impeachment, the liberals in the Duma, perhaps, sought to dissociate themselves from the policies of the liberals in the government and gain the support of those voters who were likewise dissatisfied with El'tsin.

In turn, the Communists and various “patriotic” groups in the Duma, in an attempt to exploit the conflict between Prime Minister Evgeniĭ Primakov and El'tsin, tried to strengthen their alliance with Primakov, widely considered at that time a potential future president, and get the support of Russian voters on the eve of the parliamentary elections in December 1999.²⁴⁵ The impeachment also coincided with the rise of anti-Western sentiment in Russia

²⁴¹ Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide,” 57.

²⁴² “Svedeniia o rezultatakh golosovaniia deputatov Gosudarstvennoi Dumi Federal'nogo sobraniia RF po voprosu o vydvizhenii obvineniia protiv prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii dlia otresechniia ego ot dolzhnosti,” *Kommersant*, no. 82, May 18, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/218468>.

²⁴³ Dmitriĭ Kamyshev, “Otlichivshiesia i proviniavshiesia,” *Kommersant*, May 18, 1999, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/218452>.

²⁴⁴ “Kak progolosuiut deputaty za impichment,” *Kommersant*, May 15, 1999, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/218398>.

²⁴⁵ Maksim Zhukov, Natal'ia Samoilova, “Iliukhin nashel scheta El'tsina,” *Kommersant*, March 23, 1999, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/215417>.

related to the NATO operation in Serbia in 1999; this too was used by the opposition to win voters' support.²⁴⁶

The impeachment also gave the Kremlin cause for concern about the outcome of the forth-coming presidential elections. The rise of Evgeniĭ Primakov—a former head of the Russian intelligence services and Russian Prime Minister in 1998-1999— as an independent and powerful politician, was accompanied by an attempt to shift power from the post of president to that of prime minister. The Communists' support for Primakov and their attempt to impeach El'tsin by putting forward populist conspiratorial allegations caused major concern amongst liberal politicians. The image of an aggressive nationalist attempting to challenge executive power by mobilizing the people against the government, and by means of conspiracy allegations, pushed liberal reformers to support the Kremlin's candidate, who advocated a strong super-presidential model that eventually opened the way for a further turn towards authoritarianism.²⁴⁷

As Mark Fenster noted, conspiracy theory as a mode of populist logic is also a feature of democracies, and other political systems; it can operate to mount a significant challenge to the political order whilst simultaneously highlighting structural inequities in society.²⁴⁸ Hence the impeachment based on conspiracy theories posed a challenge to the post-Soviet Russian political system. Populist conspiratorial rhetoric used by the Communists to depict the Soviet collapse gained a foothold as it was bolstered by the social and economic problems that emerged after 1991, which were dramatically aggravated by the economic crisis of 1998. Under these circumstances, the government dropped the idea of fostering national consensus and further democratic development to reach a compromise with the opposition; instead it focused on consensus among the elites regarding a suitable person for presidential candidate in 2000, in order to compete with the Communists. As Shevtsova noted, those who called themselves liberals were caught in a historical trap, both fearful of an unleashing of populism and suspicious of the representative institutions.²⁴⁹ The political elites were unable to cope with populist challenge expressed in conspiratorial rhetoric: this was one of the reasons behind an authoritarian turn in the 2000s. In this period, conspiracy theories about the Soviet collapse persisted, even though they acquired new forms.

²⁴⁶ See, for example, Vladislav Borodulin, "Primakov razvernul stranu", *Kommersant Vlast*, March 30, 1999, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/15317>.

²⁴⁷ Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 20-21.

²⁴⁸ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 90.

²⁴⁹ Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 20.

2.3. “A Major Geopolitical Disaster”: Framing the Soviet Collapse in Putin’s Russia

In the 21st century, the government-sponsored nation-building project included speculations about the causes of the Soviet collapse. The official attitude towards the collapse was expressed by Putin in 2005 in his opening address to the Federal Assembly, when he spoke of the dissolution of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”²⁵⁰ This idea, which had certain public support, was widely disseminated by pro-Kremlin politicians and loyal public intellectuals in the following years and helped foster nostalgia about Soviet times.²⁵¹

Putin’s view of the Soviet collapse, which became an important element of the Kremlin-endorsed nation-building narrative in the 2000s, capitalized on a particular socio-cultural stance, which Serguei Oushakine described as “the patriotism of despair.” Rueful feelings about the great country, supported by the notion of a conspiracy by the “Western enemies,” cemented national cohesion and represented the political leadership as in tune with the people. The dramatic picture drawn by Putin focused on the socio-economic and political inequities faced by Russian society in the 1990s. Therefore, a positive attitude towards a lost past, connected with the Soviet experience, offered a contrasting image to the post-Soviet changes; it served as an important tool with which to identify “the people” as the pan-national “community of loss,” and the collective “Other,” represented by the group of people who shared no such nostalgia about the Soviet past.²⁵² The actors included in this collective “Other” usually consisted of the most “westernized” part of Russian society. This, in principle, allowed for them to be represented in the emerging official discourse as “agents” of foreign influence, which, as we will see, again utilized conspiracy narratives.

Putin’s opening remarks, which briefly analyzed the events of the previous decade, featured several elements that permit us to grasp the popularity of the conspiracy discourse about the Soviet collapse in the 2000s. The first and key part of Putin’s speech touched upon the dramatic issues of the post-1991 era:

²⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation” (public address, Moscow, Russia, April 25, 2005),

http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml.

²⁵¹ According to the VTSIOM poll of 2002, 55 per cent of respondents called the collapse of the Soviet Union the biggest negative event among “the most important changes” in the twentieth century. See, VTSIOM sociological poll, conducted in 2002, N=1600, quoted in Boris Dubin, “Simvoly vozvrata”: 13.

²⁵² Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 114.

Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. Individual savings were depreciated and old ideals destroyed. Many institutions were disbanded or reformed carelessly. Terrorist intervention and the Khasavyurt capitulation that followed damaged the country's integrity. Oligarchic groups – possessing absolute control over information channels – served exclusively their own corporate interests. Mass poverty began to be seen as the norm. And all this was happening against the backdrop of a dramatic economic downturn, unstable finances, and the paralysis of the social sphere.²⁵³

This focus on societal traumas is evidence of the populist approach taken by the ruling political elites to unite a highly divided society on the basis of a common traumatic experience. References to “the oligarchic groups” immediately following mention of mass poverty and severe economic hardships, appealed to the broad masses of Russian society, who contrasted them to the relative economic stability of the 2000s.²⁵⁴ At the same time, an emphasis on “oligarchical rule” helped identify a common “Other” for the general public in Russian society.

As Oushakine’s analysis demonstrated, “post-Soviet uneasiness about the increasing social role of capital is translated into stories about universal lies and deceptions. The perceived exposure to foreign values and capital is often counterbalanced with ideas of an enclosed national community and unmediated values.”²⁵⁵ By referring to socio-economic problems, Putin attempted to expose inequality in post-Soviet society and, thus, demonstrate his concern about improving of the situation in the country. His address served as an important springboard for public debate and the intervention of intellectuals to find a suitable framework for national development. These intellectuals drew on conspiracy allegations about the Soviet collapse and socio-economic hardships to define the plotting “Other”; it was they who initiated the collapse of the great country and then later profited from it, while the majority of the population suffered. It is also important to note that top-ranking officials interpreted the Soviet collapse as a tragedy; this allowed them to relocate the symbolic potential of this notion from the opposition parties and movements, who actively made use of it in the 1990s, into mainstream political discourse.

²⁵³ Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly.

²⁵⁴ Mariia Shcherbal’, “Ekonomicheskaiia situatsiia v strane i lichnoe material’noe polozenie glazami rossiian: dinamika otsenok naseleniia (2005-2010),” *Monitoring obsbchestvennogo mneniia*, 5 (2010): 254, 257.

²⁵⁵ Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “Stop the Invasion!?: Money, Patriotism, and Conspiracy in Russia,” *Social Research*, Vol.76, no.1 (Spring 2009), 75.

Alongside a tragic reading of the Soviet collapse, Putin's address featured a number of ideas which presented the recent past as less traumatic. In Putin's words, the misfortunes of the 1990s were accompanied by "significant" processes:

In those difficult years, the people of Russia had to both uphold their state sovereignty and make a correct choice in selecting a new vector of development in their thousand year old history. They had to accomplish the most difficult task: how to safeguard their own values, not to squander undeniable achievements, and confirm the viability of Russian democracy. We had to find our own path in order to build a democratic, free and just society and state.²⁵⁶

This "positive" reading of the recent past urged the audience to acknowledge the socio-economic and political progress made after the Soviet collapse. It shows how it was impossible for the regime and its ruling elites to totally disavow the complex post-Soviet heritage; this would have seriously undermined their legitimacy: selective memory was the watchword. The inclusion of reference to post-Soviet progress in this strategically important political text testifies to the peculiarity of the ways in which the idea of Soviet collapse was deployed in Russian politics during Putin's era. Alexei Yurchak's theoretization of the ideological aspect of the late Soviet period illuminates Putin's strategy.

Yurchak used the theory of performativity to understand the relation between official ideology and quotidian language in the late Soviet Union. Basing his methodology above all on the works of the British philosopher John Langshaw Austin, who distinguished constative utterances (which convey meaning and can be true or false) and performative utterances (which deliver force and cannot be true or false), Yurchak identified the constative and performative dimensions of late Soviet discourse. While the performative dimension was responsible for the reproduction of conventionalized and ritualized forms, the constative dimension provided meanings that might be associated with these forms.²⁵⁷

In the late Soviet period, the performative dimension, according to Yurchak, had a prevailing role, as the ritualized form of a text or a speech valorised above the actual meaning. Most importantly, the performative dimension of a certain act, such as speech-giving or voting at elections, could not be analyzed as true or false, but instead it produced effects and created facts of the social realm. The connection with the social realm appears crucial here because the choice of context for an utterance depends on circumstances and its linkage to other texts and ideas. In Yurchak's words: "What makes an utterance performative is not the intention of the

²⁵⁶ Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly.

²⁵⁷ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 19, 53.

speaker, but rather the accepted conventions surrounding the utterance, which involve the appropriate person uttering the appropriate words in the appropriate circumstances in order to obtain conventional results.’²⁵⁸

Yurchak’s analysis of the culture and rhetoric of late Soviet society provides us with a framework within which to interpret Putin’s address and the hierarchy of themes chosen for the speech. As a key event in Russian political life, Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly offers the main official interpretation of events and authoritatively addresses major political and socio-economic issues. In a certain way, it is a ritual, which is capable of producing serious effects on the socio-political development of the country. Thus, the remark about the Soviet collapse as a “major geopolitical disaster” is an example of Putin’s performative utterance. It makes implicit reference to popular ideas and texts about the Soviet collapse, which treated it as a national tragedy. It was placed at the very opening of a strategic political text delivered by the country’s leader, which, in combination, made the time, the place and the interpretation of the event appropriate for further utilization.

Applying Yurchak’s methodology to the Putin era, we can conclude that the opening part of Putin’s speech included two different concepts both of which addressed important past experiences in national history. The first one conveyed the dreadful experience of the collapsed state and created the foundation for a positive reading of the Soviet past. Given the growth of positive attitudes towards the Soviet past at the beginning of the 2000s, the dramatic interpretation of the Soviet collapse received public support and served to convert nostalgic feelings about a common past into a powerful political resource.²⁵⁹ The second concept emphasized the importance of the post-Soviet period in constructing institutions of a democratic society. This was used to support the argument that the Russian government and political establishment sustained good relations with the West and viewed Russia as part of European culture. Each of these concepts was designed to gain the support of a different group within Russia and consequently promoted further bonding within society as a whole. This combination of two rather antagonistic ideas has become characteristic of Putin’s approach to national cohesion.

The perception of the Soviet collapse as tragic and the related myth of the deliberate destruction of the Soviet Union by political elites in conjunction with the West has thus become a tool in political strategy of the Kremlin. The political establishment of the 2000s

²⁵⁸ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 19, 76.

²⁵⁹ According to the Levada Centre, throughout the 2000s, the majority of Russians regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union, although this number has been gradually decreasing (from 75 per cent in 2000 to 49 per cent in 2012). See “Rossiiane of raspade SSSR,” The Levada Centre opinion poll, January 11, 2013, <http://www.levada.ru/11-01-2013/rossiyane-o-raspade-sssr>.

employed this idea, first, to increase national cohesion and, second, to delegitimize political opponents. The narrative of the lost country served as the unifying element of the national community of Russia. The use of this dramatic reading of the Soviet collapse in the key political speech legitimized further references to it in subsequent official discourse. The collapse of the Soviet Union became a symbolic construction, which defined the borders of the nation and simultaneously marked its “Other,” those who supposedly welcomed the destruction of the country in 1991 and facilitated its economic and political collapse in the 1990s. In this context, anti-Western conspiracy theories about the origins of the Soviet collapse justified the internal discursive division of society and allowed political opponents to be identified with “Western conspirators” thereby raising concern about their loyalty and legitimacy as political actors.

Conclusion

From the very first days of Russia’s independence, the notion that the Soviet Union’s rapid collapse was brought about by the intrigues of “the West” served, on the one hand, as a unifying platform for patriotic groups, and, as a political concept for different forces in the political establishment, on the other. The events of August 1991 possessed a uniquely symbolic potential to become a fundamental element of the foundation of the new state; they could show that totalitarianism had been transformed into democracy thanks to the joint efforts of popular politicians and ordinary Russians.

Instead, as Kathleen E. Smith argued, El’tsin and his team failed to institute a commemoration of the August events as central in the collective memory of post-Communist Russia. El’tsin lost the battle over the memory of August to the Communists and national patriots, who “recognized the value of investing organizational resources in spreading their version of events” using the courtroom, the floor of the legislature, and the streets to propagate an alternative reading of the August 1991 events.²⁶⁰ This chapter has demonstrated that scholars who have studied the political development of Russia in the aftermath of 1991, including Smith, have underestimated the importance of this “alternative” and highly conspiratorial reading of the Soviet collapse. The utilization of conspiracy theories enhanced the power of the opposition’s criticism of El’tsin’s policies and facilitated their promotion in the public space, especially within the context of socio-economic difficulties. Despite the attempts of Kremlin officials in the 1990s to define the *GKChP* as “plotters,” the alternative reading of the coup—as a staged part of “the Western plan” to destroy the USSR—turned out

²⁶⁰ Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 55.

to be more effective as a political strategy; it generated a sense of solidarity and delegitimized El'tsin's regime throughout the 1990s.

In the 2000s, the Kremlin reassessed its approach to the events of August 1991. From 2004 onwards, there were no longer any wreath-laying ceremonies organised by the government and the president, while in 2011, on the 20th anniversary of the event, the Ministry of Defence considered it “impractical” to send an orchestra and a guard of honour to the graves of the victims for an official commemoration ceremony.²⁶¹ Instead, Putin and his aides reconsidered the value of a conspiratorial reading of the August coup for political battles and began to use it against their opponents. The fact of the Soviet collapse and confusion about why the state had disintegrated so rapidly were turned into the basis of powerful political concepts, which aimed at social and national cohesion.

Widespread belief in the pre-planned collapse of the USSR in 1991 has been employed by the political establishment of Putin's Russia to solve several domestic political issues. First, the political establishment of the 2000s exploited the lack of public consensus about the August 1991 events; it overdramatized the Soviet collapse, turning the spotlight on the unreliable elites who tolerated the Soviet dissolution. This supplied the establishment with a range of populist demands calling for power to be returned to the Russian people so that they could enjoy the sovereignty of their country. The idea of Russia as a “sovereign democracy” (to be analyzed in the next chapter), which was introduced in the mid-2000s as a mainstream nation-building strategy, charged the Russian political elites and society in general with the task of maintaining independence and rejecting foreign influence.

Second, the utilization of conspiratorial narratives, shaped, in particular, by the language of the intelligence services, and which replicate the espionage narratives of the Soviet period and introduce the notion of a “subversive agency” into the day-to-day language of post-Soviet Russia, operated as a formula to endow the developments of the present day with familiar meaning. As Oushakine put it, the Soviet past became “an object of purposeful commodification and a product of active post-Soviet cultural consumption.”²⁶²

A sense of a common experience was transmitted to the broad masses of Russian population by means of a sustained nostalgia about the Soviet past, generated by various symbolic models. This experience was associated with the bond between “agents,” “Western subversion” and the collapse of the Soviet Union and served to provide a simplistic but powerful instrument to distinguish “the people” from the “Other.” The model was also

²⁶¹ Andreï Loshak, “Ob asfal't,” *Openspace*, August 22, 2011,

<http://os.colta.ru/society/projects/201/details/24255/?expand=yes#expand>.

²⁶² Serguei Oushakine, “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6, (2000): 999.

sufficiently flexible to be extended to fit different situations where the “Other” could be NGOs, political parties or particular politicians.

The official narrative of the August coup, as disseminated through the media and public speeches of intellectuals and politicians, merged nostalgia about the lost Soviet Union and the idea that Russia, as an important player in world politics, is besieged by countries interested in the acquisition of its abundant natural sources and vast territories. This reading of the August events closely linked the Soviet collapse to the loss of national identity and unambiguously marked it as a tragic landmark in the history of Russia.

The Russian authorities used charges of conspiracy against political opponents to blame them for plotting against independent Russian statehood, which had already been destroyed once, in 1991. This established a precedent for a number of significant political reforms that substantially curtailed public liberties in the 2000s. The authorities also used positive public attitudes towards the Soviet Union as a source for national cohesion. Given the results of the polls, it would seem that this perception of the August coup found a positive response in Russian society. According to the poll conducted in July 2014 by the Levada Centre, 41 per cent of respondents acknowledged the August coup to have been “a tragic event which had sinister consequences for the country,” in comparison to 27 per cent in 1994; and 47 per cent thought that it had been a wrong turn for the country.²⁶³ Certainly, these attitudes possess an alarming potential for the further utilization of conspiratorial notions about the August coup in political strategies. However, an excessive fixation on the tragic aspect of the Soviet collapse enshrines a possible threat to the legitimacy of the current political elite, since any reference to the staged character of the coup might call into question the results of their own policies.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ The Levada centre’s sociological poll “Putch avgusta 1991-go goda,” conducted on July 18-21, 2014, N=1600, <http://www.levada.ru/19-08-2014/avgustovskii-putch>.

²⁶⁴ Fëdor Luk’ianov, “Istochnik legitimnosti Rossii,” *Rossiiia v globalnoi politike*, December 8, 2011, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/woussr/Istochnik-legitimnosti-Rossii-15386>.

Chapter 3. Building “Fortress Russia”: Conspiracy Theories and Post-Soviet Strategies of Nation-Building

Introduction

The search for a new national identity in post-Soviet Russia became a serious challenge both for intellectuals and political elites after the demise of the Soviet Union. Diverse groups of intellectuals developed various concepts of the Russian nation, although many of these projects were based on the works of pre-revolutionary authors and did not fully correspond to the realities of post-Soviet Russia. In turn, El'tsin's government opted for a civic model of nation building, introducing the civic notion of *rossiiane* (Russians). Commitment to the building of a civic national identity had been fairly stable throughout the El'tsin era. However, in order to get political mileage and attract voters, the government at times tried to depict the Russian nation otherwise, as an imperial nation or Russians as a part of the Eastern Slavic community.²⁶⁵

Putin's rise to power did not fundamentally change the approach towards nation-building and the development of the model of Russia as a civic nation continued.²⁶⁶ In fact, during Putin's years in the Kremlin, governmental policies regarding nation-building have acquired two important attributes. First, as Oxana Shevel demonstrated, the political leadership of post-Soviet Russia has been deliberately ambiguous in defining the nation-building agenda. This ambiguity has allowed the political leadership to operate pragmatically, even opportunistically, to pursue its goals by shifting the terms of official discourse pertaining to boundaries and membership of the Russian nation.²⁶⁷ Second, debates about Russian national identity have become an efficient political tool, utilized to pursue aims which sometimes were not directly connected with nation-building issues.

The candid deployment of conspiracy theories by political elites for the purpose of national cohesion can be dated from 2004, when the Kremlin encountered two serious

²⁶⁵ A civic model of national identity was defined as a community of all citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnic or religious origins. In the post-Soviet period, it was challenged by several other models which perceived the Russian nation as a community of Eastern Slavs, Russian speakers, ethnic Russians and Russians as an imperial nation which was reminiscent to the Soviet model of nation-building. See Tolz, *Russia*, 236-251, 267.

²⁶⁶ Both Putin and his supporters emphasized that Russia is a multiethnic country whose multicultural diversity provides stability for political development and peace in the country. This notion is a part of governmental policy. See, for example, Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii “O Strategii gosudarstvennoi natsional'noi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2025 goda,” no. 1666 (December 19, 2012).

²⁶⁷ Oxana Shevel, “Russian Nation-building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (March 2011): 179.

challenges: the Beslan crisis and the colour revolution in Ukraine. First, the domestic threat posed by North Caucasian separatism was used for the purpose of limiting the power of regional governors and asserting the Kremlin's control over the regions. Accounting for the cessation of the direct election of governors after the tragedy in Beslan in 2004, First Deputy of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, stated that "unity of executive power" was achieved through unity of the nation, and justified the political changes by reference to domestic threats:

We should all recognize that the enemy is at the gates. The frontline goes through every city, every street, every house . . . in a besieged country the fifth column of left- and right wing radicals has emerged . . . Fake liberals and real Nazis have a lot in common. [They have] common sponsors from abroad. [They have] common hatred towards Putin's Russia, as they describe it. Whilst in reality [it is a hatred towards] Russia as such.²⁶⁸

At the same time, the defeat of the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Ianukovich in Ukraine in 2004 caused concern that the transfer of power to Putin's presidential successor in 2008 might not be as smooth as hoped. Describing the emotions of the Russian political establishment in the aftermath of what became known as Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," Pavlovskii stated: "There was a feeling that somewhere around these people [those protesting against the results of the presidential elections], those regiments (*polki*) are gathering in order to take to the streets of Moscow."²⁶⁹

These events triggered a wave of conspiracy theories, which sought to politically mobilize Russians in support of Putin's leadership and against a purported threat of domestic subversion. This mobilization was achieved largely through the stirring of debate about Russian national identity, in which conspiracy theories played a crucial role. Defined by Surkov as a *sovereign democracy*, Russia, in official discourse, started to be juxtaposed to "the West" because of political, national and religious differences. In the view of pro-Kremlin intellectuals, Russian greatness and the country's history of determining the agenda of global politics were constantly challenged by European and American governments in their attempts to undermine and split the country into numerous "puppet" states. Thomas Ambrosio noted that Surkov's sovereign democracy was one of the major discursive instruments invented by the Kremlin to insulate Russia from democratization and to facilitate an authoritarian backlash

²⁶⁸ Larisa Kaftan, "Zamestitel' glavy administratsii Prezidenta RF Vladislav Surkov: Putin ukrepliaet gosudarstvo, a ne sebia," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, September 28, 2004, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23370/32473/>.

²⁶⁹ Gleb Pavlovskii, *Putin, Russia and the West*, BBC 2, January 26, 2012.

in the 2000s.²⁷⁰ The conspiratorial aspect of the concept was aimed not only at evident political outcomes for the Kremlin, but also at the promotion of the new nation-building project.

In this chapter it will be argued that since 2004 the political elites of post-Soviet Russia, including top-ranking politicians, have been utilizing more systematically than before, for the purpose of nation-building, the notion of “the West” as the conspiring “Other.” The aforementioned ambiguity of the nation-building agenda has enabled the Kremlin to pursue pragmatic political goals, often aimed at the suppression of political opposition. In this context, the discursive division of society into “the people” and the “Other,” as well as the ability of conspiracy theories to facilitate social cohesion, appeared to be elements able to meet the Kremlin’s goals: to boost national cohesion and suppress opposition. However, Putin’s return to presidential office in 2012 marked a significant change in official discourse on national identity. As the controversy around the Pussy Riot performance demonstrates, from 2012 onwards Russia’s political leadership and the state-aligned media started to promote a less ambiguous image of the Russian nation: it was now Orthodox and conservative.

The chapter opens with an analysis of the conspiratorial aspects of Surkov’s concept and its impact on prevailing conceptualizations of national identity. The promotion of Surkov’s concept on the state level constitutes the ruling elites’ first attempt to put forward a new framework of nation-building. This analysis is followed by an in-depth investigation of several cases of the promotion of this concept in the public sphere; this will elucidate how elements of this ideology have been applied. The analysis includes scrutiny of the ideology of the youth movement *Nashi*; the controversial television documentary *The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*; and the media campaign against Pussy Riot, a female punk band, whose performance in February 2012 caused controversy and further stimulated debates about Russian national identity. The latter case is of particular importance as it provides insights into how Surkov’s concept has been challenged during Putin’s third presidency.

3.1. Vladislav Surkov’s *Sovereign Democracy*: Theorizing the New Russian Identity

On 17 May 2005, Surkov made a speech at a closed session of a public association of businessmen *Delovaia Rossiia (Business Russia)*, in which he identified Russia’s current priority to be the creation of a sovereign democracy and “a truly national elite.” According to then head

²⁷⁰ Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash. Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 71-79.

of *Delovaia Rossiia*, Boris Titov, the text of the speech disseminated by the press was a distorted interpretation of what Surkov had originally said.²⁷¹ However, the issues discussed in the text have never been officially denied. And so, Surkov's speech, in the form presented by the press in May 2005, offered a kind of intellectual framework for subsequent public debate on national identity. Furthermore, it was delivered only few weeks after the presidential address to the Federal Assembly, in which Putin identified the collapse of the Soviet Union as a "major geopolitical disaster." The articulation of these two ideas in such a short space of time demonstrated growing apprehension among the political elites regarding the issue of social cohesion in the country, which was considered necessary to ensure the future stability of the regime.

Surkov's main concern revolved around the issue of Russia's territorial integrity and the colour revolutions in the CIS countries. He viewed as a threat to Russia the concerns raised by the European Union, Finland and Estonia regarding what critics describe as the suppression of the cultural heritage of the Finno-Ugric nationalities residing within the Russian Federation. Noting that these territories were rich in oil, Surkov observed: "I am not a supporter of conspiracy theories. However, it is obvious that this is a planned action."²⁷² This remark served to emphasize that the mobilization of political and business elites in support of the government was imperative.

At the same time, the apparent absence of nationally-minded elites able to effectively contribute to Russia's development and resist Western influence, was compared to the political situation in the last years of the Soviet Union:

Unfortunately, an enormous part of our bureaucracy views [the vertical structures of power] without a sense and comprehension of the processes which are currently taking place [in the country]. This is a problem of education and the backwardness of [our] political culture. This was the reason why the Soviet Union collapsed. This could become the cause of Russia's collapse. Whereas the Soviet Union collapsed with majesty – it was a catastrophe worthy of a film – we shall decay silently and that will be the end.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Tat'iana Stanovaia, "'Sekretnyi doklad' Vladislava Surkova," *Politkom.ru*, July 18, 2005, <http://politcom.ru/288.html>.

²⁷² "'Delovaia Rossiia': Surkova ogovorili," *Polit.ru*, July 12, 2005, <http://www.polit.ru/news/2005/07/12/surk1/>.

²⁷³ "'Sekretnyi doklad Vladislava Surkova," *Copromat.ru*, July 11, 2005, http://www.compromat.ru/page_17073.htm.

The reference to the Soviet collapse in both Putin's and Surkov's texts demonstrated the centrality of this event in the elite's interpretation of current affairs. The speeches, in which the notion of the Soviet collapse was evoked, were addressed to different audiences; they aimed at shaping different societal groups' perceptions of the demise of the Soviet Union and showing its impact on post-1991 national identity. The absence of public consensus regarding the Soviet collapse left a vacuum that the political establishment was able to marshal to its advantage, a space in which to shape a favourable identity discourse.

It is noteworthy that Surkov's concept of Russian identity contained a definition of the West as Russia's competitor, rather than its enemy. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he said: "The people have attained a new sense of sobriety. The romantic days are gone. We no longer have the feeling of being surrounded by enemies, but rather by competitors."²⁷⁴ This rhetorical shift from the notion of a besieged nation to Surkov's version of political pragmatism in relations with "the West" opened up a new space for the populist expression of Russia's inequity in relation to "the foreign Other"; this would prove pivotal for further conspiratorial mythmaking. That Surkov's statement was made in an interview with a leading European periodical demonstrated to the West a certain open-mindedness on the part of the Russian political elites, as well as society at large, in regard to building relations with other countries on the basis of mutual economic interests.

At the same time, in their domestic speeches top-ranking Russian politicians, including Surkov, tended to depict the attitude of "the West" towards Russia in more conspiratorial terms. In his speech addressed to activists of the United Russia party, Surkov again explained his pragmatic approach, but this time explicitly identified the main actors, who, in his view, were interested in exploiting Russian resources:

If we are not going to rule ourselves, but entrust everything . . . to transnational companies, to powerful nongovernmental charitable organizations that dream of ways to bring us charity. . . . Then I think they will leave us just what they consider essential for us to live on, rather than what we would have kept for ourselves. . . . That does not mean they are enemies. No, they are competitors. . . . It is nothing personal.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Uwe Klussmann, Walter Mayr, "Interview with Kremlin boss Vladislav Surkov 'The West Doesn't Have to Love Us'," *Spiegel*, June 20, 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-kremlin-boss-vladislav-surkov-the-west-doesn-t-have-to-love-us-a-361236.html>.

²⁷⁵ Vladislav Surkov, "Suverenitet – éto politicheskii sinonim konkurentnosposobnosti," *Rosbalt*, March 9, 2006, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2006/03/09/246302.html>. An alternative translation of this text can be found in

It is this shift, effected by Surkov in the perception of “the West” – from an image of the ultimate enemy to one of a shrewd competitor – that effectively helped to relocate anti-Western conspiracy theories from the margins of Russian political discourse to its centre. From now on, the idea of economic and political competition with “the West” could be used by mainstream politicians and supported by factual evidence taken, at times selectively, from the global political agenda. With that reconceptualization of Russia-West relations, the language of anti-Western conspiracy became an inherent part of mainstream political discourse and lost its marginal character.

Surkov’s comparison of Russia and Europe – made in a range of texts on sovereign democracy – had two important particularities. First, Surkov admitted that Russia was a European country, despite attempts by some Russian nationalists to differentiate it from Europe. In an article entitled *Natsionalizatsiia budushchego* (*The Nationalization of the Future*), Surkov stressed the importance of pragmatism in establishing relations with European countries:

We should note again that the people to Russia’s West vary: there are those who want to subjugate it [Russia] and those who are counting on a mutually beneficial partnership. To the former, our democracy is capable of showing its determination to maintain its sovereignty, and to the latter it can show openness, flexibility and productive cooperation. Not falling out with Europe and keeping close to the West are essential elements in the construction (*konstruirovaniia*) of Russia.²⁷⁶

On the one hand, a discursive strategy of improving relations with European countries by depicting their societies as a complex conglomerate of opinions could provide the basis for Russia’s integration into European institutions. On the other, the emphasis on the groups who were allegedly economically and politically interested in Russia’s collapse became the basis for the dissemination of the anti-Western conspiratorial discourse. This dichotomy in the representation of the West in public discourse challenged a dominant perception of the West as a single, undifferentiated entity. However, analysis of domestic and international events made at the time by public intellectuals was particularly focused on those groups with an economic or political interest in Russia’s collapse. As a result, the public was provided with a seemingly sophisticated description of events in the world, but the threat to Russia was yet

Vladislav Surkov, “Sovereignty: The Political Synonym for Competitiveness,” in Vladislav Surkov, *Texts: 1997-2010* (Moscow: Publishing House “Europe,” 2010), 102-103.

²⁷⁶ Vladislav Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego,” *Ekspert*, November 20, 2006, http://expert.ru/expert/2006/43/nacionalizaciya_budushchego/.

again represented in a one-dimension manner: as rooted in the malign activities of powerful political groups resident in the West.

The stated equality of Russia and “the West” as actors on the global political stage had another important impact on the dissemination of conspiracy theories within the country. In his theory of populism, Laclau argued that populism is a mode of identification of “the people” and the “Other,” through which “the people” identify themselves. It is imperative that these two actors be equated within a social context: it is this that discursively creates social frontiers and distinguishes “the people” from their enemy, who prevents the people from realising their demand. This maintenance of the social is achieved through a form of popular, universal demand: what Laclau defines as “the elementary form of building-up of the social link.”²⁷⁷ In this particular case, the demand of the Kremlin was the creation of a new national identity of *sovereign Russians*, which was hard to achieve because of Western resistance. Using a populist form of discourse, Surkov expressed the division of the social sphere into “the power,” embodied by the West as a whole, and “an underdog,” represented by a sovereign and democratic Russia. In this context, the term “sovereignty” became the empty signifier through which all the demands of the Russian people could be expressed.²⁷⁸ No matter what was the type of the problem, and whether experienced by the individual or a social group in Russian society, it would be solved once the nation became *sovereign* and self-sufficient.²⁷⁹

In fact, Russia’s status as “an underdog” in relation to Europe had been further reinforced by Surkov’s critical image of Russia as “a badly illuminated outskirts of Europe, but not Europe yet.”²⁸⁰ Surkov managed to transform “a simple request” from political elites and the Russian people at large for a clear definition of Russian identity into, to use Laclau’s term, the “fighting demand” of the Russian people to become a nation; he did this by exploiting the belief that certain aspects of Russia were underdeveloped when compared with Europe.²⁸¹ The ability to compete with “the West” in global politics required social mobilization and national unity, expressed in Surkov’s concept of a sovereign democracy.

The basis for this “demand” was provided by the notion of Russian greatness and its ability to determine a political agenda in the world, in contrast to certain countries in the post-Soviet space:

²⁷⁷ Laclau, “Populism: What’s in the Name?,” 36, 38-39.

²⁷⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 97-99.

²⁷⁹ It should particularly be noted that Laclau studied populism as a manifestation of the anti-elitist attitudes of ordinary people. The case of Surkov’s sovereign democracy demonstrates that populist rhetoric can successfully be employed by the elites in order to reinforce their claim to power.

²⁸⁰ “Sekretnyĭ doklad Vladislava Surkova.”

²⁸¹ Laclau, “Populism: What’s in the Name?” 38.

Russians, the people of Russia, have been a people with a state for 500 years. We are a nation that is used to statehood. Unlike many of our friends from the Soviet Union and plenty of other countries, we always had the idea of the state. . . .²⁸² They were provinces of one country, they will become provinces of another. I cannot imagine Russians, people from Russia, who would think like this: “Now we shall meld with someone else, we shall run off to them, and they will cuddle us and comfort us and rule over us.” And we have got no one to blame but ourselves for what has happened to us. And we have got nowhere to run, except back home. Here is another – and for me, actually, the most important – reason why Russia should be a self-reliant state that influences world politics.²⁸³

Pointing at the countries which had undergone regime changes as a result of colour revolutions, Surkov inadvertently revealed the neo-imperial character of his chosen model of nation-building. By putting European integration as a key issue on their political agendas, the political leaderships of Georgia and Ukraine had posed a serious challenge to Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space. The new political elites of these countries articulated their ambitions for joining the EU and NATO, which, in turn, for certain sections of the Russian elites meant the decline of their influence and the end of plans to restore Russia’s former glory.²⁸⁴ In fact, in the confidential speech Surkov expressed the idea of the historical dependence of the former Soviet republics on Russian policies more bluntly: “They were drawn on the maps by Russian politicians of the past. . . . We were in the co-creative process, co-working with the world powers to re-arrange the world.”²⁸⁵

The idea of Russian greatness was amplified by the idea of the Russian people as “the tireless masters” of their fate. In Surkov’s view, ethnic Russians are the core of the nation; they are inherently tolerant and have created a “special Russian political culture” which strives towards interethnic peace.²⁸⁶ This conceptualization of Russian identity again emphasizes the imperial roots of the Russian nation-building model.

In this context, the tragic nature of the Soviet collapse, which destroyed the imperial foundation of Russian statehood, could be underscored even more powerfully. In fact, the notion of the Soviet collapse acquired an important function in defining the political “Other”

²⁸² By “many friends from the Soviet Union” Surkov most probably meant political elites of non-Russian states of the former Soviet Union whose state structures were created during the Soviet period under decrees of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

²⁸³ Surkov, “Sovereignty,” 103-104.

²⁸⁴ Tolz, *Russia*, 238-240.

²⁸⁵ “Sekretnyi doklad Vladislava Surkova.”

²⁸⁶ Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego.”

in domestic politics. The rise of Russian ethnic nationalism in the 2000s had been described by Surkov as a “nationalist-isolationist” issue, which he identified as an internal threat to Russian territorial integrity. The territorial dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, in turn, was described as a result of similar appeals made by Russian nationalists during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, which eventually facilitated the break-up of the Soviet Union:

There was a time when we were told that the Kazakhs, Ukrainians and other comrades were the mill-stone around Russia’s neck. . . . What was the result? We lost half of the country [in 1991], half of the population, half of the economy, and so forth. And if we believe that today these guys or those guys are to blame for everything, then we shall lose another half of the country and another half of the economy.²⁸⁷

Hence, Surkov highlighted for particular criticism the demand made by Russian ethnic nationalists that part of the North Caucasus be separated from the Russian Federation. The linking together of references to the Soviet collapse armed the political establishment and pro-government intellectuals with a powerful tool for delegitimizing the ideology of Russian nationalists, who often attacked Putin’s policies as anti-Russian. Nationalists were depicted as the “fifth column” funded by foreign sponsors. The existence of an internal enemy served as one of the main pillars of Surkov’s schema.²⁸⁸ Alongside Russian nationalists, another discursively constructed “subversive group” within the country consisted of the oligarchs and liberals who allegedly worked with foreign sponsors and were attempting to return to power. Labelled as “radicals,” who traditionally inhabited “the fringes of democracy,” this group of critics of the Kremlin was defined as the second main threat to the democratic development of Russia.²⁸⁹

The main danger of these critics, in Surkov’s view, was their “malign corruption” of national values; they did this by depicting Russia as an inefficient state, thus causing internal conflict and opening the way for a “soft takeover” (*miagkoe pogloshchenie*) by foreign countries:

The methods of the Orange Revolution show that very clearly. I cannot say that this is no longer an issue, because if they managed to do it in four countries, then why not in a fifth? I do not think these attempts will be limited to 2007 and 2008.

²⁸⁷ Surkov, “Suverenitet.”

²⁸⁸ Kaftan, “Zamestitel’ glavy administratsii Prezidenta RF Vladislav Surkov.”

²⁸⁹ Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego.”

Our *foreign* friends could somehow try to repeat them in the future. . . . There is one real medicine here – to create a nationally-oriented class in Russian society.²⁹⁰

Various discursive forms of differentiation of both internal and external political actors, which are used in Surkov's speeches, were utilized to shape the category of the "Other," who had been involved in conspiracy against the Russian nation. The usage of the word "foreign" (*inozemnyi*) in the above-quoted text also worked for the further alienation of "the West" as well as the framing of the image of the "Other." This argument provided pro-Putin politicians and intellectuals with a discursive tool able to neutralize contesting political views.

In a sovereign democracy, the subversive "Other" is juxtaposed to the single entity of a sovereign Russian nation (*rossiiskaia natsiia*) and its absolute supremacy in determining domestic policy. In defining "the people," Surkov paid tribute to the civic character of the definition of the Russian people and quoted the Russian constitution: "The bearer of sovereignty and the only source of power in the Russian Federation shall be its multinational people."²⁹¹ However, in Surkov's view, by contrast, the democratically elected president Putin, who represented the ruling majority of the people and their historical greatness provided the basis for sovereignty.²⁹²

According to Surkov, in contrast to the 1990s, when Russia's future was decided from Washington, Putin provided the Russian people with democratic elections, in which the majority decided on the future of the state. Thus, Surkov wrote that the popular demand of the Russians for real democracy was realized by Putin in the 2000s.²⁹³ The majority voted for him and he turned into a reality their core demand: to follow the Law and the Constitution as well as become a sovereign nation. Hence, "Putin's majority" of the Russian people rule the country on the principles of democracy. Accordingly, any attempt to undermine this state of things from within or from abroad is illegitimate and threatens the country's stability.

The parties and individuals who expressed any criticism of Putin's regime were automatically perceived as a potential threat to the legitimacy of the Kremlin. In his description of the opposition, Surkov's advisor Pavlovskii clearly stated that "existing Russian opposition parties may be working with outside forces to engineer a Ukrainian-style revolution

²⁹⁰ Vladislav Surkov, "Sovereignty," 108.

²⁹¹ Surkov, "Natsionalizatsiia budushchego."

²⁹² Dmitrii Orlov, "Politicheskaiia doktrina suverennoi demokratii," quoted in *Suverennaia demokratiia: ot idei k doctrine* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006), 9.

²⁹³ Surkov, "Sovereignty," 98.

against Putin. “That would rob Russian rule of legitimacy, while the decision-making centre would shift to another force – one outside Russia.”²⁹⁴

The national elite’s concern with Russian sovereignty and the lack of national unity generated a range of intellectual projects to facilitate national cohesion. These projects contributed to the public promotion of the idea of Russian greatness as a key factor of Russian national identity. Disseminated through the media (mostly state-aligned television channels) and book publishing, the core ideas of Surkov’s concept were shaping the mediated image of the Russian nation.

3.2. Constructing the Other: The United States as Russia’s Rival

Writing about the usage of populist discourse for the purpose of identity construction, Francisco Panizza noted that it is only possible to name “the people” by naming its “Other.”²⁹⁵ In the mid-2000s, the role of Russia’s main “conspiring Other” was assigned to the US, whose active foreign policy in several regions, which the Kremlin regarded as being in Russia’s sphere of influence, caused major concern among the Russian political establishment. The fears were again expressed in conspiracy theories about the attempts of the US government to undermine Russian integrity and destroy the country’s economic potential. The search for Russian identity thus became closely related to issues on the global political agenda; these Russian policies were constantly juxtaposed with US attempts to achieve global domination through Russia’s destruction.

In Surkov’s view, Russia’s primary goal was to support sovereignty and identity by resisting the efforts of certain governments, bands of terrorists and criminal gangs to gain global supremacy. The sustaining of a sovereign democracy in Russia, according to Surkov, would guarantee the nation a prosperous future and empower the Russians to pursue great historical achievements.²⁹⁶ It should be noted that in his texts, Surkov never provided any explicit conspiratorial analysis of US policies regarding Russia.²⁹⁷ On the contrary, according to the Wikileaks cables from the US embassy in Moscow, Surkov considered himself an Anglophile and admired the US as a “generous and humane country,’ a model for Russia.”²⁹⁸ However, despite this positive account of the Western culture the conceptual framework

²⁹⁴ Fred Weir, “Russian government sets sights on ‘subversion,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 1, 2005, [http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0601/p06s02-woeu.html/\(page\)/2](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0601/p06s02-woeu.html/(page)/2).

²⁹⁵ Panizza, “Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,” 6.

²⁹⁶ Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego.”

²⁹⁷ The only example of a blatant allusion to the anti-Russian conspiracy appeared in a secret speech in 2005; these ideas did not appear in the subsequent public texts.

²⁹⁸ See, “Cable 10Moscow184: The Evolving Role and Influence of Vladislav Surkov,” *the official Wikileaks website*, accessed May 10, 2014, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2010/01/10MOSCOW184.html>.

created by Surkov provided pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists with the opportunity for unrestrained anti-Western conspiratorial mythmaking.

Rather contrary to Surkov's representation of the West as complex and pluralistic community, conspiracy theories about the relations between Russia and "the West" in the 2000s amalgamated images of the US and West European countries, thus presenting them as a single political actor inherently hostile to Russia. As depicted by pro-Kremlin intellectuals and politicians, historically, the West has hated Russia because of its political and religious, as well as ethical, difference. In their view, the Russian nation was not focused on financial profits and kept its old traditions (primarily of Orthodox Christianity and the collective spirit).²⁹⁹ The dominance of the US in global politics has been presented as evidence of an anti-Russian conspiracy; this became particularly manifest in US international policies after the Cold War. A pro-Kremlin political scientist, Igor' Bunin, maintained that the US has eroded the right of sovereignty, and demonstrated its scepticism about the rights of the regimes which did not correspond to the American vision of democracy.³⁰⁰ In turn, the head of the Russian Constitutional Court, Valerii Zor'kin, supported Bunin's argument by contending that the very sovereignty of nation states was under threat from American politicians and ideologues of the New World Order who promoted the process of globalization.³⁰¹ Zor'kin's remark is revealing as it demonstrates that by the mid-2000s Russian political elites had internalized the conspiracy theories traditionally popular in the US and European countries.

The set of ideas used in anti-Western conspiracy discourse has been expanded by the introduction of new terms into political discourse, such as *vashingtonskii obkom* (*The Washington Regional Party Committee*) and *rukovodiashchie krugi SShA* (*ruling circles of the USA*). These terms are derived from Soviet propaganda and the ideology of Russian nationalists; they constitute an example of how post-Soviet political discourse assimilates the symbolic constructions of the Soviet past. Moreover, the prominent media and government representatives facilitated the relocation of these notions into mainstream political discourse by actively using them in public.

The first term, *vashingtonskii obkom*, served to describe the conspiratorial hierarchy by identifying the centre of anti-Russian conspiracy in the US government in Washington. Dmitrii Rogozin, the then Russian ambassador to NATO and former Duma deputy from the

²⁹⁹ See, for example, an article by the former Moscow Mayor Iurii Luzhkov, "My i zapad," in *PRO suverennuu demokratiuu* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007), 195.

³⁰⁰ Igor' Bunin, speech at the round table "Suverennoe gosudarstvo v usloviakh globalizatsii: demokratiia i natsional'naiia identichnost'" in *PRO suverennuu demokratiuu*, 262.

³⁰¹ Valerii Zor'kin, "Apologii Vestfal'skoi sistemy," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, August 22, 2006, <http://www.rg.ru/2006/08/22/zorjkin-statija.html>.

opposition with nationalist views, described public protests in the aftermath of the Russian parliamentary elections in December 2011 as “*vashingtonskii obkom* in action.”³⁰² Originally, this term emerged among groups of Russian nationalists who used it to describe what they believed was a major impact of the US administration on the policies of El'tsin's government. It was then gradually transferred to mainstream political discourse and became an important political symbol.³⁰³ After his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian government in January 2012, Rogozin developed further his idea and claimed that Putin was a defender of the Russian people against the hegemony of the *vashingtonskii obkom*.³⁰⁴

The second term, *rukovodiasbchie krugi SShA*, has been used in anti-Western conspiratorial discourse to describe particular groups of American and European politicians, critical of Russia's policies. At the same time, it has been associated with the linguistic template of Soviet propaganda about the “managing circles of the imperialistic bourgeoisie of the USA and England” (*rukovodiasbchie krugi imperialisticheskoi burzhuazii SShA i Anglii*). For instance, Alekseï Pushkov, a prominent journalist and, since 2011, head of the Duma Committee on International Relations, wrote in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 that “the managing circles of the US in the near future will not come to terms with the existence of an independent Russia. If we intend to assert the right to independence, we shall have to fight for it.”³⁰⁵

Another important aspect of anti-American conspiratorial discourse was a perception of fear among American politicians in the face of Russia's growing power.³⁰⁶ Moreover, despite the Soviet collapse and political changes in Russia, the American political elites carried on employing Cold War thinking. Veronika Krasheninnikova, director general of the Institute for Foreign Policy Research and Initiatives, wrote in her book *Rossia-Amerika: Kholodnaia voïna kul'tur* (*Russia-America: the Cold War of Cultures*) that the American neo-conservatives' hatred of Russia originated in Russia's unique ability to challenge American messianism. This was particularly evident during the Cold War in the competition between the two ideological

³⁰² “Dmitriï Rogozin obvinil ‘Vashingtonskii obkom’ v planiruemom 10 dekabria mitinge,” *Tribuna obschestvennoï palaty*, December 8, 2011, <http://top.oprf.ru/news/5718.html>.

³⁰³ Oleg Maslov, “‘Vashingtonskii obkom’ – kliuchevoi simvol v Rossii nachala XXI veka,” *Nezavisimoe analiticheskoe obozrenie*, March 19, 2007, <http://www.polit.nnov.ru/2007/03/19/symbolwashobkom/>.

³⁰⁴ Dmitriï Rogozin, “Russkii otvet Vladimiru Putinu,” *Izvestia*, January 31, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/513702>.

³⁰⁵ Alekseï Pushkov, “Mozhet li Zapad nakazat’ Rossiiu,” in *Grossmeistery zazerkal’ia. P.S. Rossia i mirovaia politika* (Moscow: Èksmo, 2009), 225.

³⁰⁶ Aleksandr Gorianin, “Fantomnye boli Ameriki,” *Profil’*, January 26, 2009, http://www.profile.ru/items_27877.

blocs.³⁰⁷ In principle, this idea stressed the fact that American political elites held a variety of political views and preferences in foreign policy. Following the general narrative of Surkov's speeches, the author showed American perceptions of Russia to be diverse. However, in her conclusion she stated, without providing any reference to sources: "As some historians have said, other countries have to be either America's colonies or its enemies."³⁰⁸ Hence, despite a claimed attempt to provide a balanced analysis of American policies in relation to Russia, the author produced arguments that supported the idea of an American conspiracy against Russia.

One of the important trends in the development of anti-American conspiratorial narratives during the 2000s was their gradual absorption into official political discourse. In fact, the state leadership even implicitly supported certain conspiratorial claims, thus legitimizing their existence in the public space. For instance, in December 2006 the governmental daily *Rossiiskaia gazeta* published an interview with Boris Ratnikov, the former general of the Federal Guard Service, who claimed he could read the mind of the former US State Secretary Madeleine Albright:

In the thoughts of Madam Albright we discovered a pathological hatred towards the Slavs. She was outraged by the fact that Russia possessed the biggest mineral reserves in the world. According to her, in future Russia's resources should be administered not by one country, but by humankind, under the control of the US, of course.³⁰⁹

This idea received further development a year later, during the presidential press-conference, when Putin was asked by a worker from Novosibirsk about Albright's idea of the redistribution of Siberian resources. Putin admitted that he was not familiar with this quote, but confirmed that similar ideas existed in the heads of "certain politicians."³¹⁰ This remark became a reference point for subsequent anti-Western propaganda, in particular during the parliamentary elections of 2007; it was then used to further strengthen the image of a "conspiring America" and its allies within the country.³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Veronika Krasheninnikova, *Rossia-Amerika: kholodnaia voina kul'tur. Kak amerikanske tsennosti prelomiaut videnie Rossii* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007), 306.

³⁰⁸ Krasheninnikova, *Rossia-Amerika*, 383.

³⁰⁹ Sergeĭ Ptichkin, "Chekisty skanirovali mysli Madlen Olbraĭt," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, December 22, 2006, <http://www.rg.ru/2006/12/22/gosbezopasnostj-podsoznanie.html>.

³¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Priamaia liniia s Prezidentom Rossii Vladimirom Putinyĭm," October 18, 2007, <http://www.president-line.ru/>.

³¹¹ Anna Smolchenko, "Putting Words in Albright's Mouth," *The Moscow Times*, November 7, 2007, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putting-words-in-albrights-mouth/193094.html>.

This episode permits perusal of the process of the development and further dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy theories in the public space and the role played by top-ranking politicians in this process. The radical claim about Albright, made in an article which rehearsed a far-reaching conspiracy theory, was initially published in an official, state-funded newspaper; only later was it to be disseminated further, but then only among a limited number of Internet sites dedicated to conspiracy theories. Putin's television interview was a major political event and therefore served as a platform from which this idea could be further disseminated among the public and made a point of reference for pro-Kremlin intellectuals in the future. Given the fact that during these press-conferences the questions asked are often manipulated in order to address matters of the day and provide a desired interpretation, there was a chance that the discussed question had been strategically selected by Putin's political advisers. Although Putin displayed unfamiliarity with the alleged statement by Albright, it is likely that he played a key role in legitimizing this allegation in the public sphere.

3.3. "Nashi": The Creation of Anti-Western National Elites

The activities of the youth movement *Nashi (Ours)* appear to be one of the most significant examples of how anti-Western conspiracy theories have been employed to establish greater social cohesion among young Russians and to utilize a particular version of nation-building discourse in support of Kremlin policies.

Pro-Kremlin political elites were shaken by youth movement participation in the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. These groups had displayed an effectiveness in street action; they were a constituency that it would have been dangerous for the Kremlin to ignore in the 2007-2008 elections. In the post-Soviet period, neither pro-Kremlin political parties nor opposition organizations managed to create a well-functioning movement able to mobilize large groups of young people. Perhaps the key impediment was a complete lack of any conceptual framework that could unite this highly disparate and fragmented stratum of society. Hence, high on the Kremlin's agenda was placed the creation of a political identity for young Russians supportive of the regime

Nashi appeared in February 2005 and defined themselves as a "Youth Democratic Antifascist Movement" whose stated goal was "making Russia a global leader of the 21st century."³¹² However, the journalists of the independent publishing house *Kommersant*, who attended the first meetings of *Nashi*, described the movement's main goal as that of resisting the threat of "the external control of the country."³¹³ The very title of the movement, *Nashi*

³¹² "Manifest dvizheniia NASHI," Molodezhnoe demokraticeskoe antifashistskoe dvizhenie NASHI, <http://img.nashi.su/nashi.su/admin/data/3/9/manifest1.doc>.

³¹³ Oleg Kashin, "Znat' 'Nashikh'," *Kommersant*, February 28, 2005, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/550696>.

(Ours), operated as a linguistic symbol distinguishing “Us” from “Them.” The community of young Russians united under its banner attacked opposition activists and criticized political elites and international foundations, who allegedly represented interests and values foreign to Russian society.

The name of the organization was initially coined by a controversial nationalist reporter and the former Duma deputy, Aleksandr Nevzorov. Nevzorov’s movement was established in November 1991 as a reaction to the failure of the August 1991 coup in Moscow. Its members called for the removal of El’tsin from the Kremlin and the restoration of the Soviet state. As Nevzorov said in 1991: “Every proper citizen of Russia, deep in his soul, dreams about the *GKChP*, because in reality the country is occupied by the enemy.”³¹⁴ This conspiratorial narrative of foreign occupation, which became a commonplace in nationalist opposition ideology throughout the post-Soviet period, helped him mobilise supporters and become a parliamentary deputy in 1993. However, Nevzorov admitted that in the 2000s Surkov had asked him to “donate” the name for his project.³¹⁵ This episode again demonstrates that the conspiratorial rhetoric of the Soviet collapse, which possessed strong potential for social mobilization in the 1990s, was, in the 2000s, relocated from the nationalist margins to mainstream political discourse— and became a political tool of social cohesion.

By the time the main principles of a sovereign democracy were formulated, *Nashi* had already organized two events; these revolved around the memory of the Second World War and the Russian resistance to fascism. On 15 May 2005, *Nashi* organized a demonstration in the centre of Moscow made up of sixty-thousand young people who, according to the movement’s leader, Vasilii Iakemenko, “took up the torch from war veterans to struggle for Russia’s independence.”³¹⁶ These actions, which were covered by state-aligned television channels, were aimed at creating an image of a large mass of young people concerned about the country’s future.

Conspiratorial rhetoric was placed at the centre of the movement’s ideology, instrumentally creating a community of “the people” who resisted the West in their struggle to ensure Russia’s survival. In his address to the participants of the first summer camp of the movement, in 2005, Pavlovskii observed:

³¹⁴ Dmitrii Zakharov, “Proekt ‘Vtoraia svezhest’,” *Kommersant Vlast*, February 21, 2011, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/1586150>.

³¹⁵ Evgenii Levkovich, “Sekundnoe delo: RS pogovoril o raspade Rossii s Aleksandrom Nevzorovym,” *Rolling Stone*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.ru/articles/politics/interview/11817.html>.

³¹⁶ Pavel Korobov, “Raznostoronnee dvizhenie,” *Kommersant Vlast*, July 25, 2005, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/595759>.

European civilization has a different mentality; it always needs an enemy, especially in periods when everything is good. It happened with the Jews at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. It is now happening with the Russians. Nowadays, for the West, the Russians are— let us face it— the main outcasts, no matter how good we are.³¹⁷

Pavlovskii's words reflected the main thrust of the ideology devised by Surkov and other pro-Kremlin intellectuals. As a result of the joint effort of pro-Kremlin intellectuals high-ranking officials, *Nashi* was supposed to become an exemplary case of the construction of “the people” out of unaffiliated and disparate groups of young Russians.

Nashi's nation-building rhetoric adopted two main stances. First, an appeal to the memory of the Second World War was used as the most uncontested and powerful narrative in post-Soviet Russia public consciousness. Second, *Nashi* emphasized the anti-fascist views of the movement's members and stressed the idea of Russia's multiculturalism as the key to the country's prosperity. As stated in their manifesto:

The clash of civilizations is able to kill Russia, as it has already killed the Soviet Union. Our aim is to prevent the expansion of the ideas of fascism, aggressive nationalism, religious intolerance and separatism, which threaten the unity and territorial integrity of Russia.³¹⁸

The aspiration for a multicultural Russia served as a positive element of social cohesion and community building. *Nashi* attempted to articulate a civic model of national cohesion: a prosperous Russia could be built if Russian youth shared the idea of racial, religious and cultural solidarity. This perhaps accounts for why *Nashi's* manifesto contained only the civic term, *rossiiskii*, without mentioning the ethnically-associated term, *russkii*.

This ideology of Russian multiculturalism was intended to be shared by the majority of Russian youth who, according to the authors of the manifesto, would replace the “defeatist generation of the 1980s” (*pokolenie porazhentsev*) which had destroyed the Soviet Union. This generation of “defeatists” consisted of the so-called oligarchs and “fascists” under the alleged control of “the West.” These groups were considered to be the main threat to the country's stability. *Nashi* defined them as “the unnatural union of liberals and fascists, Westernizers and ultranationalists, international funds and international terrorists,” united by their common hatred of Putin.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Oleg Kashin, “Otriad vlastonogikh,” *Kommersant Vlast*, July 25, 2005, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/595759>.

³¹⁸ “Manifest dvizheniia NASHI.”

³¹⁹ “Manifest dvizheniia NASHI.”

Nashi's populist call for the current elites to be replaced was supposed to serve as another factor of political cohesion amongst young Russian people. Defining the ruling class as “defeatists,” backed by the oligarchs and international foundations bodies, *Nashi* at the same time attempted to valorise the civic, state-framed model of Russian nation-building and promote it as worth defending from the threat of international conspiracy. Building its ideology on a basis of anti-fascism and the memory of the war, it served to provide patriotic ideas and merge them with notions of conspiracy.

The nation-building strategies of *Nashi* were mainly aimed at the development of a civic model of Russian nationhood, despite several, relatively unsuccessful, attempts to draw on ideas of Russian ethnic nationalism (such as the Orthodox segment of the movement). Still, being largely based on conspiracy theories, the ideology of *Nashi* mainly served as a political tool to suppress those opposing the political establishment on the eve of the 2007 parliamentary elections. As Maya Atwal and Edwin Bacon noted, *Nashi* engaged in contentious politics which United Russia had found impossible to do because of constraints of the formal political arena.³²⁰ However, in parallel with the activities of *Nashi*, the Kremlin experimented with other concepts to define the Russian nation and sponsored them by means of campaigns on the state-aligned television channels.

3.4. The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium

From the beginning of the 1990s, pseudo-historical books became bestsellers as they described how the origins of contemporary events could be traced back to conspiracies in the past. Hence, by the late 2000s pro-Kremlin public intellectuals realized the value of biased historical accounts in constructing the national identity.³²¹ Politicians and public intellectuals employed a range of historical facts in the books or television programmes to convey a given political message to society and turn conspiracy theories into a legitimate element of popular discourse. Among the most evident cases was the film *Gibel' Imperii: Vizantiiskii urok* (*The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*) broadcast on 30 January 2008 by the state channel Rossiia.

In the film, Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), the superior of Moscow's Sretensky Monastery, narrates his version of the collapse of the Byzantine Empire.³²² Backed by a

³²⁰ Maya Atwal and Edwin Bacon, “The youth movement Nashi: contentious politics, civil society, and party politics,” *East European Politics* 28, no. 3 (2012): 265.

³²¹ Among the most notable examples of this is Vladimir Medinskii's series of books on the myths about Russia.

³²² Archimandrite Tikhon apparently has close relations with Vladimir Putin. He accompanied him in a private trip to the Pskov-Pecherskii monastery in 2000 and to the US in 2003. See, Pavel Korobov, “Vlast' zdes' ne pri chem?,” *Kommersant*, February 2, 2008, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/847876>. Also, it is often stated that

dynamic promotional campaign and later praised in the pro-government press, the film was popular among viewers and stirred a heated discussion about parallels between Russian and Byzantine history.³²³

In Tikhon's view, the collapse of the Byzantine Empire was, among other things, prepared by the West, whose economic and political interests were represented by Byzantine intellectuals and unfaithful oligarchs. Supposedly, the West robbed Byzantium, thereby creating the conditions for its own economic prosperity, which, in turn, helped transform the then-barbarous European states into civilized countries. In the words of Tikhon, one of the greatest Byzantine rulers, Emperor Basyl II

took tough measures to enforce a vertical power structure, quelled all separatist movements in the outlying territories, and suppressed rebellious governors and oligarchs, who were preparing to dismember the empire. Then he "purged" the government and confiscated huge sums of stolen money.³²⁴

However, the legacy of Basyl II was soon lost by his corrupt and weak successors, who, most importantly, allowed the emergence of a "national question" in the multiethnic empire. Hence, one of the essential topics in the film is the collapse of the Byzantine empire due to a foreign conspiracy against the national unity of the empire.

According to Tikhon, the people of the Byzantine Empire lived in harmony as Orthodox Christianity operated in place of national identities. The West, depicted by Tikhon as rude and greedy, despised this attachment to Orthodox Christianity and called for the dismembering of the empire into nation states. By disseminating the idea of the nation state, the West convinced the Greeks, "the state-forming nation," to claim independence from other nations. As a result, the Balkan region became a battleground of several religious groups whose claims for independence were supported by the West.

The authors' depiction of the ethnic processes in the Byzantine Empire is accompanied by impressive pictures which connect the events of the Byzantine past with post-Soviet history. In one of the episodes, on a map of the empire, a separated Serbia and Bulgaria are coloured yellow and blue, which implicitly refer to the Ukrainian national flag. At

Archimandrite Tikhon is Putin's personal priest. See, Grigoriĭ Revzin, "Gibel' istorii. Uroki otsa Tikhona," *Kommersant*, January 31, 2008, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?docid=847456>.

³²³ According to *Kommersant*, the rating of the film was higher than the average channel's rating and amounted to 21.4 per cent at the time of the broadcast. See, Arina Borodina, "Kak smotreli 'Gibel' imperii. Uroki Vizantii'," *Kommersant*, February 1, 2008, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/848071>.

³²⁴ Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), "The Text of the Film 'The Fall of An Empire – The Lesson of Byzantium,'" *Pravoslavie.ru*, February 8, 2008, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/7389.htm>.

the same time, words about “enmity” in the empire are visually reinforced by the people fighting, oranges, falling on the street and, a man calmly walking, his face covered by a Venetian carnival mask. Moreover, in order to make the comparison with the US even more evident, Tikhon describes Venice as the “New York of the 13th century.”³²⁵

This interpretation of the Byzantine collapse refers simultaneously to the Soviet collapse as described by Surkov and to current political developments in the CIS countries. It should also be noted that Tikhon depicted the West, as one single entity, a competitor “only pursuing its own interests.”³²⁶ This narrative thread, repeated several times throughout the film, has its origins in Surkov’s conceptualization. The use of anti-Western conspiracy theories in a prime-time television programme was again aimed at shifting the anti-Western conspiracy narrative into the mainstream of Russian political discourse.

One particular detail of the film distinguished it from Surkov’s articles. This was its emphasis on Orthodox Christianity as the basis of the Byzantine Empire, and, accordingly, Russian identity. It was the growth and domination of pro-Western views among Byzantine intellectuals that had allegedly corrupted the basis of their community cohesion. It was for this reason, Tikhon insisted, that the Turks were able to conquer the empire, while the West offered no help in resisting them. As a visual background to these words, the viewer continually sees a close-up of a painting depicting Judas kissing Jesus. The legitimacy of the imperial heritage and Byzantine greatness, according to Tikhon’s film, were transferred to Russia through Orthodox Christianity. Hence, Tikhon implicitly refers to the idea of “Moscow [as] the Third Rome,” which stresses Russia’s messianic role in world history; this, since the 19th century, has played a crucial role in the conceptual framework of Russian nationalism.³²⁷ In making this point, Tikhon invokes a large body of pre-revolutionary ideas largely based on Orthodox beliefs which were sporadically disseminated in popular literature and post-Soviet pseudo-historic research. However, the utilization of elements of Surkov’s concepts allowed Tikhon to employ a wider range of frames, referring to Orthodox Christianity as a necessary, but subordinate, marker of national identification.

Most of the proponents of Tikhon’s film placed particular emphasis on the political, cultural and spiritual similarities between Russia and the Byzantine Empire, supporting references to the impact of the “Byzantine heritage” on Russian history. Narochnitskaia claimed that Byzantium was Russia’s foremother and referred to Arnold Toynbee’s essay, *Russia’s Byzantine Heritage*.³²⁸ Mentioning Toynbee’s idea that Russians as well as Byzantines

³²⁵ Tikhon, “The Text of the Film ‘The Fall of an Empire’.”

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Marshall Poe, “Izobretenie kontseptsii ‘Moskva – Tretii Rim’,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2000): 84-85.

³²⁸ Arnold J. Toynbee, “Russia’s Byzantine Heritage,” in *Horizon XVI*, no. 91 (August 1947): 82-95.

always tried to protect themselves from the Western conquerer, she maintained that Toynbee, as an acknowledged Western historian, had discovered the cause of the West's contempt for Russia. The Byzantine heritage eventually made Russia a powerful actor in global politics and the centre of a significant non-Western civilization. Therefore, the debates about the film, in Narochnitskaia's view, demonstrated the timeliness of defining Russia's national idea.³²⁹

The talk show *Natsionalnyi interes* (*The National Interest*), broadcast on 9 February, 2008, on Rossiia television channel, included Tikhon's film and a discussion afterwards; this allowed Tikhon as well as Narochnitskaia to elaborate their ideas. Narochnitskaia emphasized that the Russians were a particularly spiritual nation, in comparison to the West, which had led them to think about their nation's world mission as soon as the "famine" (*golod*) of the 1990s had been resolved. According to Tikhon, liberal freedoms became the instrument of suppression in Russia and the West used them to pursue its economic goals in relation to the country.³³⁰ In conclusion, four out of five guests agreed that the only way to build a strong nation was to recreate the Russian empire: this was the only framework which could tie the Russian nation together.

Tikhon's film and the subsequent discussion were examples of the instrumental use of Christianity in the shaping of the vision of the Russian nation. It is likely that the Kremlin exploited Russians' trust in the Orthodox Church to promote the desired political agenda.³³¹ The Orthodox appearance of the film's narrator served to promote Orthodoxy as one of the crucial markers of Russian national identity. However, the religious components of national identity— both in the film and in the discussion— were overlaid with notions circulating in current politics. In the talk show, the discussion of the impact Orthodoxy has been having on the Russian identity was virtually absent. Instead, the guests devoted their discussion to criticism of Russian opposition and the West. The appeal to Orthodoxy thus appeared to be yet another element on the Kremlin's, ambiguous nation-building agenda; state use of public trust in the Church to drive social cohesion. It is noteworthy that the attempt to promote a particular model of nation-building was articulated through anti-Western conspiracy theories and broadcast in prime-time by the major state television channel. This Kremlin approach to

³²⁹ Nataliia Narochnitskaia, "Spory vokrug Vizantii," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, February 7, 2008, <http://www.rg.ru/2008/02/07/gibel-spory.html>.

³³⁰ "Gibel' imperii. Vizantiiskii urok. Obsuzhdenie fil'ma v programme Natsional'nyi interes," Youtube video, 0:45:15, *Rossiia*, February 9, 2008, posted by "intandrew," December 24, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MfQcYQCUaA>.

³³¹ Sociological research carried out in 2008 demonstrated that approximately 65 per cent of the population had trust in the institution of the Church. See, the opinion poll conducted by the Levada Centre in March 2008, N=2100, quoted in Lev Gudkov et al. *Postsovetskii chelovek i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* (Moscow: Moskovskaia shkola politicheskikh issledovanii, 2008), 28-29.

the boosting of social cohesion became even more evident during the campaign against Pussy Riot in 2012.

3.5. The Case of Pussy Riot: Making the Nation of the “Orthodox People”

The narrative of conspiracy against the Orthodox religion as a basis of Russian identity became one of important tropes at the time of the 2012 presidential campaign. For instance, Patriarch Kirill in his address on 7 January 2012 stated that the strong faith of the Russians caused hate among their enemies and ill-wishers.³³² This address marked Kirill’s active involvement in the campaign on Putin’s side which made the Patriarch a regular object of critique among which the performance of the band *Pussy Riot* was the most controversial episode.

On 21 February, 2012, six women from the female band, *Pussy Riot*, attempted to perform a so-called punk-prayer at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, which called on the Mother of God to drive Putin away. Almost two weeks later three members of the band were arrested. This incident eventually acquired more publicity than all the scandals that had emerged in the spring of 2012 in relation to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.³³³ The authorities initially treated the Pussy Riot performance as “hooliganism”; however, soon the case against them escalated into a large-scale affair, which, according to the state-aligned media, posed a major threat to Russian statehood.

Numerous interviews with politicians and pro-Kremlin intellectuals as well as television programmes began to depict Orthodoxy as the key element of Russian identity, the Russian state and a basis for Russian greatness.³³⁴ By April 2012, the official reading of the incident had acquired a distinctive conspiratorial character, which was actively disseminated in the media. On 3 April, Kirill stated that the Russian Orthodox Church had become a victim of

³³² Evgeniĭ Revenko, “Patriarkh Kirill: Poias Bogoroditsy dal velikuiu nadezhdu,” *Rossia-1*, January 7, 2012, <http://www.vesti.ru/videos?vid=389143>.

³³³ Apart from the active support of the Kremlin on the eve of the presidential elections, in 2012 Patriarch Kirill appeared at the centre of several scandals. At first, Kirill became involved in a lawsuit during which journalists discovered that he owned an expensive flat in the centre of Moscow. Kirill wanted his neighbour, Iurii Shevchenko, to pay compensation of about £400,000 for the dust in his flat which occurred as a result of renovation works in Shevchenko’s apartment. Later, bloggers found Kirill wearing an excessively expensive watch, which was unsuccessfully deleted from the photo on the official website.

³³⁴ “Chto stoit za aktsiei ‘Pussy Riot’ v Khrame Khrista Spasitelia,” Channel One, March 15, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/prj/vkontekste/vypusk/14392>; Sergeĭ Gavrov, “Zaderem podol Matushke Rossii,” *Vzgliad*, June 27 2012, <http://vz.ru/opinions/2012/6/27/585741.html>.

an “information war” (*informatsionnaia voïna*).³³⁵ This date became a turning point in the wide-ranging media campaign against Pussy Riot.

From April 2012 onwards, the narrative of a war against the Orthodox Church dominated the speeches of pro-Kremlin intellectuals and Church representatives, who interpreted public criticism of the Church as part of the conspiracy of the West against the Russian nation. The Patriarch himself insisted that the Church was the essential element of national self-identification and, therefore, historically, it has been the first target for Russia’s enemies and invaders.³³⁶ Sergeï Markov, a prominent pro-Kremlin intellectual, further developed Kirill’s words by stating that there were powerful forces at work both within and outside the country which wished to deprive the Russian people of their mission in global history and which sought to destroy the Church as “a depository of Russian national identity.”³³⁷

In the state-aligned media the Pussy Riot incident had been framed as a repetition of anti-religious campaigns of the Bolsheviks, in which many priests were persecuted and churches were closed. Arkadiï Mamontov, a Rossiia channel journalist and active defender of the Church in the Pussy Riot scandal, called the actions of Pussy Riot a “relapse into neo-Bolshevism” thus alluding to the possibility of new anti-Church pogroms.³³⁸

These allusions surfaced repeatedly in television programmes throughout the period of the trial, from April until October 2013.³³⁹ To demonstrate widespread public support for the church, the Moscow Patriarchate decreed that prayer services be held in defence of the “desecrated relics” including both the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and 30 icons, which, according to the clerics, had been recently attacked by vandals.³⁴⁰ On 22 April, these services were held in all major Russian cities; these served to demonstrate that the great majority of Russian people stood behind the Church against the hostile minority, whose aim was to destroy the unity of the nation. In his address before the services, the patriarch evoked the

³³⁵Aleksandra Sopova, “Patriarkh Kirill: protiv Tserkvi vedëtsia informatsionnaia voïna,” *Izvestiia*, April 3, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/520710>.

³³⁶“Za Pussy Riot vstupilis’ deiateli kul’tury,” *Rossïia 1*, July 1, 2012, <http://www.vesti7.ru/vh?cid=33601>.

³³⁷ Anna Nadezhkina, “Pussy Riot: Uznitsy bez sovesti,” *Ekspres-gazeta*, August 27, 2012, <http://www.eg.ru/daily/poitics/33512/>.

³³⁸Oleg Kashin, “Esli eto kamen’, to eto kamen’. Esli shpion, to shpion’. Arkadiï Mamontov o npravstvennosti i Pussy Riot,” *Afisha*, May 15, 2012, <http://gorod.afisha.ru/archive/arkadij-mamontov-o-pussy-riot/>.

³³⁹ The most prominent example of this comparison was in Mamontov’s show “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory-2,” Youtube video, 01:20:19, televised by *Rossïia-1*, September 11, 2012, posted by “Mikhail Leont’ev,” September 11, 2012, <http://youtu.be/NrqpbuItPB0>.

³⁴⁰ “Avtoprobegom po koshchunstvu,” *Rossïia 1*, April 22, 2012, <http://www.vesti7.ru/archive/news?id=34503>.

unique multicultural spirit of Russia, but stressed that the attack on the Orthodox Church threatened the unity of the entire nation.³⁴¹

These prayers, widely covered by the major television channels, were envisaged as an embodiment of “the people,” who shared the Orthodox faith and supported the Patriarch as well as the federal authorities. Supporters of the Church were described as pious, loyal to the government, and uninvolved in recent political activities. The audience in the television coverage of the Pussy Riot case was regularly depicted as a homogenous Orthodox community in which any variety of opinions was downplayed.³⁴²

At the same time, major television channels provided a common conspiratorial interpretation of Pussy Riot as puppets who strove to split the nation apart.³⁴³ Journalists and public intellectuals utilized different terms to stress the “otherness” of the members of Pussy Riot. They were defined as witches, blasphemers and provocateurs, while their supporters, who shared their liberal values, were depicted as alien to the Russian nation.³⁴⁴ On 6 April, in the introduction to the documentary entitled *Hystera Ænigma*, broadcast by the major television channel NTV, the commentator asked “Why are gays demanding that the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour be demolished?” The response to the query came from a representative of the Moscow’s gay community, Nikolai Alekseev: “Yes, that is true.” In fact, Alekseev’s answer was a result of a massive editorial cut, which gave the impression that the LGBT community in cahoots with Pussy Riot did indeed seek to destroy the cathedral. The rest of the documentary continued in this conspiratorial vein and presented the members of the band as sexual perverts and immoral persons who were striving to trigger a revolution in Russia.³⁴⁵

This distinction between the “Orthodox majority” (*pravoslavnoe bol’shinstvo*) of “the people” and the “minority of perverts and liberals,” depicted as the “Other,” played an important role in developing the notion of Russian identity through the mediated conspiratorial discourse. By means of an aggressive media campaign, spokespersons of the Church, pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists put a great deal of effort into establishing the notion of a threat to the nation that came from internal subversion by a conspiring “fifth

³⁴¹Patriarch Kirill, “Slovo Sviatishogo Patriarkha Kirilla pered nachalom molebna v zashchitu very, porugannykh sviatyn’, Tserkvi i ee dobrogo imeni,” *The official web-site of the Moscow Patriarchate*, April 22, 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2177868.html>.

³⁴² Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, *Mediating Post-Soviet Difference: Race, Nation and Ethnicity on Russian Television* (Monograph in progress).

³⁴³ Evgenii Baranov, “Sotni tysiach pravoslavnykh po vsei Rossii molilis’ vmeste vo imia very iv zashchitu tserkvi,” *Channel One*, April 22, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/205068>.

³⁴⁴ See, for example, “Besy,” *Channel One*, March 15, 2012 http://www.1tv.ru/projects_edition/si5685/fi14384; *Poedinok s Vladimirom Solov’evym*, *Rossia-1*, September 28, 2012, <http://vsoloviev.ru/battle/2012/1154/>.

³⁴⁵“*Hystera Ænigma*, *Ch.P. Rassledovanie*,” *NTV*, April 6, 2012, <http://www.ntv.ru/video/305205/>.

column” within Russia reportedly with the support of the West. Mamontov’s trilogy of talk-shows, entitled *Provocateurs (Provokatory)*, created an overarching conspiratorial narrative for the case.

On 29 April, the state television channel Rossiia-1 broadcast the first episode of the weekly talk-show *Spetsial’nyi korrespondent (Special correspondent)*, which articulated the major conspiratorial narrative of the battle for Orthodoxy and the nation against the “blasphemers” (*koshchunitsy*) who were supported by the “West.” The documentary opened with scenes from the 22 April collective prayer service and in the course of the film referred to the alleged conspiratorial origins of the performance. By posing the question “What shall we do, people?” (*Chto delat’ budem, liudi?*) to the viewers and the studio audience, Mamontov performed a discursive division of the nation.³⁴⁶ “The people,” represented in the studio by an Orthodox nun, the press-secretary of the Moscow Patriarchy, Vladimir Legoïda, several actors, journalists, and academics, who all pledged their allegiance to the Orthodox Christianity, claimed that Pussy Riot had attacked the Church and attempted to destroy the Russian nation.

Criminal investigators who participated in the programme showed the audience the Canadian residence permit of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, one of the members of the band, with a view to linking her to the intelligence services of a foreign country. A famous author of anti-Western conspiracy theories Nikolaï Starikov stressed that if the “blasphemers” were allowed to desecrate Russian sacred heritage (*relikvi*), “we shall cease to be a nation.”³⁴⁷ Almost all participants agreed that the Russian Orthodox Church was under attack and that the Pussy Riot performance had been used to test the ability of the Russian people to defend national values.

Interestingly, the programme’s journalists and guests downplayed the links between the Orthodox Church and the authorities. The guests constantly emphasized that the main target of the “war” was the Church as the keystone of the nation. As the Church leaders had been criticized by the opposition for their relationship with the authorities, it is likely that the Kremlin needed to defuse these tensions and relocate attention onto the subversive nature of the church critics. The conspiratorial interpretation of the Pussy Riot incident allowed people to link the band members to an allegedly subversive “fifth column” of liberals with corrupt values, who were supported by the West. As Mamontov contended:

They wanted to disrupt society, to divide it and split [it]. That is what the organizers of this horrible provocation wanted to achieve. They hold nothing

³⁴⁶ “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory,” Youtube video, 29:16, televised by *Rossiia-1* on April 24, 2012, posted by “codemotion,” April 24, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yk4LLQ_9Hg.

³⁴⁷ “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory.”

sacred. They did not manage to triumph in December-January and so decided to attack the most sacred thing which the people have – the Church.³⁴⁸

This unequivocal account of the conspiring and atheist “Other” was aimed at promoting the cohesion of Russians as a single nation which professed Orthodoxy. However, the most important link was that drawn between the political protests held in response to vote rigging at the 2011 parliamentary elections and the incident in the Cathedral. The proclaimed atheism of the opposition, who supported Pussy Riot, could thus be deployed as a strong argument against critics of the regime and again to advance the revision of Russian identity as based on Orthodoxy.

The decision of Moscow’s court on 19 August, 2012 to sentence three members of the band to two years in prison took the media campaign against Pussy Riot to a new level. From August onwards it was possible to identify two distinctive currents in the conspiratorial narrative around the case. As previously, the state-aligned channels followed the initial line of the campaign and defended the Church. Kirill’s statements in August and September 2012 followed the line of emphasising the fundamental role of the Church in the preservation of Russian identity. On 9 September, during a service commemorating the bicentenary of the Battle of Borodino, Kirill drew a parallel between the Napoleonic invasion in 1812 and the current anti-church scandals. He stated that Western invaders had desecrated churches and sawn up crosses in an attempt to destroy the Russian spirit.³⁴⁹ The Patriarch’s mention of the sawn up crosses worked to connect the alleged barbarism of the French with the incident that had taken place in Kiev in August 2012. Shortly before that *Femen*, a Ukrainian feminist group, publicly sawed a cross in half in the centre of Kiev in support of Pussy Riot.³⁵⁰ This incident, which was followed by a number of similar events in Russia, served to promote the idea of a fully-fledged “war” against the Church.

On the same day as the Borodino address, Rossiia’s weekly newscast *Vesti nedeli* (*News of the Week*) broadcast an interview with Kirill in which he claimed that the Pussy Riot case was a well-planned act of reconnaissance (*razvedka boem*).³⁵¹ This framing of the Pussy Riot performance as an act of reconnaissance evoked fears of foreign subversion. In this context,

³⁴⁸ “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory’.”

³⁴⁹ Patriarch Kirill, “Slovo Sviatishhego Patriarkha Kirilla posle molebna v pamiat’ ob izbavlenii Rossii ot nashestviia Napoleona,” *The Moscow Patriarchy official web-site*, September 9, 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2457627.html>.

³⁵⁰ “Femen Activists Cut Down Cross in Kyiv,” *RFE/RL*, August 17, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-femen-cross-pussy-riot/24679942.html>.

³⁵¹ Dmitrii Kiselev, “Vazhnoe interv’iu Patriarkha,” *Rossiia-1*, September 9, 2012, <http://www.vesti7.ru/archive/news?id=36844>.

both the members of the band and their supporters were represented as part of a bigger plan to overthrow the Russian government by attacking the very foundation of Russian nationhood. The repeated emphasis on the alleged linkage between foreign intelligence and Pussy Riot served to highlight how dangerous the band members were for the Russian nation and for the Church as its main pillar. Furthermore, at this stage of the trial, Pussy Riot started to be perceived as not only a threat to the Church but also as a threat to the legitimacy of the authorities' actions. This shift in interpretation significantly changed the media coverage of the story and brought a new theme into the conspiratorial narrative of the case.

As the trial of Pussy Riot provoked more domestic and international debate, the manner in which the pro-Kremlin media conceptualized the performance also underwent certain notable discursive changes. Numerous world celebrities and foreign political leaders expressed support for the members of the band and criticized the Russian authorities. This international reaction to the trial further helped pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists interpret this external criticism as a part of the plan to discredit the Russian authorities and to undermine their legitimacy. The Kremlin's concern about the legitimacy of the Pussy Riot trial became a top-priority task at the time when the verdict was passed.

Several influential participants in the Church campaign made statements contending that the roots of the Pussy Riot case could be traced back to Putin's defence of Syria in the face of the United States' plans of military intervention. They also suggested that the wide-scale campaign of criticism against the Kremlin could be connected to the conflict with the opposition within the country, which began during the 2011 parliamentary elections. For instance, Mamontov argued that the Pussy Riot controversy had been initiated to make Putin vulnerable to critique because of his position on Syria.³⁵² In turn, Dugin, claimed that those hostile to Pussy Riot were in fact resisting the imperialist aspirations of the US and wanted to prevent the establishment of a pro-American regime in Russia.³⁵³ This shift in perspective from religion, where it had been before, to politics demonstrated that the main challenge for the Kremlin at that time became the impact of the controversy on the image of the Russian elites both within the country and abroad. This change in representation of the Pussy Riot affair in the official discourse was also reflected in the following two episodes of Mamontov's show.

The second episode, broadcast on 11 September, 2012, was mostly devoted to discussion of the role of Boris Berezovskii, a political émigré and oligarch, in the case. Several

³⁵²Aleksandr Kots and Aleksandr Iakovlev, "Arkadii Mamontov: 'Sud i prigovor Pussy Riot spravedlivy,'" *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, September 14, 2012. <http://www.kp.ru/radio/stenography/44362/>.

³⁵³Vladimir Dergachev, "Evraziitsy prigrozili zakatat' 'Marsh millionov' v asfal't," *Izvestiia*, September 14, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/535209>.

guests on the show testified that Berezovskii was preparing to stir unrest in Russia by attacking the Church.³⁵⁴ However, the programme gave nearly equal weight to the issue of the origins of the international controversy, which was explained by the work of *BellPottinger*, a British public relations company. This idea was put forward by a self-proclaimed media expert from the United States, William Dunkerley. The show also included an interview with Paul Craig Roberts, a former official in the Reagan Administration and a controversial writer, who stated that the members of Pussy Riot had been used “to demonize the Russian government for standing up to Washington’s intention to destroy Syria.”³⁵⁵ Dunkerley and Roberts’ remarks were aimed at giving credibility from “foreign experts” to the conspiratorial notions spread by Russian journalists and public intellectuals. The presence of experts from the West with similar ideas to those from Russia provided journalists with a pseudo-objective appearance, as though they were presenting how events were seen from abroad, which would help counter any possible critical opinions from domestic viewers. It should be particularly noted that the presence of foreign experts, who provide an additional legitimacy to the controversial, and at times conspiratorial statements, appears to be a distinctive characteristic of the official Russian discourse.

In general, in comparison to the first episode of the show, the report and discussion in the programme broadcast on 11 September were mostly aimed at explaining the global repercussions of the case and left the narrative of “the war against the Church” as a secondary issue. This conceptual difference was even more evident in the third episode of the show, broadcast on 16 October, which was devoted to the origins of the performance. The band’s closest supporters were accused of having profited financially from the international campaign around Pussy Riot. As Mamontov contended, the organizers of the performance wanted to become rich and famous by undermining Russia’s position on the international arena. Pussy Riot supporters within the country were depicted as greedy, two-faced “liberals” who worked in close cooperation with the geopolitical enemies of Russia in Washington.³⁵⁶ The whole controversy was depicted as a new form of “information warfare” against Russia, which widely utilized the Internet and non-government organizations within the country. This conspiratorial narrative was mostly aimed at depicting Pussy Riot as part of a wider group of

³⁵⁴ “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory-2,” Youtube video, 01:20:19, televised by *Rossiiia-1*, September 11, 2012, posted by “Mikhail Leont’ev,” September 11, 2012, <http://youtu.be/NrqpBuItPB0>.

³⁵⁵ Paul Craig Roberts, “Pussy Riot, The Unfortunate Dupes of Amerikan Hegemony,” *Paul Craig Roberts’ official website*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.paulcraigroberts.org/2012/08/22/pussy-riot-the-unfortunate-dupes-amerikan-hegemony-paul-craig-roberts/>.

³⁵⁶ “Spetsial’nyi correspondent: Provokatory-3,” Youtube video, 01:15:09, televised by *Rossiiia-1*, October 16, 2012, posted by “Mikhail Leont’ev,” October 16, 2012, <http://youtu.be/K4ryu-MHs6s>.

Russian opposition. Particular stress was placed on the opposition's and supporters' cooperation with the West.

At the same time, the perception of the Church shifted from being the object of the attack to being a peacemaker able to mediate conflicts between social groups in Russia; in turn, these groups were represented as having been set against each other by the Pussy Riot performance. An episode concerning two young people who tried to set a church on fire but repented was evoked to demonstrate that the Orthodox Church was capable of providing reconciliation.³⁵⁷ This significantly different image from that of the persecuted church at the beginning of the campaign served to neutralize the criticism of the Church's complicity in the guilty verdict against Pussy Riot.³⁵⁸

The Pussy Riot case demonstrates the manner in which conspiracy theories are used to promote national cohesion in Putin's Russia. The debates on the state-aligned television channels concerning national identity and framed within anti-Western conspiracy narratives systematically reflected the political challenges, which the Kremlin faced, and were aimed at boosting public support for its actions. The vagueness of the nation-building agenda allowed the authorities to interpret the criticism of the regime as an ultimate threat to the nation thus connecting together the two seemingly unrelated issues. The notion of the conspiracy of "the West" and, in particular, the alleged American aspiration to undermine Putin's regime, further reinforced the Kremlin's argument of the threat, which Pussy Riot reportedly presents for statehood.

The Church played a supporting role by promoting Orthodoxy as the key element of Russia's national identity. Being actively involved in the presidential campaign to mobilize people in Putin's support, Patriarch Kirill and his aides had employed conspiratorial language even prior to the eruption of the Pussy Riot controversy. Working hand-in-hand with the orchestrators of Putin's electoral campaign in 2012, representatives of the Church started to utilize a discursive division of the nation. They represented Russian society as divided between the anti-religious, anti-state, pro-Western minority and the vast and loyal majority of Russians who professed Orthodoxy and supported the authorities.

Adapting Laclau's idea of demands as the basis of populism, the need to protect Orthodoxy from the criticism at the first stage of the Pussy Riot case could be considered as the core demand of the Church and political authorities, used to downplay the scandals

³⁵⁷ "Spetsial'nyi correspondent: Provokatory-3."

³⁵⁸ An attempt to relocate responsibility for the guilty verdict was made by prominent clerics almost immediately after the verdict had been announced. See, for example, "o. Tikhon (Shevkunov) o prigovore na 'Dozhde'," Youtube video, 02:35, televised by *Dozhd*, August 17, 2012, posted by "hramtroicy," August 26, 2012, <http://youtu.be/jCGaoztcVj4>.

around the Patriarch.³⁵⁹ Anti-Western conspiracy theories about the “information war” against the Church played a pivotal role in the combined effort of the Church and the authorities to bring together the fragmented groups of Russian society to support the Church and to undermine the legitimacy of its critics. However, during the final stages of the court proceedings, the Orthodox aspect of the campaign faded away, emphasis instead falling on the political importance of the story and its conspiratorial origins located abroad. The narrative of Orthodoxy under threat was replaced by attempts of public intellectuals and politicians to justify the policy of the Kremlin against the opposition, which was depicted as dangerous and alien to the country. Hence, the artificially-created majority of the “Orthodox people,” represented as the core of the Russian nation, once again became a crude tool for achieving political goals in the hands of the Russian political establishment, in an operation that did not include any practical measures towards facilitating a national cohesion.

Conclusion

Attempts to construct a new Russian national identity based on the topical political interests of the elites in the 2000s had a lot in common with the El'tsin government's similar efforts. In the 1990s, the issue of national identity often served as an instrument with which to lobby political and economic interests and to protect the legitimacy of political actors.³⁶⁰ With some success, Putin's government also adopted this strategy to mobilize Russian citizens and ensure support of its actions.

The analysis of Surkov's concept of Russia as a sovereign democracy provides insight into how the political elites in Putin's Russia operate with the nation-building agenda in order to solve specific political problems. In the context of the Kremlin's ambiguous nation-building policies, Surkov formulated a notion of a single community of “sovereign Russians.” Incorporating elements of imperial and truly civic models of national identity, the notion was supported by appeal to diverse groups of Russian society simultaneously. Surkov's intervention in the debates on Russian identity was triggered by a fear that Putin's government could lose control over the country; the vagueness of the term “sovereignty” provided Surkov and other politicians and pro-Kremlin intellectuals with leeway to constantly redefine the nation-building agenda and the nation's potential “Others” in accordance with prevailing political goals.

Surkov's reassessment of Russia's relations with the West also had an important impact in the public sphere on the conceptualization of Russian identity and the further

³⁵⁹ Laclau, “Populism,” 37.

³⁶⁰ Vera Tolz, “Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 6 (1998): 1017.

dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy allegations. The depiction of the West as a competitor, rather than as an enemy, has made criticism of the West—when framed within the conspiratorial narrative—a legitimate part of official political and media discourse. The language of economic competition described Russia as a wealthy world supplier of natural resources, which helped articulate the notion of Russian greatness in economic terms. This argument provided a new framework for fostering patriotic attitudes among Russians and, at the same time, helped to turn the anti-Western conspiratorial notions into a debate about the economic interests of foreign companies and the West’s alleged rapacious hankering after Russian resources.

In this context, anti-Western conspiracy theories became a key instrument for boosting Russia’s national cohesion. The notion of the “conspiring West,” which competed with Russia for economic wealth and political power in the world, further helped set the boundaries of national identity. In the 2000s, Kremlin officials, as well as pro-government intellectuals, spent a great deal of time shaping the image of the US as Russia’s major conspiring rival. Moreover, leading politicians themselves took part in disseminating conspiratorial ideas among the public by means of the controlled media. A particular focus on the US as Russia’s ultimate rival in the competition for dominance in global politics has become central in the construction of the image of the Other, which is at the same time so important an element in defining “the people.”

A campaign to bring together a highly diverse and fragmented population in a bid to achieve national unity emerged as a measure deployed to prevent the possibility of a colour revolution during the Russian electoral cycle— 2007-2008. In these circumstances, the Kremlin has been trying to realise the national unity of the highly fragmented groups of Russian society by boosting political mobilization in support of the political establishment. A sense of belonging to a national community of Russians has been fostered by a constant reiteration of who Russia’s enemies are both within and outside the country.

During the subsequent electoral cycle—2011-2012—nation-building strategies were deployed in pursuit of the same goals and they repeated the main narratives of anti-Western conspiratorial discourse of the earlier period. However, the unexpected wave of civic activism significantly radicalized the Kremlin-sponsored debates on Russian national identity, that is to say, these debates became directly linked to the goal of legitimizing Putin’s victory. The controversy about the Pussy Riot performance became a focal point of the debates about Russian identity, highlighting with particular clarity how instrumental the shifts in defining this identity are. Conspiracy theories about Pussy Riot’s purported threat to Russian identity were used to connect the band’s supporters with those protesting against electoral frauds, representing them both to be a minority. At the same time, the state-aligned media depicted

diverse participants attending rallies in support of the Church as the Orthodox majority of “the people,” who were ready to defend their faith and their statehood.³⁶¹

The Pussy Riot trial seems to have had a significant impact on the model of national identity that the Kremlin started to promote during Putin’s third term. The campaign against the members of the band included several ideological markers with which the authorities could define the majority of “genuine” Russians and the minority of conspiring enemies. Thus, the representation of Pussy Riot as sexual perverts working in cahoots with homosexuals, as militant atheists and as blatant antagonists to Putin, for instance, contributed to the launch of a homophobic campaign in 2013. This was actively supported by the state media and reached a peak in the introduction of a law prohibiting the promotion of “non-traditional forms” of sexuality among young people.³⁶² This campaign, amid other political measures, highlighted a turn to a Kremlin-sponsored celebration of the so-called “traditional values” (*traditsionnye tsennosti*) of the Russian people, which were, allegedly, inherited from their ancestors.³⁶³ Newly introduced federal laws as well as numerous television programmes, are part of this drift towards radical conservatism, aimed at giving the impression that Russia is under siege by enemies. An opinion poll carried out in November 2013 by the Levada Centre showed that 78 per cent of Russians believed that Russia had enemies.³⁶⁴ This feeling of a society besieged by enemies, an image actively supported by the state-aligned media, is above all generated through conspiracy theories. Hence, despite their long-term destabilizing potential, at the beginning of Putin’s third presidential term, conspiracy theories turned into a major instrument of achieving national cohesion.

³⁶¹ A report by famous Russian journalist Oleg Kashin gives a particularly revealing picture of the diversity of the audience at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour at the rally on 22 April 2012. See Oleg Kashin, “Pravoslavnye sovetskie liudi,” *Kommersant*, April 23, 2012, <http://kommersant.ru/doc-rss/1922059>.

³⁶² For example, at the peak of the campaign against LGBT rights during Putin’s third term, Mamontov released another documentary with a distinct conspiratorial narrative, which described Russian society as besieged by homosexuals. See, “Spetsial’nyi korrespondent: Litsedei,” *Rossia-1*, November 12, 2013, http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/3957/episode_id/699361/video_id/699361/viewtype/picture.

³⁶³ Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” December 12, 2012 <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/17118>.

³⁶⁴ “Rossiiane o vragakh,” the Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on 15-18 November 2013, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/26-11-2013/rossiyane-o-vragakh>.

Chapter 4. The Image of the Enemy: Conspiracy Narratives in Post-Soviet Electoral Campaigns

Introduction

In democratic theory, elections are an essential factor in societal development if political stability and a peaceful renewal of elites is to be guaranteed; furthermore, they provide citizens with the tools to change the ways in which political, economic and social policies are carried out. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened the way to free and fair elections in post-Soviet countries; this had a significant impact on their political development. Free elections also posed new challenges for the citizens of these countries and even more so for their political elites, who, in each country, reacted to them in a different way. Michael McFaul and Nikolaï Petrov noted that during the 1990s, the Russian political elites managed to reduce the uncertainties associated with competitive elections and learned how to use particular political tools to preserve leading positions, simultaneously making an effort to sustain the public image of the country as a democratic state.³⁶⁵

The electoral period 2007-2008 was particularly crucial for the ruling elites of Russia. The parliamentary and presidential elections, which were to take place in December 2007 and March 2008 respectively, were supposed to ensure Putin's political future after the expiration of his term in the Kremlin: consequently these elections were vital for the country's political establishment. The pre-election period also coincided with turbulent changes in the CIS countries, where former political elites lost their positions as a result of either electoral defeat or post-electoral opposition campaigns. Alleging that these changes were orchestrated by Washington, Russian political elites articulated the idea of a "Western plot" to undermine Russian stability and sovereignty specifically through elections. This concept became central in the 2007 parliamentary election campaign and the 2011-2012 electoral campaigns.

In general, the electoral periods in post-Soviet Russia have become a time of a revitalization of mythmaking. In his study of post-Soviet elections, Andrew Wilson demonstrates the pivotal role played by political technologies in gaining a desired election result and he describes the various methods whereby public opinion is manipulated.³⁶⁶ Surprisingly, Wilson underestimates the crucial role played by conspiracy mythmaking in what he describes as Putin's "virtual politics." The regular application of anti-Western conspiracy

³⁶⁵ Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov. *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), 25.

³⁶⁶ Wilson, *Virtual Politics*. Especially, chapters 5, 8 and 9.

theories in electoral campaigning served as a powerful tool to mobilize the public to support the regime.

This chapter focuses on the practice of utilizing anti-Western conspiracy narratives in electoral campaigns. Such narratives were aimed at discursively dividing society into two camps: the pro-Putin Russian “majority” versus the “unrepresentative” minority of political opponents to Putin, who were depicted as the pro-Western “Other.” It argues that anti-Western conspiracy theories, due to their high mobilizing potential, occupy a prominent place in the Kremlin’s electoral strategies. Particular attention is devoted to the role played by public intellectuals in the elaboration of a conceptual framework that enabled conspiracy theories to be used by competing candidates; consideration is also paid to the ways in which these intellectual constructs relate to the official political discourse of the Kremlin.

4.1. The 2007-2008 Election Period: Combating the “Colour Revolution” in Russia

As argued in the previous chapter, the regime changes in the CIS countries in the mid-2000s were perceived with great concern in Moscow. They disrupted existing relations among political elites of the former Soviet countries and, in the eyes of the Kremlin leaders, posed a serious challenge to the smooth transfer of power during the 2007-2008 Russian electoral cycle.

The transition of power to a carefully chosen successor and the maintenance of Putin as a central element of the political system became the main goals of the pre-electoral period.³⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the failure to elect a pro-Russian candidate in the Ukrainian presidential elections, pro-Kremlin spin doctors and politicians spent a great deal of time and resources establishing an image of Putin as the only viable national leader. Through book publishing and aggressive media campaigns they depicted Putin as the keystone of Russia’s national independence and economic stability.

The parliamentary elections, which took place on 2 December 2007, in effect assumed the form of a referendum in support of Putin’s policies and the United Russia Party, in which he took up the position of chairman. In order to boost support for Putin, the pro-Kremlin pre-election campaign paid particular attention to the alleged subversive actions of the opposition, represented by United Russia’s political opponents and international observers. A ferocious media campaign as well as changes to the state legislation marginalized the

³⁶⁷ Boris Furman, “Problema 2008: Obshchee i osobennoe v protsessakh perekhoda postsovetskikh gosudarstv,” (Public lecture at Polit.ru, Moscow, Russia, October 19, 2007), <http://polit.ru/article/2007/10/19/furman/>.

opposition with the aim of ensuring maximum votes for the pro-Putin party and securing its political domination in the country.

As anti-Western conspiracy theories had been identified earlier as a useful public mobilisation tool, their development had already been a priority for pro-Kremlin intellectuals for several years. By the beginning of the electoral season in 2007, leaders of United Russia had at their disposal both a set of conspiratorial ideas with which to undermine the positions of their opponents and instruments with which to promote these ideas among the majority of the Russian population.

Putin as a National Leader

After completing two presidential terms, Putin continued to hold a leading position on the political scene of post-Soviet Russia. A poll conducted by the Levada Centre in July 2007 revealed that 52 per cent of respondents would support Putin in 2012 if he ran for another presidential term.³⁶⁸ This support, in part achieved through manipulative media coverage, was systematically highlighted during the 2007-2008 electoral campaign, in which Putin was represented as the main defender of the Russian state.³⁶⁹ As Dugin claimed, among Putin's biggest achievements in the 2000s were the restoration of country's territorial integrity and the prevention of Russia's collapse as well as the newly gained reputation of Russia as a world power "which everybody else takes into account."³⁷⁰

Pro-Kremlin spin-doctors further attempted to attach global significance to Putin by stressing his importance to resistance to US hegemony in the world. Shortly before the elections, Pavlovskii had contended that the Russian global mission was not the "return to former greatness," but a successful containment of the US, which only Putin was able to achieve.³⁷¹ Consequently, Putin was gradually obtaining exceptional features and becoming a unique political figure in post-Soviet Russia. Putin's figure was expected, among other things, to help unite various social and ethnic groups of Russian society into one nation.

At its meeting in May 2007, drawing upon public support for Putin, the United Russia Party voted in favour of the so-called *Plan Putina* (*Putin's plan*), a set of vague ideas about

³⁶⁸ According to the opinion poll "Rossiiane o Putine," conducted among 1600 respondents on 13-16 July, 2007, <http://www.levada.ru/07-08-2007/rossiyane-o-putine>.

³⁶⁹ Anna Baraulina, "Kul't distantsionnogo upravleniia," *Newsweek*, no.6, 2006, 24-27. For further discussion of the television manipulation in the 2000s see Stephen Hutchings and Natalya Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 2009), 29-56.

³⁷⁰ Aleksandr Dugin, "O monarkhii, Putine i Zubkove," *Profil*, no. 544, 2007, http://www.profile.ru/items_24124.

³⁷¹ Gleb Pavlovskii, "Rol' Putina i dal'she budet igrat' Putin," *Moskovskie novosti*, September 14, 2007, <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/160260828>.

socio-economic and political projects scheduled for realization in the years following the 2007-2008 elections.³⁷² This initiative was mainly used to demonstrate the continuity of the regime's policies and emphasize the stability in Russia's domestic policies, perceived as one of Putin's main achievements. Apart from socio-economic projects, the most important part of the plan was devoted to "the strengthening of Russian sovereignty," defined as Russia's right to independently determine the direction of its political development. The leaders of United Russia stressed in particular the uniqueness of "Russian civilization" and emphasized Russia's independence from "the West." One of the party leaders, Andrei Vorob'ev, stated that *Putin's plan* did not signal an end to Russian commitment to democracy; however, "democracy in Russia is the power of the *Russian people*" [emphasis added – I.Y.]. Thus, Vorob'ev implicitly referred to the wave of "colour revolutions" now depicted as organized by Washington in order to impose a peculiarly "Western" type of democracy alien to a local political tradition.³⁷³ In this context, the figure of Putin was used to demonstrate the will of "the people" to democratically choose the country's leader against the will of the "Other," which was associated with the United States.

While high-ranking politicians only vaguely hinted at an alleged threat of external invasion, pro-Putin intellectuals had more opportunities to express conspiratorial ideas in public. For instance, Dugin's rather Manichean interpretation of *Putin's plan* reduced it to the traditional opposition of Russia against "the West" and the latter's purported attempts to destroy Russia in the 1990s with the help of corrupt and treacherous domestic elites:

Putin's personal achievement was the fact that he did not listen to political elites, who had an anti-national orientation. . . . He did not listen to various foundations that led him to the West, pushed him towards ultra-liberalism, towards Russophobia, towards his own suicide, [as well as the destruction of] his course, the country, the nation. He did not listen to these elites, but listened to the voice of history, the voice of the people, and the voice of geopolitics.³⁷⁴

This interpretation of *Putin's plan* reflected the main conspiratorial notions widely used in the 2007-2008 campaign: a general threat to the political order, which was coming from "the West." The threat was embodied in the "treacherous" activities of NGOs and the irresponsible actions of political elites of the 1990s. These elites bore the main responsibility

³⁷² Dmitrii Orlov, "Plan Putina," *RIA Novosti*, May 21, 2007, <http://ria.ru/authors/20070521/65794202.html>.

³⁷³ "Andrei Vorob'ev: Plan kampanii," *Mediakratiia*, July 23, 2007, http://www.mediakratiia.ru/owa/mc/mc_project_news.html?a_id=17709.

³⁷⁴ Aleksandr Dugin, "Problema preemstvennosti," *Kreml.org*, August 13, 2007, <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/157501069>.

for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic disorder. *Putin's plan* did not contain any real political measures, but, through actions which were largely performative, it served to divide society into two groups and identify the subversive minority within Russia. These original descriptions of the threat were vague but later, high-ranking politicians elaborated on them.

On 2 October 2007, at the United Russia Party congress Putin became the official leader of the party, which allowed other senior officials in the party to claim that the parliamentary elections were in effect a referendum on Putin's policies.³⁷⁵ Various high-ranking supporters of Putin equated him with the entire Russian state, while his figure was used to discursively define the boundaries of the Russian political-national community. This division of the social was especially evident in an article in *Rossiiskaia gazeta* by Boris Gryzlov, United Russia's chairman. Gryzlov claimed that without Putin Russia would inevitably be at risk of mass plunder: "Contemporary Russia is Putin. 'Russia without Putin' is a Russia without governance, a Russia without will. It is a Russia which could be dismembered and which could be used in whatever way. Russia up for grabs (*Rossia kak dobycha*)."³⁷⁶

Gryzlov's text represented a mixture of alarmist ideas about a permanent threat from internal and external enemies with assurances of the ability of the political establishment to resist any sort of intrusion into domestic politics. It appealed to negative public attitudes about NATO, which was seen as Russia's rival and a potential menace from the West.³⁷⁷ At the same time, Gryzlov mentioned the perpetual threat of the "colour revolutions" and linked this to activities of Russian NGOs. At the same time, Russia was presented as a large, "sovereign" community of Russian citizens led by Putin, whose actions were aimed at ensuring the prosperity and greatness of the state and its people. "It is time to remind ourselves: we are Russia. The scenario in which 'public' organizations operating in the country are pumped with money to destabilise the situation, will not take place here. The right of Russian citizens to shape their country's destiny is not for sale."³⁷⁸

The positioning of the then-president at the head of the party also served to create the impression that Russia, as a whole, supported Putin and United Russia accordingly. Those who did not support Putin or held different political views were either non-patriots or

³⁷⁵ Viacheslav Volodin, "Vybory prevraschajutsia v referendum o doverii kursu prezidenta" (speech, All-Russian conference "Plan Putina – Strategii Rossii," Moscow, Russia, October 10, 2007), <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/162522734>.

³⁷⁶ Boris Gryzlov, "Putin ostaetsia liderom Rossii," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 17, 2007, <http://www.rg.ru/2007/10/17/grizlov.html>.

³⁷⁷ "Otnoshenie rossiian k NATO," the Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on March 20-23, 2009, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009040104.html>.

³⁷⁸ Boris Gryzlov, "Putin ostaetsia liderom Rossii."

outright enemies, striving to destroy the country from within. Putin, as the leader of the party, not only represented “Russia,” but his policies and actions were supposed to reflect the aspirations of ordinary citizens. Thus, he started to be depicted as the spokesperson of the “people,” set against a minority of political opponents who, conversely, represented “the West.” This image was further maintained through a media campaign which involved ordinary people. The Kremlin-aligned media described the people as concerned with Putin’s political future and asking the president to stay in a leading position.³⁷⁹

Another initiative was to attract voters with no specific political sympathies by the campaign entitled *V podderzku Putina* (*In Putin’s support*). Its initiators claimed that 70 per cent of the Russian population could be mobilised to support Putin and most Russians decided to join forces “helping Putin to work for the benefit of the Russian people.”³⁸⁰ In the speeches of the campaign’s activists, Putin stood in opposition to disloyal politicians, who had betrayed the country after the demise of the Soviet Union. This standoff was reflected in the concept of the *tumultuous ’90s* (*likhie devianostye*), the time of economic and political chaos, which could only have happened with the connivance of irresponsible politicians who cooperated with “the West” and ultimately took the Russian people to the edge of starvation. In the words of spin doctors, intellectuals and journalists, Putin’s policies were aimed solely at ensuring stable lives for ordinary people, unlike in the 1990s, and so this propaganda transformed Putin into the country’s saviour and “the people’s leader.”

During the first rally of the *V Podderzku Putina* campaign, Vladimir Voronin, a representative of a Cossack movement, carefully stressing his distance from any of the political parties, expressed concerns about the possible return of the instability of the 1990s:

Our logic – the logic of non-partisans and people detached from power – is simple: on 2 December 2007, we do not want to wake up in a different country, where governments change like in a film. . . . We do not want a power vacuum like in the 1990s. We want the preservation of stability and continuity of government, and we can only see Putin as its guarantor.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ See, for example, the speech of the weaver from Ivanovo, Elena Lapshina, at the congress of the United Russia Party on October 1, 2007, when she suggested that the delegates think about how to keep Putin as the leader of Russia after the elections. See, Iuriĭ Vasil’ev, “Vot stoit ona pered nami,” *Ogonëk*, no. 41, 2007, <http://www.ogoniok.com/5017/14/>.

³⁸⁰ Armina Bagdasarian, “S tverskoĭ strast’iu,” *The New Times*, no.41, November 19, 2007, <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/7309/>.

³⁸¹ Vladimir Emel’ianenko, “U nas est’ vybor,” *Profil’*, no. 551, November 19, 2007, http://www.profile.ru/items_24677.

The reference to the recent traumatic experience of the 1990s became a pivotal element of the electoral rhetoric in the 2007-2008 campaign. Every spokesperson attempted to stress that a stable future was not yet guaranteed, meaning that the return of instability was still possible. Hence, the division of the social was further drawn: between “the people,” who wanted stability and relative prosperity, which had been provided in the last eight years by Putin, and the “Other,” a troublesome minority striving to return to power and create chaos.

When accepting the leadership of the party, Putin emphasized that, in the last century, “our Motherland passed through a number of convulsions,” such as economic “shock therapy,” territorial collapse and moral decay. By contrast, he argued that in the 2000s his government had provided ordinary Russians with economic stability, agricultural successes and improved social support.³⁸² This demonization of the 1990s not only reminded Russian citizens about recent traumatic experiences, but it also served to define more clearly the main opponents of Putin and United Russia, now commonly called “Putin’s enemies” (*vragi Putina*). In the words of pro-Putin politicians and intellectuals during the campaign, the ultimate goal of these people and their organizations, backed by “the West,” was to restore a regime interested solely in national plunder and disintegration.

“*Putin’s Enemies*”

In 2006-2007, pro-Putin intellectuals and spin doctors further elaborated narratives about how to define the enemies of Russia and Putin. By the time of the elections, the *Evropa* publishing house, which was closely affiliated with the presidential administration through its editor-in-chief, Pavlovskii, published two books which described a “subversive Other” of Putin’s Russia. One was focused on individuals, another on organizations.

The first of these publications had an explicit title, *Vragi Putina* (*Putin’s enemies*). Published in November 2007, at the peak of the electoral campaign, it included stories about opposition politicians and oligarchs, who had either left Russia to avoid arrest or, as Khodorkovskii, had been convicted.³⁸³ The second book was titled *Fake-struktury. Prizraki rossiiskoi politiki* (*Fake-Structures: The Shadows of Russian Politics*). This focused on NGOs and various organizations in opposition to the Kremlin. In the author’s opinion, the declared goals and principles of these organizations were deceitful; these organizations solely strove to undermine Russia through cooperation with American and European funding bodies.³⁸⁴ These

³⁸² Vladimir Putin, “Vstupitel’noe slovo na s’ezde partii ‘Edinaia Rossiia’” (address, All-Russian Political Party “Edinaia Rossiia” party congress, Moscow, Russia, October 2, 2007), <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/161821562>.

³⁸³ Pavel Danilin, Natal’ia Kryshchal’ and Dmitrii Poliakov, *Vragi Putina* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007).

³⁸⁴ Maksim Grigor’ev, *Fake-struktury. Prizraki rossiiskoi politiki* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007).

publications were widely advertised by the pro-Kremlin media as newsworthy events. The media featured a number of interviews with their authors, which allowed them further to elaborate their arguments.³⁸⁵

The overarching narrative of these publications was the idea of Putin and Russia being equivalent terms. Therefore, any criticism of Putin and the existing political system could be interpreted as a hostile stance against the nation. In one of the interviews given in this period, Pavlovskii noted that the term “enemy” helped stress the difference of political views of Putin’s opponents. Thus, the employment of that term in the debates was justified because it clarified who the allies of the Kremlin were, and who the opponents, on the eve of the elections.³⁸⁶

Vitalii Ivanov, deputy head of the Centre for Political Conjuncture (*Tsentr Politicheskoi Kon’iunktury*) and another active pro-Kremlin spin doctor, wrote in the preface to *Vragi Putina*:

Putin’s regime carries out policies which respond to the aspirations of the nation, the policies which restore Russian power, consolidate the state, support domestic order, which correspond to our political traditions and strengthen patriotism. . . . It is not important why a person rejects Putin’s regime and becomes its enemy. It is important that, in the current situation, this person automatically becomes an enemy of the state and the nation, an enemy of our Motherland.³⁸⁷

The central idea of *Vragi Putina* was to compare Putin to his “political enemies” and demonstrate how “immoral” these people were in comparison to the then president. In order to do that, the authors ascribed a cardinal sin to each of the “Putin’s purported enemies.” Wrath was allegedly a characteristic of Boris Berezovskii, which pushed him into battle with Putin over returning control over the country to the people. Mikhail Kas’ianov, Russian prime minister from 2000 to 2004, was accused of greed, since he allegedly preferred a luxurious lifestyle and foreign trips to dealing with ordinary Russians. Mikhail Khodorkovskii was defeated because of his envy of Putin, as, in the words of the authors, he planned to dismantle Russia, destroy most of the population and give up all nuclear weapons to the Americans.³⁸⁸

Maksim Grigor’ev’s *Fake-struktury* developed the idea of Russian NGOs as a tool of foreign-government subversion, which contributed to the destruction of Russia’s unique

³⁸⁵ Iuliia Malysheva, “Sem’ vragov Putina,” *Vzgliad*, November 15, 2007, <http://vz.ru/politics/2007/11/15/124803.html>.

³⁸⁶ Gleb Pavlovskii, interview by Evgeniia Al’bats, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, November 25, 2007, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/albac/56546/>.

³⁸⁷ Danilin et al. *Vragi Putina*, 6.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-54, 125, 183-184.

political culture and society.³⁸⁹ In Grigor'ev's opinion, Khodorkovskii's *Open Russia*, as well as other NGOs, tended to monopolize the very notion of "Russian civil society" and criticized Putin from the position of civil rights' activists. In addition to Khodorkovskii, Grigor'ev criticized the coalition *Drugaiia Rossiia (the Other Russia)*, formed by various Russian opposition activists critical of the Kremlin. The author particularly stressed the title of the coalition – the *Other Russia* - and elaborated on how alien Putin's opponents were in relation to Russian society, which the then president represented.³⁹⁰

The creation of an "Other" via the merging of images of former oligarchs with NGOs, was used as yet another discursive tactic to separate the main critics of Putin's policies from "the people." This conceptualization was reinforced by stressing the critics' affiliation with the West. At a time when most people were struggling financially, rich business people who had made their fortunes during the highly unpopular reforms in the 1990s, were an easy target for channelling public resentment. The critique focused on the alleged alienation of these people from their country and their affinity to financial interests abroad. The parliamentary elections of 2007 were promoted as a chance for Russian people to decide the future of the country, in contrast to the 1990s, when decision-making was allegedly controlled by the West.³⁹¹

International Observers as "Fake Structures"

The concept of "fake structures," as coined by Grigor'ev, was also applied to international observers of the parliamentary and presidential elections. International monitoring of elections was considered important by the Russian political establishment as it reinforced the regime's legitimacy. However, international observers who acted outside of the Kremlin's control were also a source of concern for the regime. In late October 2007, the conflict between the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (CEC) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reached its peak when the OSCE criticized the Russian government for not providing visas to observers on time. Finally, the OSCE received a letter of invitation from the CEC proposing a reduction in the number of international observers, which prompted the OSCE to refuse to participate in the monitoring of the 2007-2008 elections.³⁹² In response, pro-Kremlin reporters and intellectuals

³⁸⁹ The role of NGOs in Russian conspiracy discourse will be discussed in more details in chapter 5.

³⁹⁰ Grigor'ev. *Fake struktury*.

http://www.modernlib.ru/books/maksim_grigorev/fake__strukturi_prizraki_rossiyskoy_politiki/read_1/.

³⁹¹ Pavel Danilin, Natal'ia Kryshchal' and Dmitrii Poliakov, interview by Andrei Dobrov, *Russkaia Sluzhba Novostei*, November 15, 2007, <http://www.kreml.org/interview/165638650>.

³⁹² "OBSE i Belyi dom razocharovany zhelaniem Rossii ogranichit' chislo nabludatelei na vyborakh," *Newsru.com*, October 31, 2007, <http://www.newsru.com/world/31oct2007/osce.html#1>.

defined the OSCE as the “transmitter of Washington’s orders,” that is, acting in accordance with instruction from the US government and preparing reports about the elections well before the elections had actually began.³⁹³

Representing international observers in this way contributed to the creation of a sense of danger in relation to international monitoring organizations, which allegedly wanted to delegitimize Russia’s parliamentary elections and thereby “undermine” Russian statehood. Grigor’ev himself claimed that the goal that had been set for the OSCE in Washington was to undermine the Putin regime and make it dependent on foreign institutions. Therefore, he demanded a complete ban on the presence of international observers at the elections.³⁹⁴ First, the usage of conspiracy ideas in this particular case allowed legitimacy to be added to current policies of the Russian government concerning the elections. Second, conspiracy theories about the alleged control of international observers from the US justified their absence.

According to pro-Kremlin speakers, the observers were tasked with delegitimizing Putin, since his position would be even stronger after the parliamentary elections. Stressing the international observers’ lack of objectivity, a Duma deputy and director of the Institute of the CIS countries, Konstantin Zatulin, noted that “the West” was involved in various intrigues against Putin and Russia because his political course was working against its interests:

When elections take place in Ukraine and yield the desired “orange” outcome, even if these elections are absolutely illegitimate and held with violations, they are still presented as “an advancement towards democracy.” . . . However, when elections take place in Russia, confirming [public support for] the policy which the West does not like since it does not put our state under the command of the West (ne predstavliaet nashe gosudarstvo v rasporiazhenie Zapada), as was the case in the 1990s, we instantly receive complaints about every possible and impossible violations.³⁹⁵

These accusations of double standards on the part of international observers and their alleged affiliation with the United States coincided with the intensified activities of US diplomacy in post-Soviet countries. For instance, President Bush actively supported the political changes in the CIS countries, stating that we live “in historic times when freedom is

³⁹³ Igor’ Borisov, “Vashingtonskii retransliator,” *Kreml.org*, December 3, 2007, <http://www.kreml.org/other/167197235>.

³⁹⁴ Maksim Grigor’ev, “Prisutstvie nabludatelei na etikh vyborah ne tol’ko ne nuzhno, no i opasno.” (address, Moscow, Russia, November 2, 2007), <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/164512584>.

³⁹⁵ Konstantin Zatulin, “Reaktsiia nabludatelei ot PASE byla izvestna zaranee,” *Kreml.org*, December 4, 2007, <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/167281887>.

advancing, from the Black Sea to the Caspian, and to the Persian Gulf and beyond.”³⁹⁶ References to US involvement in politics in the post-Soviet space to the detriment of Russia’s interests, in addition to a massive propaganda campaign promoting the notion of “sovereign democracy,” contributed to the shaping of the image of Russia as a “besieged fortress.” In this context, the regime expected that the absence of international observers would have no impact on public perception of the legitimacy of the elections. At the same time, the pro-Kremlin media provided accounts from alternative international observers (from Serbia and CIS states), who confirmed that the elections were carried out according to democratic standards.³⁹⁷

In this context, anti-Western conspiracy theories worked as a tool to delegitimize foreign observers. The possibility of questioning the legitimacy of elections in December 2007 was preempted by anti-Western conspiracy theories spread on the eve of elections. Speculation about the biased observers of the OSCE provided an argument for why the Russian public should ignore external criticism of the results. At the same time, possible criticism of the Kremlin’s policies in the 2000s was counterbalanced by references to the dramatic reforms in the 1990s and their possible return were United Russia to lose the elections. The prospect of this scenario, framed within conspiracy narratives, lays at the heart of Putin’s speeches on the eve of elections.

The Leader Defines the Enemy: Putin’s Public Speeches on the Eve of the Parliamentary Elections

A mass rally of Putin’s supporters, which took place at the *Luzhniki* stadium on 21 November 2007, was a central point of the campaign to establish Putin as the irreplaceable Russian national leader and strengthen the position of United Russia. Putin’s active engagement during the last stage of the campaign had an important meaning for the campaign. The narratives, which were developed by various pro-Kremlin speakers and disseminated by the state-aligned media, were reflected in Putin’s speeches and thus received formal approval from the political leader and a consequent legitimization in public discourse. The main goal of the speeches was to ensure that the popularity of opposition leaders and parties, which could potentially challenge United Russia’s predominance, was diminished. Putin participated in the rally and emphasised that his presence was motivated by concern about the future of Russia,

³⁹⁶ George W. Bush, “President Bush’ Speech in Tbilisi,” *BBC News*, May 10, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4534267.stm>.

³⁹⁷ “Nabludateli SNG nazvali vybory v Dumu svobodnymi i prozrachnymi,” *Izvestia*, December 3, 2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/413793>.

which could be successful only because of United Russia's policies, which Putin described as "non-populist."

The proclaimed efficiency of Putin and United Russia's collaboration was juxtaposed to the undermining of Russia carried out by its rivals. At least half of the speech on 21 November was devoted to striking descriptions of the political elites who had ruled the country in the 1990s, robbing the people. It also included references to foreign embassies and NGOs which had allegedly worked to split society, as well as to those irresponsible politicians who had supposedly contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin's rhetoric at the rally reflected the conspiratorial themes that had been developed by pro-Kremlin spin doctors in the previous years. Thus, pointing at the unreliable elites who had ruled the country in previous years, Putin maintained:

Those who confront us do not want our plan to be realized, because they have completely different aims and designs for Russia. They need a weak and sick state. In order to engage in underhand dealings behind society's back (*za ego spinoi obdelyvat' svoi delishki*), in order to get dividends (*poluchat' kovrizhki*) at our expense, they need a disorganized and disoriented society, a divided society.³⁹⁸

This part of Putin's speech in fact repeated, at times word for word, the text of the above-mentioned book *Vragi Putina*. There its author Pavel Danilin claimed: "These particular persons are Vladimir Putin's real enemies. They are all united by hatred of the president who did not let them engage in their underhand dealings behind the scenes (*obdelyvat' svoi delishki*) at the expense of the entire society, the entire state."³⁹⁹ Since the book had been written and published before the rally, these phraseological parallels demonstrate a close relationship between Putin's speechwriters and the ideas elaborated by the pro-Kremlin spin doctors. Utilization of the conspiratorial notion of the behind-the-scenes activities of elites again worked for the establishment of Putin's image as a genuine "people's leader" who acted for the good of the nation.

Several parts of Putin's speech were particularly designed to explain that certain social groups posed a threat to the Russian people and Russian greatness. One of the crucial points was the labelling of political opponents as "jackals who beg for scraps at foreign embassies, foreign diplomatic missions, who count on foreign funds and governments, rather than the support of their own nation."⁴⁰⁰ This conspiratorial description served to separate the Russian

³⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na forume storonnikov Prezidenta Rossii," (Address, Moscow, Russia, November 21, 2007), <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/11/153636.shtml>.

³⁹⁹ Danilin et al. *Vragi Putina*, 10.

⁴⁰⁰ Putin, "Vystuplenie na forume storonnikov Prezidenta Rossii."

people, led by Putin, from unpatriotic politicians striving to return to power through parliamentary elections. This accusation was primarily directed at The Union of Right Forces (SPS, Soiuz Pravykh Sil), the liberal party which could potentially have challenged the domination of United Russia in the new parliament. The list of candidates from the SPS also included a number of well-known politicians who had worked in El'tsin's government.

At the beginning of the campaign, pro-Kremlin writers criticized the SPS for pretending to be responsible and honest with voters. For example, Danilin accused the SPS of lying to voters because, in his words, during the elections the SPS could only count on spin doctors to create the impression of a truly "national" party.⁴⁰¹ Two months later, these notions were reflected in Putin's statement:

None of these people have stepped back from the political stage. You can find their names among the candidates and funders of certain parties. They wish to have revenge; they want to return to power, to their spheres of influence. . . . [They want] gradually to restore an oligarchic regime based on corruption and lies. They lie even today. They will not do anything for anyone. . . . They will also take to the streets now (Vot seichas echshe na ulitsy vyidut). They took a bit [of knowledge] from Western specialists; [they] were trained in neighbouring republics, so, now [they] will arrange provocations here.⁴⁰²

Even without naming the party, Putin managed to identify the one political opponent able to compete with United Russia for votes. Had SPS enjoyed any credible success at the elections, it would have thrown into question the country's absolute support of United Russia and complicated the process of the power transfer to Putin's successor. In order to suppress the opponent, the Kremlin financially pressured SPS members, who had either to leave the party or stop funding it. At the same time, attempts by the party to take part in street protests allowed pro-Kremlin spin doctors to promote conspiracy theories about SPS participation in a colour revolution.⁴⁰³

On 29 November Putin warned Russian television viewers about a group of politicians who planned to return to the "years of indignity, dependency and collapse," contrary to the

⁴⁰¹ Pavel Danilin, "Partiia 'politicheskogo gerbalaifa'," *Vzgliad*, September 24, 2007, <http://vz.ru/columns/2007/9/24/111577.html>.

⁴⁰² Putin, "Vystuplenie na forume storonnikov Prezidenta Rossii."

⁴⁰³ Dar'ia Guseva, Mikhail Fishman, "Soiuz sil'nykh pravykh," *Russkii Newsweek*, no. 48, November 26 - December 2, 2007, 27-28.

wishes of the Russian people.⁴⁰⁴ Broadcast in a primetime news bulletin on Channel One a few days before the elections, this address to the nation was intended to mobilize the maximum number of voters and guarantee a high turnout, which would demonstrate the legitimacy of the parliament and the future president. Although a conspiratorial narrative did not occupy the main place in this address, it was presented; and yet again it discursively divided the country into the patriotic majority of the Russian people, led by Putin, and a minority of “pro-American liberals” and fugitive oligarchs who strove to enrich themselves at Russia’s expense.

The parliamentary elections of 2007 may be seen as a central episode in the political development of post-Soviet Russia, as they were harnessed to guarantee the transfer of power and the legitimacy of the political system. As Peter Duncan noted, uncertainty about the future created a sense of fear on the part of the elites in Russia, who could not rule out the worst-case scenario during the parliamentary elections.⁴⁰⁵ This fear was in part reflected in the proliferation of anti-Western conspiratorial theories, which claimed the existence of a subversive minority in the country who aimed to destroy the political and economic achievements of the 2000s.

After the United Russia success at the December 2007 elections, the political establishment significantly changed its overarching political narrative and replaced the idea of the threat of a “colour revolution” with that of modernization of the economy; this became the central trope of Medvedev’s presidential term. According to the journalists of *Russian Newsweek* at a meeting with civic activists in January 2008, Medvedev personally removed all references to the Western threat of “colour revolution” from his speech and focused more on the matter of the socio-economic prosperity of Russian people.⁴⁰⁶ This conceptual shift in Medvedev’s rhetoric suggested that anti-Western conspiracy notions were regarded by the political establishment as an efficient tool of popular mobilization, particularly during sensitive periods for the regime’s survival. The next electoral period of 2011-2012, although initially focused on the promotion of Putin’s return to the presidential office, again demonstrated that anti-Western conspiracy ideas were perceived to have potential as a means of delegitimizing political opponents and achieving desired political goals.

⁴⁰⁴ “Predvybornoe obrashchenie Putina,” YouTube video, 4:05, televised by *Channel One* on November 29, 2007, posted by “OlegKozyrev,” November 29, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mg59P6FM_4&feature=youtu.be.

⁴⁰⁵ Peter J.S. Duncan, “Russia, the West and the 2007-2008 Electoral Cycle: Did the Kremlin Really Fear a ‘Coloured Revolution?’” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 1 (2013): 20, doi: 10.1080/09668136.2012.698049.

⁴⁰⁶ Mikhail Fishman, Pavel Sedakov and Iuriĭ Alekseev, “Demisezonnyi kandidat,” *Russkii Newsweek*, no. 6, 2008, 17.

4.2. The 2011-2012 Election Period: Splitting Russia

At the beginning of the electoral campaign of 2011-2012, the main goal of the pro-Kremlin narrative was to justify the idea of Vladimir Putin's return to presidential office for a third time. The official announcement of this was made at the United Russia Party congress on 24 September 2011, when the then president, Medvedev, stepped back from running for a second presidential term himself. Named by the Russian media as a reshuffle (*rokirovka*), this swap caused disillusionment and provoked criticism in the independent media about Medvedev as a politician, thus undermining his public reputation. In the lead up to the elections, liberal journalists noted that the hardest part for Putin during the electoral campaign of 2011-2012 would be to explain to ordinary Russians the reasons for his return to the Kremlin and to make a case for Medvedev's decision not to seek re-election. These tasks first came up after the reshuffle in September and were not realized successfully during the campaign.⁴⁰⁷

The turning point of the campaign took place on November 20, 2011, at the Mixed Martial Arts Tournament, when Putin was booed by the crowd. Putin's press secretary, Dmitrii Peskov, and other high-ranking supporters tried to account for the crowd's reaction. Nevertheless, the effect of the incident, among other things, highlighted the problems Putin was having in getting wide public support. This caused a dramatic shift in the campaign strategy which started to focus on conspiratorial concepts, most of which had already been utilized in the previous electoral campaign.⁴⁰⁸

"The Voice From Nowhere"

Even as early as November 27, at the United Russia Party conference, Putin stated: "We know . . . that representatives of some foreign states are gathering those to whom they pay money, the so-called grant receivers, instructing them and promoting [them] to [conduct] specific 'work,' to influence the course of the electoral campaign in our country."⁴⁰⁹ In this way, Putin and other members of the Russian political establishment attempted to delegitimize the activities of NGOs on the eve of the elections and make the results of alternative polls and

⁴⁰⁷ Dmitrii Kamyshev, "Proekt 'Nu, pogodi!'," *Kommersant Vlast*, no. 15, April 18, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1621193>.

⁴⁰⁸ Aleksandr Kukolevskii, "Effekt Monsona," *Kommersant Vlast*, no. 47, November 28, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1816701>.

⁴⁰⁹ "Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii V.V.Putin priniial uchastie v rabote s"ezda Vserossiiskoi politicheskoi partii "Edinaia Rossiia," *The official web-site of the Russian Government*, November 27, 2011, <http://government.ru/docs/17248/index.html>.

monitoring vulnerable to critique. The results of genuine monitoring could have demonstrated massive fraud and violations of the law.

These pronouncements were backed by a visible increase in the dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy ideas by the Russian media. Reporters from the NTV television channel rushed to the office of the Association in Defence of Voters' Rights, "Golos." They were making a documentary about this organization, which later was entitled *Golos niotkuda* (*The Voice From Nowhere*) and broadcast during prime-time on the eve of the elections.⁴¹⁰ The authors of the film, who still remain unknown, claimed that Golos was affiliated with foreign sponsors. It was alleged that Golos was given funding to bring about Russia's collapse by claiming that the 2011 parliamentary elections had been rigged. This story was followed by the closing down of the *Karta narusheniĭ* (*The Map of Violations*) project, produced by Golos in collaboration with the news web-site Gazeta.ru to monitor the quantity and specific details of violations during the course of the parliamentary elections.⁴¹¹

Simultaneously, the Duma deputy from the pro-Kremlin A Just Russia Party, Anton Beliakov, stated in an interview with Dozhd that the US, as Russia's geopolitical opponent, financed Golos for the purpose of demonising and undermining the country's reputation in the eyes of the rest of the world, with the aim of damaging Russia's investment climate.⁴¹² Beliakov and his colleagues from the Duma filed an inquiry at the General Prosecutor's Office to check if the intervention of the NGO in the electoral process had been made in the interests of foreign countries.⁴¹³ Nikolaĭ Levichev, head of A Just Russia Party, also accused Golos of being a "puppet master" (*kuklovod*) and stated that it had "messianic" aspirations to judge the results of the elections.⁴¹⁴

The television channels' and politicians' joint attempt to link Golos with "foreign masters" served to throw its reputation into doubt and, eventually, the results of its monitoring of the elections. Although the organization disclosed all the necessary information about its funding, the mainstream conspiratorial narrative, disseminated through the mainstream media during the parliamentary election campaign, described Golos as a crucial

⁴¹⁰ "CHP. Rassledovanie. Golos niotkuda," *NTV* Video, 27:08, December 2, 2011, <http://www.ntv.ru/video/peredacha/267383>.

⁴¹¹ "Karta vybornykh narusheniĭ privela k otstavke v Gazete.ru," *Russkaia sluzhba BBC*, December 1, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/11/111130_golos_prosecutors.shtml.

⁴¹² "Mironov ob"iavil Beliakovu vygovor. Ne malo li?," *Dozhd* video, 03:59, November 30, 2011, http://tvrain.ru/articles/geroy_utra_anton_belyakov_dokument_po_golosu_vyglyadel_po_drugomu-99998/.

⁴¹³ Natal'ia Bashlykova, "Deputatskoe zaiavlenie protiv "Golos" initsirovala LDPR," *Kommersant-Online*, November 30, 2011, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/1827619>.

⁴¹⁴ "Nam kuklovodov i tak khvataet": online-interv'iu s predsedatelem partii "Spravedlivaia Rossiia," *Gazeta.ru*, November 30, 2011, <http://www.gazeta.ru/interview/nm/s3847282.shtml>.

tool of foreign influence on domestic politics. In the first decade of December, during the street rallies against the rigging of the election results, the pro-Kremlin web-site *Vzgliad* wrote:

In particular, “Golos” became “the entry point” for “western partners” into Russian domestic politics; precisely through this association the pressure has been applied, which eventually brought about a situation whereby today the non-systemic opposition claims the illegitimacy of the Russian elections and ineffectively tries to protest in the streets against their results.⁴¹⁵

The political establishment feared a loss of legitimacy during the process of the transition of power and made conspiratorial narratives about Golos the main tool of the delegitimization, in the same way as had been done to the OSCE observers in 2007. Before the parliamentary elections, some experts concluded that political manipulation of the results of the elections would be more evident than had been during the previous electoral cycles; and that this would pose a threat to the political legitimacy of the United Russia Party and Putin personally.⁴¹⁶ With average public support for Putin lower than in the 2000s and the Kremlin unable to offer the public a sufficiently good reason for his return as president, pro-Kremlin politicians and spin doctors were very keen to utilise familiar tactics. Through the active usage of the media they attempted to mobilize “the people” against the pro-Western “Other,” which made independent observers of the elections the first, and the most vulnerable, target, just as in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

“The White Ribbon Aims to Shed Blood”

Street protests and significant activism after the parliamentary elections in December 2011 triggered a wave of conspiracy speculations about a possible colour revolution supported from abroad. This notion had been fostered by pro-Kremlin intellectuals since 2005 and they could now proclaim that it had become a very real danger. A famous anti-Western conspiracy theorist Nikolaï Starikov described the events in Moscow as a well-tested plan of revolution designed in Washington to establish friendly political regimes in post-Soviet space and plunge its nations into chaos:

⁴¹⁵ Ivan Afanas’ev, “Golos’ Ameriki,” *Vzgliad*, December 9, 2011, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2011/12/9/545334.html>.

⁴¹⁶ Sergey Belanovsky and Mikhail Dmitriev. “Political Crisis in Russia and How it May Develop.” (Report, Centre for Strategic Research Foundation (CSR), Moscow, Russia, 2011), <http://www.csr.ru/docs/category/51-2009-12-24-06-54-11?download=174%3Apolitical-crisis-in-russia-and-how-it-may-develop&lang=ru>.

The [foreign] partners and their Fifth Column are now trying to promote in Russia the same scenario which they have repeatedly tested in the post-Soviet space of Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Ukraine – it has been the same everywhere. Elections and cries about their falsification by the authorities, [then] people in the streets, [then] an orange revolution (insurrection), [then] total control of the political life in this country by Washington.⁴¹⁷

One of the protesters' symbols was a white ribbon; it was used to emphasize the unity of those discontented with the election results.⁴¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, some prominent conspiracy theory authors, such as Starikov and another pro-Kremlin blogger, Dmitriï Beliaev, posted messages that the white ribbon was proof of a “colour revolution” – a plan invented in the US to provoke clashes with the authorities and deaths of Russian protesters.

According to Beliaev, the web-site *Belaia lenta* (*The White Ribbon*) had been registered in the US two months before the parliamentary elections in Russia, thus proving the existence of a foreign plan to provoke post-electoral unrest in Russia. Beliaev alleged that just before the website had been registered, Alekseï Navalnyï, a prominent Russian oppositional leader, travelled to London where he purportedly received instructions from Boris Berezovskiï, whilst another leader of the opposition, Boris Nemtsov, travelled to the US in order to receive approval of the plan. After the elections in December, Navalnyï and Nemtsov were urging people to join street protests, while “the ideological backup” of these actions, as claimed by Beliaev, was provided by individuals with dual citizenship. For instance, it was noted that several popular media personalities, such as the inventor of the white ribbon—Arsen Revazov, a well-known blogger—Anton Nossik and Dem'ian Kudriavtsev—general director of the *Kommersant* publishing house, all held Israeli passports. Another person who was mentioned in Beliaev's post was Konstantin von Eggert, a former BBC journalist and member of the Royal Institute for International Affairs in London, who had previously had close connections to Great Britain, which for Beliaev automatically indicated his involvement in anti-Russian subversive activity.⁴¹⁹

Allegations against these people in fact had a slight touch of anti-Semitism, as it was repeatedly emphasized that those fostering oppositional attitudes had Israeli passports. It should also be noted that Kristina Potupchik, the press-secretary of *Nashi*, whose mailbox was

⁴¹⁷ Nikolai Starikov, “Vybory v Rossii i pamiat’,” *Nikolai Starikov (blog)*, December 7, 2011, <http://nstarikov.ru/blog/13827>.

⁴¹⁸ Arsen Revazov, “Snezhnaia revoliutsiia ili chistyï kreativ,” *Arsen Revazov (blog)*, December 7, 2011, <http://el-mariachi.livejournal.com/37344.html>.

⁴¹⁹ Dmitriï Beliaev, “Belaia lenta' byla organizovana zadolgo do vyborov,” *Dmitriï Beliaev (blog)*, December 8, 2011, <http://top.oprf.ru/blogs/278/5703.html>.

hacked in February 2012, reportedly drew up instructions for activists of *Nasbi*, in which she specifically emphasized the “Jewish” origins of some of the famous anti-Kremlin activists.⁴²⁰

When the Moscow authorities refused permission for an official opposition rally and there were widespread calls to hold unauthorized protests anyway, Starikov and Beliaev warned their readers that the real aim of the white ribbon movement was to shed blood on the streets of Moscow and thereby implicate the government in violence:

On 10 December, people gather not to express [their] protest, but solely to shed blood and infuriate the mob, to cause disorder. This has happened in many countries in the Middle East, and the same happened one hundred years ago in Russia. “The White Ribbon,” according to the intentions of organizers, should become red. Then this symbol has a completely different meaning.⁴²¹

The peaceful atmosphere of the first rally on Bolotnaia Square, against the election results, discredited the warning of bloodshed. However, the state leadership chose another tactic to undermine the opposition’s stance. Putin’s own reaction to the white ribbons was also rather pejorative. At a press conference held on 15 December, he compared the ribbons with condoms; the remark aimed at morally denigrating the protesters’ symbol.⁴²² These comments triggered a wave of anti-Putin criticism that was expressed on protesters’ banners during the next demonstration, held on 24 December. However, these comments also importantly influence the course of the electoral campaign, and inadvertently supplied the pro-Putin intellectuals with further arguments to define the internal subversive enemy as linked with the West.

Putin’s derogatory comment helped transform the protesters’ critique of Putin into personal criticism, rather than keeping it focused on the demand for fair elections. This shift crucially shaped the subsequent campaigns. Putin’s image became the focal point of both anti-government protests and the pro-government campaign; and this focus helped to activate a highly performative official discourse. Pro-Kremlin intellectuals and journalists represented Russian society as divided between “the real people of Russia,” also defined as “Putin’s majority,” who inhabited provincial Russia, and its counterpart, the so-called “creative class,” a dissatisfied minority consisting of hipsters (fashionable young people), internet users and so-

⁴²⁰ Marat Gel’man, “Spisok Potupchik,” *Marat Gel’man (blog)*, February 4, 2012, <http://maratguelman.livejournal.com/2529416.html>.

⁴²¹ Dmitrii Beliaev, “Belaia lenta’ byla organizovana zadolgo do vyborov.”

⁴²² “Stenogramma programmy ‘Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinyim. Prodolzhenie,’” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, December 15, 2011, <http://www.rg.ru/2011/12/15/stenogramma.html>.

called “liberals.”⁴²³ At the same time, the elections in March 2012 were yet again transformed into a referendum in support of Putin and his policies. The pro-Putin campaign, carried out by the state-aligned media, also attempted to turn the image of Putin into a symbol unifying discrete and disparate social groups, in order to strengthen his electoral base. At the same time, it also served to demarcate the domestic boundaries between “Us” and the subversive “Other,” a broad category which included almost every citizen critical of Putin and his policies.

Moscow vs. “The Real Russia”

The performative division of Russian society into the majority of people and the minority of protesters was effected through the instrumental creation of media personalities who, it was claimed, shared the values of Putin’s electorate. For instance, during the same press conference on 15 December, Putin received a question from Igor’ Kholmanskikh, a worker from Nizhni Tagil, who expressed concern about the opposition rallies: “We do not want to go back. I want to say about these rallies, if our militia, or, as is it called now, the police, do not know how to work, cannot cope, I, together with my men, are ready to go out and assert our stability. . . .”⁴²⁴

This episode signalled the start of Kholmanskikh’s media career; he was transformed into an iconic news bulletin personality and a recurring character in the campaign, representing the “real, working Russia” in contrast to the “cubicle rats” (*ofisnyi plankton*) of Moscow. In an article published on 18 January 2012, Kholmanskikh wrote:

It is our country. It is not for them to be the best people in the country and the salt of the earth, but for us all. The country should be developed in the way that all people think is right. . . . I think that if I am ready to vote for Putin in the presidential elections and am ready to encourage others to do the same, it does not mean I am on “the side of the authorities.” I am on the side of the people.⁴²⁵

These words echoed Putin’s statement, made in his pre-election article in the newspaper *Izvestiia*, about a certain section of the Russian elites, who always tried to initiate

⁴²³ “Putin’s majority” was an extremely abstract term, coined by pro-Kremlin spin doctors to demonstrate that Vladimir Putin was supported by large and diverse social groups of the Russian population. See, for example, Kirill Kobrin, “Sotsiolog Aleksei Levinson – o ‘putinskom bol’shinstve,’” *Radio Svoboda*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24514713.html>.

⁴²⁴ “Stenogramma programmy “Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinyim. Prodolzhenie.”

⁴²⁵ “Nachal’nik tsekha UVZ Igor’ Kholmanskikh vystupil s obrasheniem: ‘Delo daleko zashlo,’” *Nakanune.ru*, January 18, 2012, <http://www.nakanune.ru/news/2012/1/18/22260092/>.

revolution instead of promoting stability.⁴²⁶ The focus of the pro-Putin rhetoric was on the juxtaposition of the stability and prosperity of the ordinary Russian people, versus a corrupt, pro-Western minority, which agreed to get rid of Putin and hand over control of the country to the West. The subsequent course of the presidential campaign was based on this juxtaposition: the “real people of Russia” against a “fat, ambitious, absolutely addle-brained, forgetful minority,” in the words of Mikhail Leont’ev, a famous pro-Kremlin journalist.⁴²⁷

Although the conspiratorial narratives of the elections in 2007 and in 2012 shared certain similarities, the 2012 presidential campaign was distinguished by a vagueness in pro-Kremlin speakers’ definition of the subversive “Other.” The diversity of social and political groups, which were dissatisfied with the policies of the Kremlin and disappointed with the prospect of Putin’s returning presidency, has made it difficult for the Kremlin to clearly and quickly define the object of conspiratorial mythmaking. Consequently, diverse groups of people who protested against the rigged elections in December 2011 and questioned the stability of the regime, were discursively united into a broad group of “the people from Bolotnaia.” Reportedly, all members of this vaguely defined social group shared a hatred of Putin and had links to the West.

Sergei Kurginian, another prominent participant of the campaign, in a manifesto called, revealingly, *Oni i My (Them and Us)*, described a division between “the pro-Western, conspiring minority” and Russian patriots. The central argument of the manifesto defined the attendees of the first Bolotnaia rally and its leaders as agents of a “foreign evil will” (*ispolniteli inozemnoi zloi voli*) who had been preparing *perestroika-2*. Kurginian drew a parallel with the last years of the USSR and Gorbachev’s failure to reform the country, which caused economic collapse; and he simultaneously accused El’tsin of plundering the country in the 1990s. Thus, he directed his populist call to the economically worst-affected group of the population, the intelligentsia, many of whose representatives did not have high incomes, in contrast to the attendees of the opposition rallies:⁴²⁸

So, THEY want the final breakdown of the country. If you wish it, go to THEIR rally. Support their fat bodies with your skinny hands. But THEY, after

⁴²⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia sosredotachivaetsia – vyzovy, na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit’,” *Izvestiia*, January 16, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/511884>.

⁴²⁷ Margarita Polianskaia, “Mikhail Leont’ev: Liudi s Bolotnoi – eto sytoe, ambitsioznoe, absoliutno bezmozgloe men’shinstvo,” *Kommersant FM*, February 4, 2012, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/1866640>.

⁴²⁸ According to the Levada Centre poll, approximately 2/3 of the attendees of the opposition rallies in Moscow in 2011-2012 had relatively high income, whereas 1/3 had lower income and struggled financially. See, Denis Volkov, “Protestnye mitingi v Rossii kontsa 2011-nachala 2012 gg.: zapros na demokratizatsiiu politicheskikh institutov,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia*, no.2 (2012): 74.

partitioning the country, will leave for foreign castles and villas. While you will not leave. So, is it worth going to THEIR rallies, supporting THEM?⁴²⁹

Kurginian's appeal to the "dissatisfaction of professors and doctors, workers and engineers, soldiers, teachers, agrarians" with current governmental policies clearly aimed at distinguishing the discontent of the representatives of "real Russia" from the dissatisfaction of the leaders of the opposition movement. Avoiding references to post-election grassroots civic activity in the country, Kurginian mainly associated the rallies with politicians from El'tsin's government, such as Nemtsov, and former tabloid celebrities, like Kseniia Sobchak. Their aim, according to Kurginian, was to destroy the country by using "justified discontent" with the political situation, as had already been done in 1991.⁴³⁰

At the same time, pro-Kremlin spin doctors and journalists continued to portray the leaders of the opposition rallies as a "fifth column" working for the US State Department. A substantial part of the conspiratorial narrative during this campaign was disseminated through television documentaries, which became its hallmark. The most notorious case was NTV's series of documentaries entitled *Zagranitsa im pomozhet (Abroad Will Help Them)* and *Anatomiia protesta (The Anatomy of Protest)*. Each of the episodes summarised various myths, forgeries and clichés taken from the Russian conspiracy discourse of the 2000s, such as Russia being infiltrated by foreign agents, NGOs and oppositionists, purportedly financed by foreign governments to destroy Russia and obtain control over its natural resources.⁴³¹

However, the key aim of these documentaries was to relocate the responsibility for fraud during the elections onto the anti-Putin opposition; numerous videos were screened, about vote-rigging engineered by foreign intelligence services. As early as 4 February 2012, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office declared that the majority of videos about falsifications during the 2011 parliamentary elections "contained elements of video editing" and were later placed on the US Internet servers.⁴³² The fact that anyone in the world with *YouTube* access could upload the video was of no interest to those making these comments; rather, the main emphasis was on the fact that the *YouTube* servers were located in the US, which contributed to the idea of the staged character of the anti-government criticism. Moreover, at the peak of the campaign, Stanislav Govorukhin, the chief of Putin's campaign

⁴²⁹ "Oni i My: Vozzvanie kluba "Sut' Vremeni"," Virtual'nyi klub "Sut' vremeni", December 17, 2012, <http://eot.su/node/10279>.

⁴³⁰ "Oni i My."

⁴³¹ "CHP. Rassledovanie. 'Anatomiia protesta'," *NTV* Video, 36:20, March 16, 2012, <http://www.ntv.ru/video/peredacha/296996/>.

⁴³² "V SK prokommentirovali rezul'taty proverki videorolikov, razmeschennykh v Internete," *Channel One*, February 4, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/election/198311>.

office, declared that the Internet was a scrapheap (*pomojka*) which belonged to the US State Department.⁴³³ Thus, the videos about electoral fraud, which were widely recorded and disseminated via the Internet by ordinary Russians, were interpreted as a part of a subversive American plan, rather than a grassroots initiative by Russian citizens calling for fair elections.

Although conspiratorial notions were visible in the public space, the policies of delegitimization of those opposed to Putin had a limited impact on public opinion. According to a poll conducted by the Levada Centre in January 2012, 13 per cent of respondents shared the idea of the “western sponsorship” of the rallies.⁴³⁴ Given this result, it might be concluded that anti-Western conspiracy theories have been a useful item in the Kremlin’s political toolbox but possessed a limited capacity. The effect of these ideas was evident only when they were applied with other populist rhetoric which was based on the existing socio-economic and political problems. During the challenging electoral campaign, the authorities actively utilized anti-Western conspiracy notions to achieve a short-term mobilization of all potential supporters. However, the performative division of Russian society into the “people,” represented by Putin, and a mixed community of protesters supposedly linked to the West, was effected to channel the dissatisfaction of large masses of Russian citizens about economic and social inequality in the country. Expressed through alarmist conspiracy theories about a “fifth column,” the populist claim about the preservation of existing stability was able to bring about the swift mobilization of those voters who were financially dependent on the government; this certainly offers insight into the profile of those supporting the regime.

Michael McFaul: “Ambassador for Colour Revolutions”

The comments US Senator John McCain addressed to Putin, that the Arab Spring “is coming to a neighbourhood near you” and State Secretary Hillary Clinton’s “concerns about the conduct of the election” provided fertile soil for the substantiation of conspiracy fears.⁴³⁵ In response to international critique, Putin stated that Clinton’s words had no factual basis; however, they set the tone for some “figures within the country and provided a signal. They [the members of opposition] heard this signal and, under the auspices of the US State

⁴³³ “Glava predvybornogo shtaba Vladimira Putina raskritikoval uchastnikov mitingov ‘Za chestnye vybory,’” NTV Video, 07:32, February 19, 2012, <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/271313/>.

⁴³⁴ The Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on 27-30 January 2012, N=1600, <http://www.levada.ru/07-02-2012/o-protestuyushchikh-otkaze-v-registratsii-g-yavlinskomu-kontrolu-za-vyborami-chast-2>.

⁴³⁵ Tom Washington, “McCain warns Putin of ‘Arab Spring,’” *The Moscow News*, December 6, 2011, <http://themoscownews.com/international/20111206/189263561.html>; Elise Labott, “Clinton cites ‘serious concerns’ about Russian election,” *CNN.com*, December 7, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russia-elections-clinton/index.html>.

Department (*gosdep*), started active work.”⁴³⁶ Hence, the notion of *gosdep* (an acronym of *gosudarstvennyi departament*) became central in the body of conspiratorial mythmaking related to the electoral period of 2011-2012.

In Russia’s official discourse, the new US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, who arrived in Moscow in January 2012, came to symbolize American conspiracy against the country. Almost immediately, he was given the nickname “Ambassador for colour revolutions.” In addition, his meetings with leaders of the opposition allowed pro-Kremlin journalists and writers to claim that he had arrived to supervise a colour revolution in Russia. His image provided an important conceptual connection between the current rallies, the notion of the colour revolution, and the collapse of the USSR, ideas which were particularly crudely and instrumentally lumped together by Mikhail Leont’ev in his programme, *Odnako*, broadcast on the Channel One on 17 January.⁴³⁷

Leont’ev’s programme *Odnako* followed a report in the preceding news programme, *Vremia*, on Ambassador McFaul’s first Moscow meeting with the opposition leaders.⁴³⁸ Leont’ev presented McFaul, in the first instance, as an expert in “colour revolutions.” In support, Leont’ev referred to an article entitled *Poslom v Rossiïu priezhaet spetsialist po revoliutsiiam* (*The arriving ambassador to Russia is a specialist on revolutions*), which was published on the popular web-site *Slon*.⁴³⁹

According to Leont’ev, McFaul’s main specialization was the “promotion of democracy”; this statement was followed by a quote from McFaul’s interview to *Slon* about his positive impressions of the last years of *perestroika* and his friendship with “Russian democrats.” It was suggested that McFaul financed and trained so-called “democratic leaders” who then took leading positions in Russia in the 1990s, while in 2010 McFaul was allegedly central to the training of the new leader in Yale, Alekseï Navalnyï. Hence, Leont’ev tied together the collapse of the USSR, the harsh economic reforms supported by pro-American economists, and the current activities of the opposition movement, implying that these processes had all been coordinated by one person, Michael McFaul. Later, Leont’ev referred

⁴³⁶ “Putin obvinil Klinton v pooshchrenii oppozitsii: ‘dala signal’ deiateliam vnutri strany,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 8, 2011, http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/12/08/n_2127250.shtml.

⁴³⁷ In the interview with David Remnick Mikhail Leont’ev openly admitted that in the aforementioned programme he deliberately created an image of the master of anti-Russian conspiracy out of McFaul’s arrival at Moscow and substituted facts of his autobiography. See, David Remnick, “Watching the Eclipse,” *The New Yorker*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse>.

⁴³⁸ “Novyi posol SSHA v Rossii vstretilsia s predstaviteliami oppozitsii,” *Channel One*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/polit/196641>.

⁴³⁹ Aleksandr Baunov, “Poslom v Rossiïu priezhaet spetsialist po revoliutsiiam,” *Slon*, January 13, 2012, http://slon.ru/world/spetsialist_po_antidiktatorskim_dvizheniyam-730708.xhtml.

to the US periodical *Foreign Policy*, which supposedly noted that McFaul was the second non-career diplomat appointed to Moscow, after Bob Strauss, who, Leont'ev added, "serviced the collapse of the USSR." In addition, McFaul was the author of hundreds of "anti-Putin" articles and a book, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*. The title allowed Leont'ev to hypothesize that the new ambassador had arrived in Moscow to complete the revolution.⁴⁴⁰ The previous academic interests of ambassador McFaul and, in particular, his research on the origins of the political changes in Ukraine in the mid-2000s, also helped Leont'ev speculate about McFaul's comprehensive knowledge of the funding schemes of the "colour revolutions" and alleged financial support of similar events in Russia.⁴⁴¹

Leont'ev's short report on Ambassador McFaul's appointment, broadcast during prime-time on the federal channel, became another structure-forming element of the conspiratorial allegations of the presidential electoral campaign. Igor' Panarin, who has been mentioned in chapter 2, described McFaul as the archetypal conspiratorial mastermind:

Time has shown that he [McFaul] knows how to withstand pressure, [he] quickly adjusts to a changing situation, and obviously has some secret plans about how to implement Alekseï Navalnyĭ's project. So, it is too early for the Kremlin to relax – the fight to prevent chaos and to preserve Russian statehood is yet to come.⁴⁴²

Due to McFaul's activity, uncharacteristic of traditional diplomats, which involved him meeting the opposition leaders on the first day of his service, McFaul became an easy-target of anti-American conspiratorial allegations. His connections with the Russian political elites of the 1990s, many of whom were considered by pro-Kremlin propaganda post-2000 as representatives of the West, his openness to dialogue, as well as a certain unpreparedness for the hostile and aggressive treatment he received from pro-Kremlin activists, made him a favourable object of conspiratorial mythmaking. This mythmaking also exploited negative attitudes towards the US among Russians. Throughout the 2000s, between 25 and 30 per cent of Russians shared negative attitudes towards the US, a factor that could be of use in the campaign against McFaul.⁴⁴³ Somewhat similar to the former UK ambassador to Russia Anthony Brenton, who became a target of *Nashi* for attending a conference of the Russian

⁴⁴⁰ "Analiticheskaia programma "Odnako" s Mikhailom Leont'evym," *Channel One*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/leontiev/196647>.

⁴⁴¹ Anders Aslund and Michael McFaul, *Revolution in Orange: the Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough*. (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

⁴⁴² Igor' Panarin, "McFaul and the Moscow opposition rallies," *RT.com*, February 7, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/mcfaul-opposition-rallies-panarin-667/>.

⁴⁴³ See "Otnoshenie rossiian k drugim stranam," the Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on 7-10 March 2014, N=1603, <http://www.levada.ru/18-03-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>.

opposition in the mid-2000s, McFaul was represented as the conspiratorial personification of the US within Russia, the key coordinator of subversion of the Russian state.⁴⁴⁴

Poklonnaia Hill vs. Bolotnaia Square

The epitome of this conspiracy hysteria was the “Anti-Orange” Poklonnaia Hill rally on 4 February 2012, where leading anti-Western public intellectuals gathered to jointly rebuff “the orange threat.”⁴⁴⁵ At the same time, the rally on Poklonnaia Hill was a first in a series of street events that were used to demonstrate the numerical dominance of pro-Putin forces over oppositionists. Among the slogans of the 4 February rally were: “Yes – to fair elections, no – to orange ones,” “We won’t let the country collapse” and “Stop begging for scraps at foreign embassies,” thus constructing a connecting narrative line between the electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2011-2012. The Poklonnaia Hill rally became the “patriotic answer” to the third demonstration for fair elections in Moscow, which took place on the same day. The “patriotic” rally was supposed to symbolize the attitude of “real Russia” to Putin, as opposed to the anti-Putin rhetoric of Bolotnaia Square.

The Poklonnaia Hill protesters promoted two main ideas: to resist the “orange threat” and express their support for Putin. A large number of attendees of the rally served to demonstrate that Putin represented the majority of the Russian people who opposed the minority of “dissatisfied Muscovites.” Federal channels’ media coverage of the rallies also stressed the numerical superiority of the Poklonnaia rally by citing the figure of “more than 100 thousand participants,” against a quarter of that number at the anti-Putin Bolotnaia rally.⁴⁴⁶ In the words of the leaders of the Poklonnaia Hill initiative, the participants of their rally stood against the political “nobody” (*nichtozbestvo*), which was preoccupied with destroying the country.⁴⁴⁷

The juxtaposition of the two events was regularly emphasized by pro-Putin speakers. It was employed to symbolize the two parts of Russian society and to reproduce the binary division of the world, typical of conspiracy discourse. This discursive set-off was also an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the opposition’s argument that the results of the presidential elections would be rigged. The majority of Russians, which Putin claimed to

⁴⁴⁴ Arkady Ostrovsky, “Youth group hounds UK Moscow ambassador,” *Financial Times*, December 8, 2006, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/15054982-8661-11db-86d5-0000779e2340.html#axzz30meQdAEq>.

⁴⁴⁵ Anna Analbaeva, “Ne dadim razvalit’ stranu!,” *Vzgliad*, February 3, 2012, <http://vz.ru/politics/2012/2/3/557130.html>.

⁴⁴⁶ “Gosudarstvennoe TV pokazyvaet Poklonnuiu: net oranzhevoi chume, ne pozvolim utopit’ Rossiiu v krovi,” *Gazeta.ru*, February 4, 2012, http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/02/04/n_2191705.shtml.

⁴⁴⁷ Vitalii Ivanov, “Putin nameren mobilizovat’ bolshinstvo. Putinskoe bolshinstvo. Nuzhno obraschat’sya tol’ko k nemu,” *Izvestiia*, January 16, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/511953>.

represent, looked for stability and peace, whilst the minority had only one goal – to gain power by any means. Putin and his political allies speculated that the opposition was prepared to falsify the election results and thus delegitimize the authorities.

A few days before the presidential elections, Putin stated that his opponents were ready “to use certain mechanisms which would prove that the elections were rigged. “They [the members of opposition] themselves will be filling ballots, they will be controlling it [the course of elections], and then they will assert it [the fraud at elections] themselves. We can already see it, we already know it.”⁴⁴⁸ This statement was a pre-emptive step in dealing with the possible appearance of videos about electoral procedure violations, similar to protests in December 2011. If such videos were to appear, Putin’s remark prepared the ground for delegitimizing possible criticism of the opposition. On the other hand, if no such videos appeared, the legitimacy of the elections would be self-evident and the transfer of power to Putin, and his status as the nation’s leader, legitimated. In any case, the dominant position of the majority within a democratic state would dictate its will to the minority. By hinting at the alleged subversive actions of the opposition, Putin thus aimed at undermining any critical arguments with regard to elections.

The notion of Putin as the spokesperson for the patriotic “majority” against a foreign threat was amplified even more during Putin’s pre-election appearance, which was timed to coincide with the Defender of the Fatherland Day on 23 February, 2012, in the *Luzhniki* stadium. The rally was preceded by a march entitled “*Zashchitim stranu!*” (“[We will] defend the country!”), whilst in his opening speech Leont’ev stressed that Putin was the real saviour of the country, which was on the verge of a “national suicide” equal to the collapse of 1991.⁴⁴⁹ Reflecting the symbolic meaning of the day on which the rally was taking place, Putin’s speech was framed by a call for national unity and it pursued a twofold goal. Above all, Putin asserted the presence of the community of “the people,” led by him, and potentially open to everyone who shared patriotic values and was ready to defend them. Simultaneously, he pointed towards the unreliable minority, which was striving to act against the interests of their own country:

The main thing is that we are together. We are a multiethnic, but single and powerful nation. I want to tell you that we do not reject anyone, do not attach labels (*shel'muem*) or push anyone away. On the contrary, we urge everyone to unite for our country, certainly all those who consider our Russia their own

⁴⁴⁸“Putin: opozitsiia gotovit vbrosy dlia diskreditatsii vyborov, no ei nado podchinit'sia mneniuiu bolshinstva,” *Gazeta.ru*, February 29, 2012, http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lastnews/2012/02/29/n_2222381.shtml.

⁴⁴⁹ “Vystupleniia na mitinge v podderzhku Vladimira Putina: Mikhail Leont'ev, zhurnalist,” *Ekho Moskvy*, February 23, 2012, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/861846-echo/>.

country, who are ready to take care of it, value it, and believe in it. And we ask everyone not to look out at the distant horizon (*ne zagliadyvat' za bugor*) . . . [not to] go abroad and not to cheat at the expense of our Motherland, but to be together with us, work for it and its people and love the way we love it – with all our heart.⁴⁵⁰

In this crucial remark, Putin reiterated some of the key points of his own speech, delivered in November 2007 at the high point of the parliamentary campaign, when he coined the notorious idea about the “jackals who beg for scraps at foreign embassies.” The utilization of the similar notion in 2012 demonstrated Putin’s consistent use of anti-Western conspiracy theories in electoral strategies that sought to mobilize Russian society by dividing it into “the people” and the subversive pro-Western minority.

At the same time, the two campaigns in 2007 and 2012 also differed from each other. In 2007, anti-Western conspiracy theories were part of the elaborate and well-prepared campaign which delegitimized specific organizations and parties to ensure the smooth transfer of power from Putin to his chosen successor. The situation in 2012 was different. The campaign centred on Putin’s return; this was the overarching narrative of Kremlin propaganda. At the same time, the protest movement, which erupted in December 2011, significantly radicalized the campaign, turning it into a crusade against the vague and undifferentiated “orange threat” of the opposition “from Bolotnaia,” heavily based on anti-Western conspiratorial rhetoric.

A corpus of anti-Western conspiratorial perceptions, which became the intellectual base of the 2012 campaign, was developed by public intellectuals in the 2000s. They depicted Russia as a besieged country perceived by “the West” as a mere repository of natural resources. At the same time, Putin’s rhetoric combined both conspiratorial allegations, which were based on the discourse produced by his “support group,” and appeals for national unity. The conspiratorial aspect of this rhetoric was mainly focused on highlighting the alleged threat of treacherous opposition politicians and irresponsible intellectuals.⁴⁵¹ Every conspiratorial allegation which Putin used was aimed at delegitimizing the arguments of his political opponents and was accompanied by a series of articles in newspapers, blog posts and documentaries on the state-aligned television channels to maintain the desired effect. At the same time, the campaign was further able to promulgate a vivid image of “the real people” and the “Other” by organizing an “Anti-Orange” rally that mirrored the street activities of the

⁴⁵⁰ “Vladimir Putin vystupil na mitinge “Zashitim stranu!” v Luzhnikakh,” *Vladimir Putin Presidential Campaign’s Official Web Site*, February 23, 2012, <http://putin2012.ru/events/300>.

⁴⁵¹ Ol’ga Malinova, “Simvolicheskoe edinstvo natsii? Rerezentatsiia makropoliticheskogo soobschestva v predvybornoi ritorike Vladimira Putina,” *Pro et Contra* 16, no. 3 (May-June 2012): 83.

opposition as well as marches in support of Putin, both of which were also widely covered in the press.

Conclusion

Andrew Wilson writes that post-Soviet politicians and parties often exist only on television and have no life other than the virtual one.⁴⁵² If applied to the social division in Russia during electoral cycles, this hypothesis could be developed further. Constructed by spin doctors and intellectuals in Luzhniki and on Poklonnaia Hill, the “Putin majority” in fact consisted of diverse social groups that could not be convincingly united under a single descriptive term nor be considered to exist in real life. Through biased television programming and sociological polls, produced by the Kremlin-funded polling agencies such as VTsIOM, the architects of electoral campaigns regularly created the image of a dominant majority of “the people” which supported Putin’s candidacy.⁴⁵³

The image of Putin in the Kremlin-controlled media during the electoral campaigns consistently represented him as a genuine “people’s politician.” His public appearances and the staged support from ordinary working people all combined to establish his connection with “real Russia” and sustain his leadership position. The campaign thus followed well established populist tactics. Francisco Panizza notes: “As a political figure who seeks to be at the same time one of the people and their leader, the populist leader appears as an ordinary person with extraordinary attributes.”⁴⁵⁴ Attempts on the part of intellectuals loyal to the Kremlin to ascribe to Putin an image of global importance and to create a public cult around him were used to stress this “extraordinary aspect” of a populist leader.⁴⁵⁵ Moreover, the figure of Putin became something of an embodiment of “the people,” who were expected to unite through the populist demands for sovereignty and independence from “the West.” This populist division of society was once more utilized during the presidential campaign of 2012, when the authorities required a quick popular mobilization in support of Putin’s re-election.

The 2007 parliamentary elections were grounded ideologically in the personal public popularity of Putin as a politician. The uncertainty of his political future after 2008 created a fruitful basis for speculations and alarmist conspiratorial appeals to protect the country from

⁴⁵² Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 33.

⁴⁵³ For further discussion on the affiliation of the major Russian polling agencies with the Kremlin, see Natal’ia Morar’, “VTsIOM: korruptsiia v obmen na loial’nost’,” *The New Times*, no. 39 (2007), <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/7767/>.

⁴⁵⁴ Panizza, *Populism and the mirror of democracy*, 21.

⁴⁵⁵ Pavel Sedakov, Artëm Vernidub and Dar’ia Guseva, “Kul’tiverovanie,” *Russkii Newsweek*, no. 41, October 15-21, 2007, 32-35.

the “plunder” equivalent to the dramatic changes of the 1990s, which were allegedly connected to the “Western conspiracy.” Considering the 2007-2008 electoral period as a key moment in the life of the regime, the ruling political elites prepared the necessary ideological background to justify Putin’s stay in power. An integral part of this ideological project were the anti-Western conspiracy theories actively developed by the Kremlin-aligned intellectuals to delegitimize potential opposition.

In contrast, the active application of anti-Western conspiracy theories during the 2012 presidential campaign stemmed from an overall fall in public support for Putin and the existing political regime. The authorities had overlooked considerable societal shifts and had to face the consequence of this shortly after the 2011 parliamentary elections, when protest demonstrations began. Moreover, the essential idea of the “Putin majority,” due to its vague and fragmented character, required active promotion, which was accomplished through the aggressive media campaign of January-March 2012 and the persistent demonization of Putin’s political opponents and civil activists *en masse*.

Overall, anti-Western conspiratorial mythmaking became an essential part of electoral practices in the mid-2000s. It has been widely used to provide a simple explanation of current events, shift responsibility for social and economic problems to other social actors and delegitimize political opponents. Amongst the creators and ideological suppliers of the anti-Western agenda figured numerous spin doctors and public intellectuals. In charge of think tanks and publishing houses, they were able to initiate media campaigns and coin conspiratorial schemes with the aim of helping the Kremlin achieve its political goals, and, above all, to help secure Putin’s victory and to prop up the legitimacy of his regime.

Chapter 5. Battling Against “Foreign Agents”: Conspiracy Narratives in Domestic Politics Under Putin and Medvedev

Introduction

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, conspiracy theories played a major role in post-Soviet politics in the 1990s due to their high mobilization potential and ability to provide simple explanations for complex issues. All the main spheres of social and political life were influenced by the idea of a conspiring group of people eager for power and wealth. El'tsin's attempted impeachment was a remarkable episode in domestic political life aimed at demonizing the ruling elites and their leader. Similar conspiratorial notions were regularly applied, even if with less publicity, both on federal and regional levels of Russian politics to strengthen the positions of particular politicians in their struggles with opponents. In the 2000s the significance of conspiratorial discourses in the public sphere further increased and became a pivotal element of several political campaigns which changed the course of Russia's political development. The conspiratorial notions served as pretexts to initiate lawsuits and justify criminal cases against political opponents, at times also culminating in legislative changes, which have affected democratic processes in the country.

Three campaigns against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 2005, 2006 and 2012-2013, which resulted in changes in Russian legislation regarding third sector organizations had a harmful impact on the development of civil society. The origins of the campaign were to be found in a shock, which the ruling political elites experienced, first in response to the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004 and later in response to the massive rallies for fair elections in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections in 2011. The Russian leadership acknowledged the crucial role which NGOs played during regime changes in the CIS countries. Consequently, through the work of loyal public intellectuals, the activities of NGOs were interpreted through the prism of a conspiracy of the West against Russia. The conspiratorial explanation was first articulated by the media thus preparing the ground for the implementation of a highly repressive set of laws against NGOs. These newly introduced restrictions were sufficient to impede the work of NGOs in the country and in the eyes of the Kremlin this should have helped ensuring the control over society.

The wave of political protests against Putin in 2011-2012, which occurred despite the government's preventive measures, further radicalized attitudes towards NGOs among pro-Kremlin intellectuals and politicians who described them as key facilitators of unrest. A further campaign to delegitimize NGOs in the eyes of Russians in 2012 resulted in a law

which required all NGOs with any foreign funding to register voluntarily as “foreign agents.” The introduction of the law followed a long-running campaign discursively to establish a link between NGOs and the notion of the “fifth column,” which conspires from within against the sovereignty of the country and its people.

Focusing on the policy regarding NGOs in Russia during the 2000s, this chapter will look at how conspiracy notions have been used by the regime as a tool in domestic politics in order to delegitimize third sector organizations. It will first consider how regime changes in the CIS countries affected the conspiratorial perception of NGOs among the political elites inside Russia. Then it will study how the fear of the “colour revolution,” which was spread through the media, was utilized in order to justify the amendments of the legislation regarding NGOs. The chapter will then discuss how post-electoral public activism in 2011-2012 triggered another wave of state repressions against NGOs and study the place of conspiracy theories in it. In conclusion, the potential effect of conspiratorial mythmaking regarding third sector organizations on societal development will be analysed.

5.1. Russian NGOs and the “Colour Revolutions”: Defining the Domestic Threat

As discussed earlier, the “colour revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia had a tremendous impact on Russia’s domestic politics in the 2000s. Putin’s administration feared that the examples of other CIS countries could encourage Russian citizens to protest against the results of the elections in 2007-2008. Concerned about the outcome of the presidential elections in Ukraine in 2004, Pavlovskii noted that Russia was not ready for a new type of revolution and should focus on restraining the influence of the opposition.⁴⁵⁶ Since then, as Robert Horvath has demonstrated, the political elites loyal to the Kremlin began to develop a plan of “a preventive counter-revolution.”⁴⁵⁷

A legislative pressure on NGOs was among the first measures which were introduced as a part of the “counter-revolution.” The importance of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in fostering civic activism on the eve of and during the events in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 has been pointed out in scholarship.⁴⁵⁸ The existence of a wide and active network of civic organizations throughout Russia was

⁴⁵⁶ Aleksandra Samarina, “Moskovskie degustatory ukrainskogo sala,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 7 December, 2004, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2004-12-07/1_pavlovskiy.html.

⁴⁵⁷ Robert Horvath, “Putin’s ‘Preventive Counter-Revolution’: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 1 (2011): 1-25.

⁴⁵⁸ See, for example, Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, eds., *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures* (London: Routledge, 2010).

perceived as a serious threat for the outcome of the elections in 2007-2008, which the ruling elites desired. In fact, some NGOs were very critical of Putin's policies and even received financial support from his political opponents (such as Mikhail Khodorkovskii's *Open Russia Foundation*). As a result the regime's need to promote Putin as the nation's leader and delegitimize his opponents made non-governmental organizations an ideal object for attack, which, as we shall see, relied, in part, on conspiracy theories.

The foreign funding of Russian NGOs received an official interpretation after the events in Georgia in 2003. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 26 May 2004, Putin spoke about some NGOs which were solely focused on fundraising from foreign sources and defended the commercial interests of their funders.⁴⁵⁹ This remark signalled both the concern of the Kremlin regarding the regime change in Georgia and Khodorkovskii's active support of civic initiatives throughout the country.⁴⁶⁰ The actual campaign against NGOs took time to develop as it was launched a year later, in May 2005, simultaneously with other measures against the opposition. Nikolai Patrushev, the then head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), reported that foreign intelligence employed new methods of surveillance and worked in the CIS countries under the guise of non-governmental organizations.⁴⁶¹ One month later, Putin replied to Patrushev's report by expressing a strong objection to the funding of public activities from abroad and promising to curb it.⁴⁶²

This conspiratorial narrative thus linked non-governmental organizations and foreign intelligence, emphasizing the "otherness" and harmfulness of the former to the people of Russia. In this emerging new twist of the Kremlin-sponsored discourse, the activities of NGOs, which were funded from foreign sources, threatened Russian sovereignty. Consequently, the term "sovereignty" became pivotal to the anti-Western conspiracy discourse, which was widely propagated through the media from 2005 onwards.

It is also important to note that Russia's sovereignty, together with the development of civil society, was the focus of Putin's address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 2005 as one of the three main issues to be considered by the political elites of

⁴⁵⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii" (address, Moscow, Russia, May 26, 2004), <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2004/05/71501.shtml>.

⁴⁶⁰ For further discussion of Khodorkovskii's support of NGO see Richard Sakwa, *The Quality of Freedom: Khodorkovskiy, Putin, and the Yukos Affair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123-128.

⁴⁶¹ "Patrushev: Zapad sobral 5 millionov dollarov na sverzhenie Lukashenko," *Lenta.ru*, 12 May, 2005, <http://lenta.ru/news/2005/05/12/revolution/>.

⁴⁶² Nargiz Asadova, "Kovrovoe zakonodatel'stvo," *Kommersant-Vlast*, no. 47, November 28, 2005, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/630480>.

the country.⁴⁶³ Following his speech, non-governmental organizations became the primary object associated with foreign subversion and were depicted in the media as constituting an ideological and financial framework to overthrow Putin's regime. After 2005 numerous publications by pro-Kremlin intellectuals and spin doctors thoroughly developed this idea. Vitalii Ivanov, one of the pro-Kremlin public intellectuals and deputy head of the *Centre for Political Environment*, claimed that "Western foundations" (*zapadnye fondy*) were donors to a whole range of opposition parties, regardless of their political views.⁴⁶⁴ This political indiscrimination was evoked to make an impression of the cynicism of NGOs and their "sponsors" from the West and reinforced the claim that Western foundations worked to deprive Russia of independence.

Another prominent pro-Kremlin public intellectual, Sergei Markov, contended that the people at the rallies in Ukraine were fighting for freedom and honour, whilst organizers of the rallies became wealthy "revolutionaries" generously funded by American and European foundations.⁴⁶⁵ This argument served to continue Putin's accusation that NGOs were interested mainly in commercial benefits, not the well-being of society. Hence, the freedom, which NGOs enjoyed before 2005, as well as their ability to arrange funding from foreign sources, was a privilege, which they were now to lose as they were put under control of the government. Many pro-Kremlin public intellectuals depicted NGOs as centres of the "Orange revolution" which enjoyed excessive freedom of action within Russia, while remaining under financial and organizational control from abroad.⁴⁶⁶

The work of intellectuals prepared the ways for introducing serious legislative limitations on the activities of NGOs. This goal was achieved at the end of 2005, when the Duma debated and adopted amendments to the law on non-governmental organizations despite domestic and international protests. In a press interview one of the authors of the law employed a conspiratorial language to substantiate its adoption by claiming that NGOs with foreign affiliation destroyed Russian citizens "from within" because Russians easily fell for foreign influence:

⁴⁶³ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation" (address, Moscow, Russia, 25 April, 2005),

http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2005/04/25/1223_type63372type63374type82634_87049.shtml.

⁴⁶⁴ Vitalii Ivanov, *Antirevolutsioner. Pochemu Rossii ne nuzhna "oranzhevaia revoliutsiia"* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006), 112.

⁴⁶⁵ Sergei Markov, "'Oranzhevaia revoliutsiia' – primer revoliutsii global'nogo soobshchestva XXI veka" in *"Oranzhevaia revoliutsiia." Ukrainskaia versii: Sbornik* (Moscow: Evropa, 2005), 71-72.

⁴⁶⁶ Dmitrii Iur'ev, "Oranzhevye polittekhologii Ukrainy: upravlenie svobodoi" in *Rossia i "sanitarnyi kordon"* (Moscow: Evropa, 2005), 47.

It is clear for the West that Russia is a huge store of natural resources. That is why, for example, big Western business is ready to invest money in the development of Siberia through these organizations. But there is a question: why do they do that? The pragmatic West will not invest money without a reason.⁴⁶⁷

The authors of the new legislative initiatives, following Putin's idea that Russia's sovereignty was the ultimate virtue of the nation, suggested to prohibit the registration of organizations in case their aims and goals created "a threat to sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity and distinctive customs, cultural character and national interests of the Russian Federation."⁴⁶⁸ As a result, these broad and vague criteria created obstacles for registration for NGOs, as many of them relied on foreign funds, and allowed pro-Kremlin politicians and intellectuals to accuse NGOs of subversion.

Conspiracy allegations, which gave rise to the legislative crackdown on NGOs, became an efficient tool to suppress the opposition. The obedient media further contributed to creating a negative image of NGOs among the broader public, as many Russian citizens knew little, if anything, about their activities.⁴⁶⁹ The epitome of this campaign was a documentary broadcast by the state-owned *Rossia* television channel, which aimed at delegitimizing NGOs by connecting them with foreign intelligence services.

The British "Spy-Rock": Linking NGOs and Foreign Intelligence Services

The first set of legislative amendments against NGOs were approved by Putin on 10 January 2006 and provoked concern mostly among civic activists and foreign diplomats.⁴⁷⁰ This lack of attention of ordinary Russians to third sector organizations, on the one hand, created a fertile ground for conspiratorial mythmaking. At the same time, it also limited the capacity of the Kremlin to construct the image of the powerful, subversive "Other," which threatened the lives of ordinary citizens. Being aware of this problem, the regime was keen to use the state-aligned media in order to instrumentally link NGOs and foreign subversion. In

⁴⁶⁷ Suzanna Farizova, "Oni razrushaiut grazhdan iznutri," *Kommersant-Vlast*, no. 47, November 28, 2005, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/630481>.

⁴⁶⁸ "Federal'nyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 10 ianvaria 2006 goda № 18-FZ 'O vnesenii izmenenii v nekotorye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossiiskoi Federatsii,'" *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, January 17, 2006, <http://www.rg.ru/2006/01/17/nko-poryadok-dok.html>.

⁴⁶⁹ According to the polls conducted in 2004, 58 per cent of Russian citizens "never heard of NGOs," See, "Obshchestvennaia podderzhka NKO v rossiiskikh regionakh: problem i perspektivy" (Analytical report based on sociological polls, Issledovatel'skaia gruppa TsIRKON, Moscow, 2004), http://www.socpolitika.ru/files/8019/Report_Public_Opinion.pdf.

⁴⁷⁰ Andrei Kuznetsov, "Bol'she trekh ne sobirat'sia," *Lenta.ru*, December 16, 2005, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2005/12/16/ngo/>.

the most famous media effort of this kind Western intelligence was represented by British diplomats.

Arkadiĭ Mamontov, a controversial pro-Kremlin journalist whose documentaries often serve to prepare public opinion for future legislative initiatives of the Kremlin, produced a documentary entitled *Shpiony (The Spies)*. It was broadcast in prime time on Rossiia channel on 22 January 2006 and became a significant media event subsequently discussed by most of the Russian press as well as provoking a diplomatic scandal between Russia and the UK.⁴⁷¹ An 11-minute film showed an operation against alleged British spies carried out by the FSB. It was claimed that the spies used a rock placed in a Moscow park, which was stuffed with sophisticated electronics in order to exchange information with their informants. Mamontov contended that Marc Doe, the second secretary of the British embassy in Moscow, was a British intelligence officer whose responsibility was to supply Russian NGOs with funding. On screen Mamontov demonstrated documents, typed in English, with the titles of organizations (e.g. a prominent human rights watchdog, *The Moscow Helsinki Group*), the transferred amounts of funding, and Doe's signature appearing at the end of each document.

The linking of the two issues (spies and NGOs) was made explicit in the opening part of the documentary. In the film an FSB official Diana Shemiakina stated that among thousands NGOs operating in Russia only 92 had an official registration with the Ministry of Justice. "The majority of them [NGOs] were created, financed and existed under the patronage of the governmental and civic organizations of the US and their NATO allies."⁴⁷² The connection between NATO, the USA and Russian non-governmental organizations thus discursively created an image of NGOs as betrayers of the country. In order to demonstrate a degree of impartiality, Mamontov noted that the majority of non-governmental organizations assisted the people in the spheres where the government was unable to help. Despite that, Mamontov emphasized, the people who worked in Russian NGOs must be more honest and work for the interests of Russia, as opposed to the organizations mentioned in the documentary.⁴⁷³

The narrative of Mamontov's documentary correlated with the main narratives regarding the work of NGOs in Russia in the aftermath of the "Orange Revolution." On the one hand, it supported Patrushev's claim that the foreign intelligence services worked through

⁴⁷¹ "Spetsial'nyiĭ korrespondent: Shpiony," Youtube video, 11:27, televised by *Rossiia*, January 22, 2006, posted by "GeopoliticsofEurasia," January 3, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5ePL1wDuiQ>.

⁴⁷² The transcript of the programme is available here: "Shpiony," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, January 30, 2006, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/644690>.

⁴⁷³ Andreĭ Baranov and Dmitriĭ Steshin, "Telezhurnal'ist Arkadiĭ Mamontov: ia rasskazal, kak protiv nas shpionit Zapad. A menia nazvali dushitelem svobody," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, January 27, 2006, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23648.4/49247/>.

NGOs. On the other hand, it developed further Putin's argument that some NGOs consisted of corrupt people primarily interested in monetary gain. Moreover, to substantiate the claim of the external threat, Mamontov used the critical remark by Condoleezza Rice, the then US Secretary of State, about the new Russian legislation on NGOs.⁴⁷⁴ In this context Rice's speech, which also praised the successes of the Ukrainian civil society, perfectly fitted the conspiratorial view of NGOs as agents of foreign subversion.

Russian journalists who investigated the production of Mamontov's film found out that the Rossiia channel production crew played virtually no role in this case. Instead, the production was almost entirely in the hands of the FSB. Furthermore, the urgency with which Mamontov's film was broadcast (it replaced another earlier scheduled programme) indicates the government's involvement in the matter.⁴⁷⁵ Representatives of NGOs, which were discussed in the programme, also stated that the documents mentioned in the programme were signed by the first secretary of the British Embassy, but not by Doe.⁴⁷⁶ These facts demonstrated that the conspiratorial story about a spy rock was deliberately disseminated with the purpose of delegitimizing NGOs and linking them to foreign spying activities within Russia. The link between foreign spies and NGOs widely disseminated by the state-aligned media allowed the authorities to reach a wide audience and influence the perception of non-governmental organizations among ordinary Russians.

The broadcast of *The Spies* also opened the floor to debates among politicians about the necessity to control NGOs. In this regard, the documentary supplied the "factual basis" and provided another chance to bring the conspiratorial interpretation of NGOs' activities into the public sphere. Without specifying which NGOs were involved in the alleged spy scandal, the deputies of the Duma expressed concern regarding the funding of NGOs by foreign intelligence services. The very fact that the deputies avoided accusing concrete organizations created an atmosphere of suspicion towards all NGOs, regardless of their activity or possible affiliation with foreign sponsors. Sergeĭ Mironov, the then head of the Council of the Federation, noted that the spy scandal clearly demonstrated the need for strict laws regulating NGOs.⁴⁷⁷ A few days later Putin also supported this idea. He complained that the work of foreign intelligence services with NGOs destroyed the reputation of human rights

⁴⁷⁴ Glenn Kessler, "Secretary Criticizes Russia's NGO Law," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/07/AR2005120701681.html>.

⁴⁷⁵ Svetlana Metel'eva and Aleksandr Raskin, "Spetskor upolnomochen zaiavit'," *Russkii Newsweek*, no. 4, January 30, 2006, 17.

⁴⁷⁶ Mikhail Fishman, "A kamen' prosto otkryvalsia," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, no.4, January 30, 2006, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/644690>.

⁴⁷⁷ "Gosduma osudila britanskiu razvedku, no ne nazvala 'opasnye NPO'," *REGNUM*, January 25, 2006, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/578894.html>.

activists.⁴⁷⁸ Using the chance to reiterate what he had already stated earlier about the hypocrisy of civil society organizations in Russia, Putin insisted that the new law was legitimate and served to protect Russian sovereignty.

The story of the “spy rock” and its conspiratorial interpretation in the federal media and among leading politicians became the first example of state-aligned Russian television becoming a pace-setter in the all-Russian political agenda. The structure of the narrative and the absence of the concrete accused side left enough space for conspiratorial narratives aimed at the delegitimization of non-governmental organizations through a claimed connection with foreign intelligence services. Despite the demands of civic activists that journalists withdraw their accusations and a lawsuit initiated by the leader of the *Moscow Helsinki Group* Liudmila Alekseeva against Mamontov, the conspiratorial narrative about non-governmental organizations continued to play a major role in the political discourse from 2006 onwards. This narrative was further developed as the next wave of repressions came into place.

5.2. NGOs as “Foreign Agents”: New Developments in the Anti-Western Conspiracy Discourse

The unprecedented wave of civic activism in the post-election period in 2011-2012 made NGOs a primary object of governmental surveillance and repression. A pretext for the campaign against them appeared rather accidentally. In January 2012, during the peak of the protests in Russia, BBC 2 broadcast a documentary entitled *Putin, Russia and the West*. In the second episode of the documentary, Tony Blair’s Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, admitted that the spy rock, which was chosen to trigger a campaign against NGOs in 2006, was real.⁴⁷⁹ This news was somewhat shocking for members of the anti-Putin opposition, as the “spy rock” story was widely considered to have been entirely invented by the FSB. In the meantime, Powell’s admission was utilized by pro-Kremlin reporters and public intellectuals in their attack on the opposition.⁴⁸⁰ Mamontov gave several interviews to pro-Kremlin reporters in which he criticized leaders of the Russian opposition for being hypocritical and for their

⁴⁷⁸ “Zaiavleniia dlia pressy i otvety na voprosy po itogam zasedaniia Mezhhgosudarstvennogo Soveta Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soobshchestva,” (press-conference, January 25, 2006, Moscow), http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/01/25/2257_type63377type63380_100687.shtml.

⁴⁷⁹ “Episode 2: Democracy Threatens,” *Putin, Russia and the West*, BBC 2 (London, January 18, 2012).

⁴⁸⁰ The news became headlines in the newscasts of all federal channels. See, “Byvshii glava kantseliarii eks-prem’era Britanii podverdil dostovernost’ istorii so ‘shpionskim kamnem,’” *Channel One*, January 19, 2012, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/world/196888>, “Ekspert: ‘shpionskii kamen’ stoit desiati millionov funtov sterlingov,” *Rossia*, January 19, 2012, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=690724>.

lack of loyalty to their country.⁴⁸¹ Yet again the main conspiratorial ideas, elaborated in the mid-2000s by Putin and his supporters, were revived and utilized against their political opponents.

This unexpected update to the story provided Mamontov with an opportunity for another documentary on the topic, entitled *Shpionskii kamen'* (*The Spy Rock*) which was broadcast on 22 January, 2012.⁴⁸² Half of the documentary consisted of episodes of the 2006 broadcast in order to remind viewers of the case. Using Powell's interview as a pretext, Mamontov accused several leaders of Russian NGOs of having dual citizenship and thus linked them with the political "Other" of the Russian nation, the US.

The primary object of his attack was Liudmila Alekseeva, who had received a US passport in 1982 after she had been expelled from the Soviet Union for her human rights activities.⁴⁸³ Despite the fact that dual citizenship is a common phenomenon, the Russian authorities and pro-Kremlin intellectuals systematically interpret it as a sign of potential disloyalty towards Russia.⁴⁸⁴ In the same way Mamontov discursively divided Russian society and separated NGO leaders from the rest of the nation on the basis of their alleged disloyalty. Stating that every new citizen of the US must swear an oath of loyalty to the country, Mamontov claimed that Russian human rights activists must be absolutely clear about their loyalty insisting that dual citizenship inevitably caused a complex situation for people like Alekseeva. The reference to foreign citizenship alongside evidence of the British espionage served as a framework to further enhance the conspiratorial perception of civic organizations.

Mamontov's programme became an important turning point for another round of conspiracy mythmaking against NGOs. In order to link the fact of Alekseeva's dual citizenship to her activity within Russia, Mamontov suggested to introduce the term "foreign agents" (*inostrannye agenty*) for organizations funded from abroad, which engaged in political activism.

Most importantly, Mamontov referred to the legislation of the US, in particular, using the *Foreign Agents Registration Act* (FARA) as a template for Russian policy concerning

⁴⁸¹ See, for example, Dar'ia Cherkudinova, "Kamen', kotoryi ia derzhal v rukakh, byl tot samyi, angliiskii?," *Izvestiia*, January 19, 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/512379>.

⁴⁸² "Spetsial'nyi korrespondent: 'Shpionskii kamen'," Youtube video, 30:21, televised by *Rossia*, January 22, 2012, posted by "GeopoliticsofEurasia," January 22, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yukgmHtjz3Q>.

⁴⁸³ "Ludmila Alekseeva answers Arkady Mamontov," *Rights in Russia*, January 24, 2012, <http://hro.rightsinrussia.info/archive/ngos/mamontov/alekseeva>.

⁴⁸⁴ In this context the latest legislative initiative to fine or sentence the holders of dual citizenship for a failure to inform the authorities about that, is noteworthy. See "Bill Proposes Fines For Those 'Hiding' Dual Citizenship," *The Moscow Times*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/bill-proposes-fines-for-those-hiding-dual-citizenship/497136.html>.

NGOs.⁴⁸⁵ The law, which was introduced in the US in 1938, required organizations, which had any affiliation with foreign powers to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of Justice.⁴⁸⁶ Used mainly against Nazi propaganda within the US, the law was amended in the 1960s to define as agents any organization, which sought economic revenue or political advantage by influencing American governmental policies. In the Russian situation, the main emphasis was placed on the fact that American counterintelligence was officially responsible for monitoring the abovementioned organizations.

This highly selective utilization of foreign legislation is characteristic of Kremlin policies to implement controversial laws. By referring to the so-called “Western practices,” pro-Kremlin politicians and loyal intellectuals thus justify their actions as “conventional.”⁴⁸⁷ In our case, the US law to monitor foreign lobbying groups and organizations within the US served to legitimize the introduction of further amendments into Russian legislation on NGOs.⁴⁸⁸ A reference to the American law was used to reinforce the notion of an internal enemy in public discourse and to claim the existence of subversive groups within Russia.

A group of pro-Kremlin public intellectuals and Duma deputies with the support of the state-aligned media led a new campaign promoting anti-Western conspiratorial notions. This alliance proved to be efficient in the realization of desired goals in the past because it helped to disseminate widely conspiratorial notions among the public and then to justify adopting restrictive laws. Among the most active supporters of the new law were two deputies, Aleksandr Sidiakin and Evgeniï Fëdorov, while Veronika Krasheninnikova, former head of the Council for Trade and Economic Cooperation USA-CIS, justified the amendments by references to her personal experience. She claimed that in 2006-2010 she was a representative of the city of St. Petersburg in the US and was registered as a foreign agent in that country. She often used this fact to validate the law’s introduction as part of the “common practice” of a democratic country.

The very term “foreign agent” echoed the accusations used against numerous innocent Soviet citizens during the Great Purges in the 1930s. Article 58 of the Criminal law of the RSFSR, which was introduced during Stalin’s rule, treated relations with a foreign state or its

⁴⁸⁵ “Spetsial’nyi korrespondent: ‘Shpionskii kamen’?”

⁴⁸⁶ The Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, 22 USC. § 611-621 (1938).

⁴⁸⁷ An exceptionally telling utilization of this argument could be found in Maksim Shevchenko’s interview, see Elisabeth Schimpfoss, Ilya Yablokov, “Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self-Censorship among Russian Media Personalities and Reporters in the 2010s,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22, no. 2 (2014): 295-312.

⁴⁸⁸ The comparative analysis of the Foreign Agents Registration Act and its Russian version could be found in Vladimir Kara-Murza, “‘Inostrannye agenty’ v Rossii i SShA: mify i real’nost’,” *Institut sovremennoï Rossii*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.imrussia.org/ru/politics/455>.

representatives as a serious crime against the Soviet state, often punishable by death.⁴⁸⁹ The term “agent of a foreign country” was utilized in the political discourse of Stalin’s Soviet Union and was used as a synonym for terms related to the conspiratorial notion of the “fifth column”: a *spy* (*shpion*) or a *subversive element* (*podryvnoi element*).⁴⁹⁰ During Gorbachev’s glasnost and the 1990s such terminology was represented as the epitome of injustice in Stalin’s regime. However, the reintroduction of the term from the 1930s in relation to NGOs aimed at “othering” them and demonstrated the engagement of the Kremlin with the politics of historical memory.⁴⁹¹

In fact, the official initiators of the new law attempted to separate the term from the memory of Stalinist repression and frame the narrative about it within the so-called “international standards of work with NGOs.”⁴⁹² At the same time, the introduction of terms which are closely related to the memory of the Great Purges demonstrates the dependence of the official political discourse on the vocabulary of the Soviet era. As Oushakine argued, this connection to the language of the past simultaneously demonstrates the remoteness of the context in which this language was initially utilized.⁴⁹³ For example, in the case of Stalin’s repressions the accusation of being a “foreign agent” could cause immediate arrest. In turn, during the campaign in 2012 it was emphasized that the use of the term should not necessarily be seen as leading to repressions and that the law simply required a particular reference in the title of an organization to indicate its affiliation with a foreign sponsor.⁴⁹⁴

On 8 July, 2012, the weekly newscast *Vesti nedeli* (*News of the Week*), on the Rossiia channel, broadcast a report on the parliamentary debates about the new law. It included interviews with Sidiakin and Krasheninnikova and reflected the main tropes of the narrative that turned NGOs into a subversive “Other.” Thus Sidiakin contended that, in the past few years, approximately seven billion dollars was transferred from abroad to certain Russian NGOs and that the biggest transfers were made during the electoral period. This statement,

⁴⁸⁹ “Stat’ia 58 UK RSFSR”, <http://stalinism.ru/dokumentyi/statya-58-uk-rsfsr.html>.

⁴⁹⁰ See, for example, a key speech made by Stalin on the eve of the Great Purge, I.V. Stalin, “O nedostatkakh partiinoi raboty i merakh likvidatsii trotskistskikh i inykh dvurushnikov: Doklad na Plenum TSK VKP(b),” in Stalin I.V. *Sochineniia*. Vol.14 (Moscow: Pisatel’, 1997), 151-173.

⁴⁹¹ For further discussion on the politics of memory in Putin’s Russia, see Alekseĭ Miller, “Istoricheskaia politika v Rossii: novyi povорот?” in *Istoricheskaia politika v XXI veke: sbornik stateĭ*, ed. Alekseĭ Miller and Mariia Lipman (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012), 328-367.

⁴⁹² Konstantin Kostin, “Ne nado smotret’ na ‘tretii sektor’ kak na piatuiu kolonnu,” *Izvestiia*, April 1, 2013, <http://izvestia.ru/news/547731>.

⁴⁹³ Oushakine, “In the State of Aphasia,” 998-999.

⁴⁹⁴ Sergeĭ Smirnov, “Medvedev: V slove ‘agent’ net nichego plokhogo,” *Vedomosti*, December 12, 2012, http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/6930971/medvedev_v_slove_agent_net_nichego_plokhogo#ixzz2EMGZkLnk.

made without any documented evidence, clearly reflected the Kremlin's main concern over the possibility of foreign influence on the outcome of elections. It also revealed the real aim of the new law - to ensure a safe transfer of power in future elections by restricting the activities of independent observers.

Sidiakin's conspiratorial hint repeated popular fears of foreign subversion spread by pro-Kremlin spokesmen during the period of Putin's presidential election campaign in 2012. Sidiakin asserted that the law would only deal with a minority of NGOs closely related to foreign foundations. This report then included Liudmila Alekseeva's statement in which she spoke about her complaint to the US president with regard to the new law. According to the reporter this was a clear demonstration of where the loyalty of such activists lay.⁴⁹⁵ The report demonstrated the centrality of the widely watched state-aligned television to providing the coverage of the law from the regime's point of view, which heavily relied on the conspiratorial ideas which were intentionally elaborated for the campaign.

In addition to the Soviet propaganda notions, active supporters of the new law utilized different conspiratorial theories with origins in the post-Soviet period. For example, during the presentation of the new law to the Duma, Sidiakin wore the St. George ribbon in order to visually contrast his initiative with the anti-regime protesters who wore white ribbons as their symbol in 2011-2012. The St. George ribbon was a symbol of soldier's bravery in Imperial Russia and after the Second World War was reintroduced as a military award. The St. George ribbon had been re-invented by pro-Kremlin journalists in 2005 partly in response to the orange ribbons, a symbol of the "Orange revolution" in Ukraine.⁴⁹⁶ According to Alekseï Miller, the St. George ribbon became one of the most successfully constructed symbols of historical memory in post-Soviet Russia, which commemorated the patriotism and heroic deeds of Soviet soldiers during the Second World War.⁴⁹⁷ Sidiakin's utilization of this symbol aimed at stressing the patriotism of the law which was called on to defend the sovereignty of the nation, in contrast to the allegedly unpatriotic actions of the opposition. The performative character of Sidiakin's speech was manifested in trampling the white ribbon under foot as a sign of resistance to foreign subversion.⁴⁹⁸ These two symbols were juxtaposed in a conspiratorial way, with the intention of emphasizing the "otherness" of NGOs while, at the

⁴⁹⁵ Pavel Zarubin, "Zakon ob NKO vyzval ostruiu polemiku," *Rossia-1*, July 8, 2012, <http://www.vesti7.ru/archive/news?id=36564>.

⁴⁹⁶ Mikhail Zygar', "Sviazannye odnoi lentoi," *Kommersant-Vlast*, May 15, 2006, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/673083>.

⁴⁹⁷ Alekseï Miller, "Izobretenie traditsii," *Pro et Contra* 16, no. 3 (2012): 94-97.

⁴⁹⁸ "Sidiakin nazval beluiu lentu simbolom kapituliatsii," Youtube video, 08:21, posted by "Alekseï Smelov," October 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c04UV3JsZFQ>.

same time, advocating the social cohesion of the rest of the nation on the basis of the memory of the Second World War.

The campaign against NGOs also utilised the conspiracy theories regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union. In July 2012, the prominent Russian radio station with liberal credentials, *Ekho Moskvy* (*Echo of Moscow*), broadcast a talk show about the law on NGOs. Describing the reasons for its implementation, Krasheninnikova accused Russian NGOs of planning to undermine state sovereignty and argued that NGOs participated in a long-term campaign orchestrated by the United States with the aim of destroying Russia and promoting anti-Russian ideas among Russia's citizens. "Yes, we destroyed [the USSR] ourselves. This is Washington's idea, look how deep [this idea] is embedded in your mind," argued Krasheninnikova.⁴⁹⁹ The reference to the Soviet collapse serving as a basis for changes in legislation marked the extent to which, by 2012, the reading of the Soviet collapse as an operation on the part of foreign intelligence had become essential to the political discourse in the country.

Because of the controversial nature of the label, which some Russian NGOs were supposed to obtain after the adoption of the new law, none of the organizations agreed to be included in the list of "foreign agents." As a result, in March 2013, the Russian law enforcement organs initiated a mass inspection of NGOs throughout the country, checking 233 NGOs in 52 regions.⁵⁰⁰

Among the first targeted were *Transparency International* and *Amnesty International*, major human rights organizations, which had been often critical of the domestic policies of the Kremlin. Another target of inspections was an independent sociological foundation, the Levada Centre, which was a prominent - indeed, the only - independent opinion polling company in the country at that time. The case of the inspection of the Levada Centre is particularly emblematic as it demonstrates the vagueness of the terms of the new law and the close connection of the law to the conspiratorial discourse. The pretext for inspection was the centre's alleged political activities, which was forbidden for NGOs with foreign funding. In the absence of any definition of political activities, the Levada Centre was accused of influencing the political situation within Russia by publishing the results of opinion surveys, which, in the government's view, were subversive to the regime.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ Veronika Krasheninnikova, interview by Tikhon Dzyadko and Sofiko Shevardnadze, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, July 10, 2012, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/oblozhka-1/907357-echo/#element-text>.

⁵⁰⁰ Mariia Zheleznova, "Proverki NKO okazalis' masshtabnee ozhidaniï," *Vedomosti*, April 16, 2013, http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/11182771/proverki_ne_vremya_dlya_dialoga.

⁵⁰¹ "Lev Gudkov prokommentiroval 'predosterezhenie' 'Levada tsentru'," *Kommersant-Online*, May 20, 2013, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2192914?fp=33>.

A public debate about the inspection erupted, with pro-Kremlin participants using conspiracy-based arguments to defend the actions of the law-enforcement organs. For instance, Evgeniï Fëdorov, a Duma deputy, contended that the Levada Centre was part of the “framework” of 664 NGOs, which were created in order to establish external control and exploitation of Russia by the West.⁵⁰² This conspiratorial notion was put forward to delegitimize the results of the centre’s polls, which demonstrated public disappointment with some Putin’s politics after 2012. The set of ideas articulated by Fëdorov, which were largely based on anti-Western conspiracy theories, could potentially be applied to various issues of domestic policy, which made them a significant instrument of social cohesion in the post-electoral period.

The role of conspiratorial narratives further increased in the media campaign against non-governmental organizations in 2013, which signified a change in the nature of governmental policies, after Putin’s re-election in 2012. While Mamontov’s documentary of 2006 had been one of a relatively small number of conspiratorial stories broadcast by the federal television channel when the campaign against NGOs first started, the frequency and diversity of such programmes and public speakers during Putin’s third presidential term extraordinarily increased.

For instance, the talk show *Politika*, broadcast by the state-aligned television Channel One in May 2013, demonstrated that, despite the participation of several discussants with different points of view, overall the programme gave a particular prominence to conspiracy theories by means of editing, giving voice to loyal intellectuals and the manipulative positions of moderators. Attempts on the part of the speakers who were opposed to the Kremlin to demonstrate faults with recent inspections were interrupted by the moderators, who immediately passed another question to loyal public intellectuals who, in turn, shifted the discussion in a different direction, employing conspiratorial rhetoric. For instance, the issue of civic activism, in which some NGOs were involved, was shifted into a discussion about the colour revolutions and the supposed role of the intelligence services in them.⁵⁰³ These manipulative practices created the impression of the plurality of opinions, even though the domination of conspiratorial ideas and the biased approach of the moderators determined the overall frame of the narrative, serving to delegitimize political opponents of the Kremlin.

A new campaign against NGOs carried out in 2012-2013 eventually impacted on the public perception of non-governmental organizations and established a conspiratorial image

⁵⁰² “‘Levada tsentru’ zakazyvaiut issledovaniia s tsel’iu vneshnego upravleniia nashei stranoi,” *Kommersant FM*, May 7, 2013, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2185439/print>.

⁵⁰³ See, for example, Viacheslav Nikonov and Mikhail Remizov’s remarks, “Politika,” *Channel One*, April 11, 2013, <http://www.1tv.ru/prj/tolstoy/vypusk/22702>.

of third sector organizations in the public discourse. According to a sociological poll conducted in May 2013 by the Levada Centre, which continued functioning despite the intimidating inspections and critical media coverage, 43 per cent of respondents considered influence on the domestic policies of Russia as the main aim of NGOs with foreign funding. Furthermore, 19 per cent of respondents perceived such NGOs as an internal threat to the country.⁵⁰⁴ Despite the fact that less than one fifth of respondents saw NGOs as clearly conspiring entities within Russia, almost a half of respondents perceived third sector organizations as a problematic factor in domestic life. Hence, the attempts to delegitimize the Kremlin's opponents by creating the subversive Other out of NGOs could be assessed as moderately, yet not fully, successful.

The prevalence of conspiratorial rhetoric in public discourse encouraged the construction of a link between the term "foreign agent" and the conspiratorial notion of the "fifth column," thus effectively discrediting NGOs as spy agencies.⁵⁰⁵ According to the abovementioned poll, in total 56 per cent of respondents believed that at least a few non-governmental organizations were spying on behalf of foreign governments. Apart from the impact on public opinion, 22 organizations were declared by the law-enforcement organs to be "foreign agents," mainly due to their critical assessment of governmental activities.⁵⁰⁶ In sum, it has become evident that by 2013 anti-Western conspiracy theories turned out to be fully embedded in domestic politics.

Conclusion

The conspiratorial conceptualization of Russian NGOs which was promoted in the public sphere from 2004 onwards was among the most significant, long-lasting ideological and political projects initiated by the Kremlin. Russian NGOs as political actors were important in fostering the values of a democratic society after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They provided people with assistance in various spheres of life, often filling the educational and social-support gaps left by the disappearance of the old system of state-sponsored social provision. Despite their relative weakness and inability to attract large numbers of activists,

⁵⁰⁴ The Levada centre opinion poll "Obshchestvennoe mnenie ob NKO s inostrannym finansirovaniem," conducted on April 19-22, 2013, N=1601, <http://www.levada.ru/17-05-2013/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-ob-nko-s-inostrannym-finansirovaniem>.

⁵⁰⁵ See, Denis Volkov's, representative of the Levada Centre, reference to the poll according to which approximately 60 per cent of the Russians connected the term *foreign agent* with the terms "fifth column" and "a spy." Denis Volkov, interview by Vitalii Dymarskii and Kseniia Larina, *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, May 10, 2013, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/year2013/1070590-echo/>.

⁵⁰⁶ Natal'ia Gorodetskaia, "Genprokuratura vynesla opredelenie politicheskoi deiatel'nosti," *Kommersant*, August 23, 2013, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2261048>.

non-governmental organizations were the main sources of civil education and, from this perspective, could help advance democratic values among the population.⁵⁰⁷ However, the events in Georgia and Ukraine, where NGOs played an important role in facilitating regime change, made them the first target of counter-reforms to secure Putin's hold on power. With the help of state-aligned media and public intellectuals, conspiracy mythmaking became a key tool in the discursive construction of the negative image of Russian NGOs. These notions were intended to help the Kremlin to deprive independent civil society institutions of legitimacy and thus of the possibility of becoming important political actors.⁵⁰⁸

The three public campaigns against NGOs, promoted by both the media and shaped within conspiracy theories, served to initiate changes and to justify the restrictions on NGOs. These measures caused a two-fold decrease in the number of non-governmental organizations, from approximately 400,000 in 2005 to less than 220,000 in 2013.⁵⁰⁹ Given the absence of effective governmental support for social and humanitarian initiatives, this drop in the number of NGOs influenced the development of civil society in Russia. The allegations against NGOs of their lack of loyalty to the Russian nation also paved the way for the government to continue creating from above supposedly civil society actors, fully loyal to the Kremlin.⁵¹⁰

The process of othering NGOs, performed by public intellectuals and politicians through anti-Western conspiracy discourse, was primarily aimed at ensuring that civic organizations acquired a poor reputation among the majority of Russians. In fact, the fear on the part of the political elites that they themselves could lose legitimacy because of the activities of NGOs further encouraged them to use anti-Western conspiracy theories as an important instrument of political practice. A significant increase in the scale of conspiracy fears about NGOs during Putin's second and third presidential terms allows us to trace both

⁵⁰⁷ Sergej Ljubownikow, Jo Crotty and Peter Rodgers, "The state and civil society in Post-Soviet Russia: The development of a Russian-style civil society," *Progress in Development Studies* 13, no. 2, (2013): 153-166.

⁵⁰⁸ Vladimir Gel'man, "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire? Post-Soviet Regime Changes in Comparative Perspective," *International Political Science Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 175-176.

⁵⁰⁹ See, Dmitrii Kamyshev, Nikolai Gul'ko, "Na pervyĭ-vtoroi otchitaĭs'!" *Kommersant-Vlast'*, December 19, 2005, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/636567>. For the total number of NGOs in Russia in 2013 see the report of the Ministry of Justice, "OB OSUSHCHESTVLENII MINISTERSTVOM IUSTITSII ROSSIĖSKOĖ FEDERATSII GOSUDARSTVENNOGO KONTROLIA (NADZORA) V SFERE DEIATEL'NOSTI NEKOMERCHESKIKH ORGANIZATSII I OB EFPEKTIVNOSTI TAKOGO KONTROLIA," Moscow, 2013, <http://minjust.ru/ru/node/4851>.

⁵¹⁰ Liliia Biriukova, Mariia Zheleznova, "Blizkie k narodnomu frontu organizatsii raspredeliat prezident'skie granty," *Vedomosti*, April 4, 2013, http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/10624961/granty_doverennym.

the evolution of the anti-Western conspiracy discourse and the continuity of methods involved in solving domestic political issues.

The campaign against NGOs in 2005-2006 was carried out by a few media outlets, which involved the most influential ones and it began to shape public opinion regarding the work of NGOs. It did not require too much effort on the part of the Kremlin for it to create a conspiratorial image of NGOs as a subversive agency within the country among ordinary Russians, as both knowledge about and interest in their activities were relatively low. However, the unstable political situation in the aftermath of the elections in March 2012 elections significantly radicalized the official political discourse. The dramatic decrease in public support for the government forced pro-Kremlin politicians and intellectuals to use all available discursive tools to ensure social cohesion and public support of the regime. Given an already elaborated image of NGOs as the dangerous conspiring Other, a new wave in the Kremlin-led campaign against NGOs appeared to be a straightforward way to suppress one of the few noticeable opponents of the regime.

Conclusion

In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, anti-Western conspiracy theories gradually moved from the political margins to the core of official political discourse. By 2014, the image of the West as the conspiring “Other” had become a crucial element of official discourse regularly utilized by the political elites, including top level politicians, in order to gain public support and delegitimize the opposition. This process of systematically mainstreaming anti-Western conspiracy theories began in the mid-2000s. Major developments in Russian politics in the 2000s demonstrate that Fenster’s understanding of conspiracy theories as a populist theory of power is valid not only for the analysis of US politics but can shed light onto political developments of post-communist societies.

The absence of clear ideological underpinnings of the current Russian political regime has been often noted in scholarship.⁵¹¹ Such a regime is more flexible, than totalitarian, as it allows citizens to do business and travel abroad, and leaves an almost unlimited space for self-expression. In addition to that, a positive economic dynamic and the growth of wealth in the 2000s contributed to the popularity of, and public support, for Putin’s policies. However, the approaching end of Putin’s presidency in 2008, especially alongside the wave of colour revolutions in the CIS countries, provoked concern among the political establishment and turned the preservation of Putin’s power into the crucial task of the Kremlin. As part of this process, with the support of loyal public intellectuals, the Kremlin formulated a powerful narrative, which juxtaposed the Russian nation with the West, against whose intrigues only Putin could protect Russia. This stance has been turned into the main ideological pivot of the regime for forthcoming years.

Daniel Treisman pointed out that post-communist Russian ruling elites have always kept a close eye on the results of opinion polls; under Putin and Medvedev this tendency became even more pronounced as all major political decisions had, somehow, to be reconciled with the public mood.⁵¹² The Russian authorities’ concern about their action’s congruence with popular attitudes has been reflected in constant populist appeals of political leaders for the support of the majority of Russians. This tendency peaked in the 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 electoral cycles when the discursively constructed “Putin majority” (*putinskoe bol’shinstvo*) became a significant factor of domestic politics. Hence, in the 2000s, widespread approval of Putin became a key tool which allowed legitimization of the policies introduced by the Kremlin to ensure control over the country

⁵¹¹ See, for example, Ivan Krastev, “Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 13. For the similar point regarding the ruling Edinaia Rossiia Party, see Vladimir Gel’man, “Transformatsiia rossiiskoi partiinoi sistemy” (public lecture, Moscow, Russia, March 14, 2008), <http://polit.ru/article/2008/03/14/gelman/>.

⁵¹² Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia’s Journey From Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 256.

In official discourse, Putin was represented as the only possible leader for the country and an embodiment of “the Russian people,” whose interests and demands he allegedly fulfilled. Following Laclau’s definition of populism, it could be argued that in the 2000s Putin became a populist leader whose rhetoric aimed at the gathering of different elements of the social into the broad category of “the people,” defined as the “Putin majority,” on the basis of popular demands. At the beginning of the 2000s, the public demand consisted of a strong, stable state and greater social equality. It could be argued that Putin’s administrative reforms and attacks on oligarchs not only partially fulfilled public demand, but also established Putin’s authority. From the mid-2000s, the maintenance of economic and political stability in the country was indeed the issue of concern for many Russians. Using this concern as a pretext for political campaign, pro-Kremlin intellectuals and politicians instrumentally linked the economic growth of the 2000s with the image of Putin as a successful leader. Hence, the popular demand of ordinary Russians to preserve stability has been bound up with the need for the ruling elites stay in power. This goal was gradually achieved through the suppression of democratic institutions and attacks on civil society.

The transition towards greater authoritarianism in the 2000s was accompanied by discourse that contrasted the “Putin majority” to the minority of dissents who disagreed with the Kremlin’s political agenda. Since 2004, dissent voices have been regularly considered as the “subversive Other,” which is alien to the nation and more loyal to the West than to Russia. This discursive division of Russian society, which was based on a conspiratorial reading of the past and current historical events, gradually evolved into the basic framework through which Russian domestic developments were interpreted. Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012 further elevated the anti-Western conspiracy theories into one of the key discursive tools used to explain the necessity for new legislative initiatives and the suppression of the opposition.

A lucid illustration of how essential anti-Western conspiracy theories have become for the political establishment in Russia can be seen in the Kremlin’s reaction to the rapid and dramatic developments in Ukraine in 2013/2014. The media campaign to interpret Russia’s policies in Ukraine has been framed by pro-Kremlin politicians within Russia as a payback for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, supposedly organized by the West. Through the press and television talk shows, public intellectuals and politicians loyal to the Kremlin interpreted the Euromaidan movement as an outcome of subversive Western action which brainwashed Ukrainian citizens and set them against Russia.⁵¹³ After Viktor Yanukovich had

⁵¹³ See, for example, the interview with Konstantin Kosachev, head of the governmental agency to promote Russia abroad: Polina Khimshiashvili, “Interv’iu – Konstantin Kosachev, rukovoditel’ Rossotrudnichestva,” *Vedomosti*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/23897621/v-krizis-v-razy-povysilas-poseschaemost-kurosov-baleta>.

fled in February 2014, the opposition which came to power has been described as “the fascist government” under the auspices of the US.⁵¹⁴ At the same time, the intervention in the Crimea in March 2014 was justified by the need to protect “compatriots” from extreme Ukrainian nationalists backed by the West. The Crimea’s annexation has been described in the state-aligned press as the end of the New World Order rule in Russia and a key step in the construction of the Russian nation.⁵¹⁵

Anti-Western conspiracy theories have been receiving open endorsement not only from public intellectuals and rank-and-file politicians, but also from the Kremlin. Putin’s appeal to the Council of the Federation on 1 March 2014 for permission to deploy military force in Ukraine was explained by the senators of the Federation Council in terms of the threat of a US invasion of Ukraine and supported unanimously.⁵¹⁶ The protest of some Russian citizens against Russia’s policies was interpreted by top Russian officials as an evidence of the presence of an “anti-national fifth column” within the country. Putin’s press secretary, Peskov, called the presidential critics a “nano-fifth column” (*nano-piatataia kolonna*) thus downplaying the significance of alternative opinions in the country.⁵¹⁷ In addition, in his address to the Federal Assembly concerning the referendum on independence in the Crimea, Putin himself linked the possible emergence of economic difficulties in the future with the actions of the “traitors of the nation” (*national-predatelei*) supported from abroad.⁵¹⁸ So, yet again, top-ranking politicians not only discursively divided the nation into the loyal, patriotic majority and the unreliable minority, but also provided an explanation of inevitable future economic problems, which would arise from economic sanctions and capital outflows.

The efforts of the Kremlin’s campaign resulted in a growing belief among the Russian population that the West stood behind the unrest in Ukraine.⁵¹⁹ In March 2014, 58 per cent of Russians supported military intervention and 79 per cent supported the annexation of the

⁵¹⁴ See Veronika Krashennnikova’s remark at “Krym: Itogi referendum,” the Politika show, *Channel One*, 1:18:10, March 16, 2014, http://www.1tv.ru/projects_edition/si5905/f30185.

⁵¹⁵ Mikhail Remizov, “Zhertva krymskoï kampanii,” *Izvestiia*, March 14, 2014, <http://izvestia.ru/news/567486>.

⁵¹⁶ “Stenogramma trista sorok sed’mogo (vnecherednogo) zasedaniia Soveta Federatsii,” The Council of the Federation, March 1, 2014, <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/41d4c8b9772e9df14056.pdf>.

⁵¹⁷ “Peskov: million rossiian podderzhivaiut Putina v situatsii s Ukrainoi,” *RIA Novosti*, 7 March, 2014, <http://ria.ru/politics/20140307/998669395.html#ixzz2wLI7sGeZ>.

⁵¹⁸ “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” 18 March, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603>.

⁵¹⁹ According to the Levada Centre opinion poll conducted in February 2014, 43 per cent of Russians believed that the West stood behind the protests in Ukraine. See, “Otnoshenie zhitelei Ukrainy i Rossii k sobytiyam v Ukraine,” The Levada Centre opinion poll, N=1603, <http://www.levada.ru/03-03-2014/otnoshenie-zhitelei-ukrainy-i-rossii-k-sobytiyam-v-ukraine>.

Crimea.⁵²⁰ Simultaneously, support for Putin reached 85 per cent in July 2014, a record high for the period since the presidential elections in 2012.⁵²¹ At the same time, opinion polls demonstrated a growth of negative attitudes towards the European Union and the United States.⁵²²

To a large extent, the impact of current events in Ukraine on Russian domestic policies in 2014 is at least equally, if not more, significant as the shock experienced by Kremlin officials in 2004 during the so-called “Orange revolution” in Kiev. The political changes in Russia in the decade between the two Ukrainian “revolutions” and the Russian political elites’ response to them provides us with an opportunity to make an overall evaluation of the role played by anti-Western conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russian political development.

A detailed analysis of the nature and employment of anti-Western conspiracy theories in the Russian context has demonstrated that throughout the post-Soviet period conspiracy theories evolved from a marginal phenomenon into a universal instrument of political struggles. In the 1990s the Kremlin came to realize the value and efficiency of conspiracy theories for ruling elites wanting to keep a grip on power. However, an almost total state monopoly on the media at the end of the 2010s allowed the Kremlin to turn the seemingly bizarre conspiratorial narratives into an integral part of reality for many Russians.

It would certainly be an exaggeration to claim that Russian political elites sowed a fear of Western conspiracy among Russians in order to control Russian society. More likely, Russian authorities capitalized on the traumatic memories of *perestroika* and the first post-Soviet years. They created an image of the West as the dangerous and conspiring “Other” and thus transformed this image into a powerful instrument of social polarization.

Each case-study explored in this thesis has demonstrated how a carefully chosen language of conspiracy fermented anti-Western attitudes and how these attitudes helped reinforce the power claims of political elites. The analysis conducted on primary sources demonstrates that Russian political elites are keen on using every element of historical memory and sociopolitical reality that fits their agenda to gain their goals. The absence of appropriate facts does not appear to be an obstacle as a wide range of loyal experts and pseudo-intellectuals are able to invent conspiratorial myths from scratch, weave them into the current political agenda and transmit them via loyal media outlets.

⁵²⁰ For more details see the interview with Lev Gudkov, the director of the Levada Centre: “Putin perestal byt’ ‘teflonovym,’” *Gazeta.ru*, March 13, 2014, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/03/13_a_5948629.shtml.

⁵²¹ “Iul’skie reitingi odobreniia,” The Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on 18-21 July 2014, N=1600, <http://www.levada.ru/24-07-2014/iyulskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>.

⁵²² “Otnoshenie rossiian k drugim stranam,” The Levada Centre opinion poll, conducted on March 21-24 2014, N=1603, <http://www.levada.ru/02-04-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>.

The analysis of conspiracy theories in this thesis and its consideration of the way they are manifested in public space has enabled an assessment of the scale of efforts on the part of Russian politicians and spin doctors to create a sophisticated political discourse. Through the study of Surkov's idea of Russia as a sovereign democracy and Putin's careful handling of conspiratorial rhetoric it is possible to recognise the shrewdness of political maneuvering of the Kremlin officials.

As discussed throughout the thesis, the change of regime in Ukraine in 2004 was one of the important factors triggering a dramatic increase in the utilization of conspiracy theories as an essential instrument of social cohesion. The notion of Western conspiracy became an important functional element of political ideology, which exploits people's nostalgia of past greatness, justifies the authoritarian turn and provides a basis for a short-term social cohesion. In the 2000s, a growing nostalgia for the Soviet Union and the absence of public consensus regarding events of the recent past allowed the Kremlin to simulate national cohesion. As chapter 2 demonstrates, Russia's political and intellectual elites in the 2000s made the conspiratorial reading of the Soviet collapse a crucial factor of domestic policies. Pro-Kremlin intellectuals and politicians labelled the opposition to the Kremlin, which shared critical attitudes towards the Soviet Union, a "fifth column" conspiring against the Russian nation. Putin's definition of the Soviet collapse as "a major geopolitical disaster" transformed the negative attitude of ordinary Russians towards the Soviet collapse into the key marker of loyalty to the state and the nation. Those Russian citizens who have not shared the grief over the lost state became discursively excluded from the community of the Russian people and labelled as enemies working in cahoots with the West, which had once been instrumental in destroying Russia.

The idea of a "subversive agency" among the political elites of the Soviet Union and Russia, which contributed to the Soviet collapse, provided the basis for populist rhetoric among politicians and intellectuals. These theories appealed to some sections of Russian society and supplied the authorities with arguments to undermine the reputation of their political opponents, who had reputedly benefitted from the Soviet collapse. The attempted impeachment of El'tsin in 1999 had demonstrated that anti-Western conspiracy theories about the Soviet collapse could serve as a political tool, rather than simply remain an element in marginal ideologies. It showed the potential of creating short-term alliances with diverse political groups in order to pursue political goals. At the same time, the impeachment became the starting point for the relocation of these theories from the ideological arsenal of the opposition to the official political discourse.

The active employment of the conspiratorial reading of the Soviet collapse by Russian officials demonstrated the tactics of the Russian establishment in the 2000s. They adapted the

ideology of the national-patriotic opposition and used it against the Kremlin's current rivals – the liberal democratic and radical nationalist opposition. At first, Kremlin officials borrowed the dramatic and conspiratorial interpretation of the Soviet collapse from the intellectual set of ideas developed by the national patriots. Later, the intellectual leaders of the patriotic opposition of the 1990s gradually became the biggest advocates of the current regime. Aleksandr Dugin, a proponent of the ultimate standoff with the West, discussed in chapter 1, joined the coalition in support of Putin in the presidential elections in 2012. Two years later, he stood at the forefront of the public campaign in support of the annexation of the Crimea and advocated the military intervention in the Eastern Ukraine. Another leader of the national-patriotic forces whose media outlet was the key voice of the anti-El'tsin coalition in the 1990s, Aleksandr Prokhanov, in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2014 noted with satisfaction that he was “regularly invited to Kremlin events.”⁵²³ The transformation of these public intellectuals from leaders of the anti-government camp into the Kremlin's closest allies in the 2000s shows that the Kremlin has been taking every advantage to ensure maximum support from diverse communities in the country. In fact, as this thesis argues, public intellectuals and authorities need each other as both sides benefit from this collaboration. The active involvement of public intellectuals in the production and dissemination of anti-Western conspiracy theories raises their public profile and grants the support of the Kremlin. In turn, the Kremlin encourages the intellectuals' endeavour to disseminate anti-Western conspiracy theories as they help reinforce the power claims of political elites.

In the 2000s, the ruling political elites, with the support of prominent public intellectuals such as Gleb Pavlovskii, invested a great deal of time and money in creating a network of public intellectuals and media personalities who produced and disseminated anti-Western conspiracy theories among the Russian public. Regardless of political preferences or professional background, intellectuals loyal to the Kremlin represented the West as the main external enemy of Russia and also in control of opposition to Putin. At the same time, the efforts of these intellectuals transformed the figure of Putin into an icon of resistance to the West and the only guarantor of Russia's sovereignty. Overall, populist theories of Western conspiracy produced by public intellectuals became an influential tool with which to legitimize authoritarian rule and delegitimize its opponents.

Numerous think tanks and foundations led by prominent public intellectuals became an integral part of the policies aimed at the promotion of Vladislav Surkov's idea of Russia the sovereign democracy. Surkov's definition of the West as a competitor helped shift anti-

⁵²³ Ellen Barry, “Foes of America in Russia Crave Rupture in Ties,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/world/europe/foes-of-america-in-russia-crave-rupture-in-ties.html?hp&_r=3.

Western rhetoric from the margins of political discourse into the discourse of economy and finance. This, in turn, supplied the long-standing debates on Russian greatness with a pride in Russia's vast natural resources and explained the reasons of the alleged hostility of the West towards Russia. Moreover, Surkov represented Western societies as complex and pluralist, in which only some particular groups wished Russia ill. This change in anti-Western rhetoric, which traditionally represented the West as a single, monolithic entity, also contributed to the further legitimization of anti-Western conspiracy mythmaking in the public sphere.

Apart from meeting clearly political needs, the ever-growing presence of anti-Western conspiracy theories in official discourse of Putin's Russia could also be explained by the ability of conspiracy theories to create identities and promote national cohesion. As chapter 3 suggests, Russian political and intellectual elites in the 2000s opted for anti-Western conspiracy theories as a key tool of nation-building. They discursively created a dualistic worldview in which the Russian nation stood against its ultimate, conspiring "Other," the United States.

This discursive division of the world enabled the Kremlin to simulate the cohesion of the highly heterogeneous Russian society on the basis of animosity towards the US. The peaks of active social mobilization against the allegedly destructive US policy towards Russia were during the electoral cycles in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012. However, the wave of rallies against the regime from 2011 onwards, which came as a surprise to the Kremlin, radicalized the search for the conspiring "Other" connected to the US and turned the idea of resisting the US into a basis for legislative initiatives. The trial of Pussy Riot became a timely event for political authorities as it allowed Russian society to be discursively split between the "Russian Orthodox people" and the subversive "Other," in the aftermath of a challenging electoral campaign. However, these efforts to construct the nation on the basis of an alleged conspiracy against Orthodoxy had merely a short-term effect and were only partially connected to nation-building policies.

Conspiracy theories about Pussy Riot's ultimate threat to Russian national cohesion were used to link supporters of the band to protesters demanding fair elections in the country. The campaign against Pussy Riot became a media-constructed event aimed at polarizing society in the post-electoral period. It served as a bridge between a conspiratorial propaganda campaign against the West, embarked upon to ensure Putin's victory, and the anti-opposition campaign in the aftermath of the elections. The corpus of anti-Western conspiracy notions used in the debates around the Pussy Riot affair set the parameters of domestic politics during Putin's third term and helped counter-balance the anti-Kremlin claims of the opposition.

The impact of anti-Western conspiracy theories on political developments in Putin's Russia has never been as apparent as during the parliamentary and presidential elections of

2007-2008 and 2011-2012, when the struggle for guarding access to power tends to be particularly intense. As chapter 4 showed, throughout both electoral cycles well-orchestrated campaigns promoted Putin as an embodiment of “the people” who guaranteed the country’s sovereignty and independence from the West. Russian political scientist Kirill Rogov convincingly suggested that the Kremlin’s urge to create an “overwhelming majority” of Putin’s supporters is the way to consolidate elites and demonstrate the efficiency of the regime.⁵²⁴ Various anti-Western conspiracy theories, which had been actively developed by public intellectuals and pro-Kremlin politicians, emerged as an efficient instrument of popular mobilization. The two electoral periods of the new millennium became the revealing moments which demonstrated how various elements of the state and private institutions cooperated in an effort to maintain the regime. Public intellectuals and think tanks work together with the state-aligned media to aggressively promote fears of a colour revolution in Russia, which was reportedly organized by the West and its domestic allies. In turn, in their public speeches top-ranking politicians, including Putin, articulated anti-Western conspiratorial notions thus confirming the conspiracy narrative as an inherent and legitimate part of official political discourse.

As chapter 5 demonstrated, the citizen activism which had pre-empted Putin’s third presidential term made the government increase pressure on non-governmental organizations, which became the Kremlin’s first target in the aftermath of the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004. After 2004, pro-Kremlin public intellectuals and the state-aligned media swiftly shaped the image of NGOs as the conspiring “Other” within Russian society; these were supported by Western foundations and intelligence services and sought to subvert Russian society. This discursive backdrop clearly reflected the political elites’ fear of the possibility of a colour revolution taking place in Russia. Just after Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012, NGOs again found themselves at the centre of an aggressive campaign to delegitimize their activities by portraying them as dangerous and subversive. The political campaign against NGOs in 2012-2013 relied heavily on a corpus of anti-Western conspiracy theories developed in the 2000s with the active support of the Kremlin. The campaign demonstrated how joint effort by politicians, public intellectuals and the state-aligned media is able to launch conspiracy theories into the public space and justify repressive measures against political opponents. The relative decline of non-governmental institutions during the Putin years indicates the usefulness of conspiracy theories in the struggle for redistributing power between different political actors.

This study has also demonstrated the fact that the Russian authorities themselves appear to be the major protagonists and producers of conspiracy theories. As Kathryn

⁵²⁴ Kirill Rogov, “Sverkhbol’shinstvo dlia sverkhprezidentstva,” *Pro et Contra* 17, no. 3-4 (2013): 120.

Olmsted argued, in the United States the federal authorities are also partly responsible for the popularity of conspiracy fears among Americans, because in the past the government suppressed dissenting voices and concealed real conspiracies.⁵²⁵ Still, the main source of conspiracy theories in the US is located in grassroots movements, which perceive the federal government as the ultimate conspiring “Other.” In the Russian case, the picture is the reverse. The Kremlin and its allies among public intellectuals are major instigators of anti-Western conspiracy theories, which are transmitted through channels under the control of the government to the grassroots level of Russian society. This carefully sponsored process legitimizes Kremlin policies and operates in place of a coherent state ideology. Moreover, unlike in the US, political and intellectual elites utilize conspiratorial rhetoric to boost their popularity and build careers.

The prominence of anti-Western conspiracy theories in contemporary Russia and their active exploitation on domestic and foreign policy levels allows us to draw several conclusions about the future prospects of the discussed phenomena and the political regime.

The rallies in the winter of 2011-2012 symbolized a new period in post-Soviet Russian history and forced the Kremlin to reconsider the mechanism of governing the country. As this study demonstrated, in the 2000s anti-Western conspiracy theories targeted only particular political and non-governmental actors who, in theory, were able to undermine the legitimacy of the ruling elite. The principal aim of these theories was to secure victory in the elections. The failure of the Kremlin to accomplish a smooth transfer of power from Medvedev back to Putin in 2011, on the one hand, revealed a serious dissatisfaction with the state of things in the country on the part of some sections of the elites and middle-class citizens. On the other hand, the crisis of legitimacy highlighted problems within the political system, showing it to be in need of in-depth reform. As Vladimir Gel'man noted, after the rallies in 2011-2012 the maintenance of the status quo by any means available became the main goal of the Kremlin.⁵²⁶ Whilst the Kremlin sees this status quo as a preservation of power by incumbent politicians, ordinary Russians, with the help of the state-aligned media, perceive it as social and financial stability. In this context, anti-Western conspiracy theories have evolved from a smart instrument for delegitimizing political opponents into a widely employed interpretative frame for domestic and foreign policies.

The conspiratorial language chosen by the authorities in 2012 became the major tool to explain and justify their policies. The constant juxtaposition of “the people” of Russia,

⁵²⁵ Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 234.

⁵²⁶ Vladimir Gel'man, *Iz ognia da v polyimia: rossiiskaia politika posle SSSR* (St. Petersburg: “BKHV-Peterburg”, 2013), 191.

whose demand is the maintenance of the status quo, with the “Other,” who undermines the integrity of the nation, is a tool to deal with ever-emerging conflict in the country. Here the West serves as an embodiment of a powerful, external foe who supports internal enemies of the nation. Social mobilization is carried out through aggressive campaigns in the state-aligned media and allows the Kremlin to meet the social, political and interethnic challenges of the post-2012 period. For this reason, hardly any major legislative initiative of the Duma aimed at protecting the regime refrains from being framed as an act of resistance to the treacherous West.

The thesis has demonstrated that conspiracy theories, regardless of political system and the presence, or lack, of democratic tradition in the country, enable insight into the power relations among major political actors. As suggested in the introduction and proved over the course of the thesis, conspiracy theories are an integral part of any political regime of the modern world and thus should be contextualized and analyzed appropriately. Moreover, the analysis carried out has wide-ranging implications for further research in the area.

The Kremlin’s decision to annex a part of Ukraine and support separatists in its Eastern regions in the summer 2014 became the major challenge for European regional security; the whole post-1991 framework of international relations faltered in the face of the Ukrainian turmoil. This shift significantly impacted on the political landscape of the Central and Eastern European region, on the one hand, causing security concerns in the East European states (like Moldova), and, on the other hand, providing certain political leaders with a basis for reinforcing power in their state.

A clear example of this is the obsessive search of Viktor Orban's government for a conspiring “Other” in Hungary. Orban’s call to build an “illiberal state, a non-liberal state” and the series of measures aimed at destroying civil society institutions under the pretext of external threat resembles Putin’s policies to secure power in the 2000s.⁵²⁷ The attacks on NGOs, a fierce criticism of the West as well as the relocation of revanchist rhetoric from the far-right parties to the ruling party, Fidesz, all suggest similarities between the two countries.⁵²⁸ The approach to anti-Western conspiracy theories developed in this thesis could prove instrumental in studying political development in Hungary and add more details to the current investigations into anti-Semitic conspiracy mythmaking.⁵²⁹ More broadly, the approach could

⁵²⁷ Ian Traynor, “Budapest autumn: hollowing out democracy on the edge of Europe,” *The Guardian*, 29 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/29/budapest-viktor-orban-democracy-edge-hungary>.

⁵²⁸ Amy Brouillette, “The Autocrat Inside the EU,” *Foreign Policy*, August 21, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/21/the_autocrat_inside_the_eu_viktor_orban_hungary_illiberal_state.

⁵²⁹ Peter Kreko, “The empire of conspiracy: the axiomatic role of anti-Semitism in the ideology of the Hungarian extreme right,” in *Conspiracy Theories in Europe: A Compilation* (Counterpoint: 2014): 14-17.

be used to assess the power struggles in the post-socialist states of the Central and East European region, which is important for the democratic development of these societies.

Within this framework, the analysis of conspiracy theories in non-Western states has also proved to be a fruitful strategy to expose power relations and further explore the nature of authoritarian backlash. The application of Fenster's approach to study Russian politics could in the same way be utilized to study anti-Western conspiracy theories in Turkey where Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government actively uses conspiracy theories to destroy political opposition.⁵³⁰

The events in Ukraine in 2013-2014, the annexation of the Crimea and the Civil war in Eastern Ukraine marked another phase in the evolution of the Putin regime.⁵³¹ Similar to the effect of the "Orange revolution" in 2004, the consequences of the political unrest in Ukraine will be most evident in Russia, contributing to the further decay of civil society institutes and Russia's isolation from the world. The state-sponsored campaign of massive public support for the annexation of Crimea displays the same pattern as the previous movements that made "the people's" support of Putin so prominent that it was able to suppress the dissenting voices of the political "Other." As this thesis demonstrates, the centrality of conspiracy theories to the political discourse of Putin's Russia is necessary to guarantee the survival of the elites and their control over society. Therefore, the shift to revanchist and clearly conspiratorial rhetoric, which fills the ideological gap, and the biggest international conflict between Russia and the West since 1991 is likely to further increase the salience of anti-Western conspiracy theories as a major tool with which to manage Russia.

⁵³⁰ See, Necati Polat, "The Anti-Coup Trials in Turkey: What Exactly is Going On?," *Mediterranean Politics*, 16, no. 1 (2011): 213-219; "Turkey and the Army: Conspiracy theories," *The Economist*, January 29, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13040014>.

⁵³¹ The majority of scholars and observers agree that the annexation of the Crimea marked a new, more radical period of Putin's politics which will most probably bring about a degeneration of the state. For more details on this, see, for example, Aleksandr Morozov, "Konservativnaia revoliutsiia. Smysl Kryma," *Colta.ru*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.colta.ru/articles/society/2477>, and Daniel Treisman, "Watching Putin in Moscow" *Foreign Affairs*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141005/daniel-treisman/watching-putin-in-moscow>.

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