“This was all conceived by Churchill back in 1918...”

Conspiracy theory and the new Russian identity
Outline

1. Conspiracy theory: key texts and myths
2. Five sources of the conspiracy theory
3. Constructing the new Russian identity
4. Domestic and foreign policy implications
Putin after Beslan: “This is War”

- “Some want to cut off a juicy morsel from us while others are helping them. They are helping because they believe that, as one of the world’s major nuclear powers, Russia is still posing a threat to someone, and therefore this threat must be removed. And terrorism is, of course, only a tool for achieving these goals.” (TV Address, 4 September 2004)

- “I did not say Western countries were initiating terrorism, and I did not say it was policy. But we have observed incidents. It is a replay of the Cold War mentality. There are certain people who want us to be focused on internal problems and they pull strings here so that we don’t raise our heads internationally.” (Valdai Meeting, 6 September 2004)
Vladislav Surkov: “The enemy is at the gate”

- “Actors that still live by Cold-War phobias…”
- “Their goal is destroying Russia and filling its immense space by multiple weak quasi-states.”
- “The enemy is at the gate. The front line crosses every city, every street, every house.”

*Komsomolskaya Pravda, 29 September 2004*
Viktor Cherkesov:
“‘The backbone class of the state’”

- “…Our unprecedented territorial shrinking makes them crave for more. We have the face the truth – the possibility of the follow-up breakup of the state, possibly the last breakup.”

- “The chekists and the present-day Russia are historically bound together.”

*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 29 December 2004
Dmitry Medvedev: “Russia may disappear”

- Unless we are able to consolidate our elites, Russia as a single state may disappear. (...) The breakup of the Soviet Union will look like child’s play compared to a government collapse in modern Russia.

- Today Russia has grown strong from the inside and has issued its bid as a player on the international stage. No one likes this, this disrupts the geopolitical balance. Even when fears regarding Russia are irrational, unfortunately in a number of cases they lead to bursts of political activity.

*Expert, 4 April 2005*
I do not support the conspiracy theory. But this is clearly a planned system of actions. (…) Let alone the “Orange revolutions”, or the activity of the humanitarian institutes. Everyone knows that Freedom House is headed by [James] Wolsey, a former director of the CIA. You have to be a complete idiot to believe in a purely “humanitarian” mission of this outfit. We should not forget what kind of tasks are faces by certain “circles” within these states.

(Radio Liberty, 11 July 2005)
Conspiracy of the ‘Colored Revolutions’

- The Fourth wave: ‘revolutions by order’
  - Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan…
  - A cynical ‘technological’ perspective on social and political movements
    - shaped by Russia’s own ‘managed democracy’ and ‘political technologies’
  - Ignorance and naïveté: Bush and Soros portrayed as partners in the same camp (e.g. in Ukraine)
Five sources of the conspiracy theory

- Advance of the West
- Identity games between Russia and the West
- The birth trauma of the Soviet breakup
- Political origins of the elite
- Resistance to globalization
Advance of the West

- The USSR breakup seen as an episode in the perennial geopolitical confrontation
  - “We aimed at the USSR but hit Russia” (Zinoviev)
- The “encirclement of Russia”
  - NATO and EU enlargement
  - War on Terrorism: US bases in the CIS
  - “Color revolutions” and western involvement in the CIS
- Russia’s recent diplomatic fiascos
  - Asylum to Chechen emissaries (Akhmedov and Zakayev)
  - Western reactions to Dubrovka and Beslan
  - May 2005 Victory celebrations as a source of major political conflict
Identity is a two-way street

- Identity is an intersubjective process by which social actors identify themselves and construct meanings
  - not a given, but constructed…
  - …vis-à-vis the Other (Schmitt: political = othering)
- 9 May as a textbook case: external alienation accelerates internal identity construction
  - St. George’s ribbons as a popular response
  - E.H. Carr: the “hypocrisy of morality” in the international relations
Identity games in the 1990s

WEST ➔ PARTNERSHIP / COOPERATION ➔ RUS

WEST ➔ INTEGRATION ➔ EE ➔ OTHERING ➔ RUS

WEST ➔ ALLIANCE ➔ EE

ASPIRATIONS
Identity games in the 2000s

OLD WEST

NEW WEST

OTHERING

RUS

OTHERING
The trauma of the Soviet breakup

- Putin: breakup of the USSR “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”
- The birth trauma of the post-Soviet mind, the inferiority complex
- Symbolic compensation: oil, territory, nukes, influence (e.g. Middle East)
- Conspiracy theory raises self-esteem: an autistic perspective
The origins of the Russian elite

- *Siloviki*, bureaucrats, technocrats: illusions of total control of the system
- Foreign policy elite children of the Cold War: Ideas of condominium and global controllability
- Post-soviet demoralization and demobilization, market attitudes and cynicism
- The postmodern mind: “humanitarian technologies” and political spectacles
Resisting globalization

- Conspiracy theory as Russian resistance identity
- Reaction of societies to the universal instrumentalism (fundamentalism, racism, terrorism)
- The perennial Russian/Soviet tradition: “this was all conceived by Churchill back in 1918” (Vladimir Vysotsky)
The constructivist argument

- “Anarchy is what the States make of it” (Alexander Wendt) … Conspiracy is what the States make of it
- Merging multiple Others into one big Other
  - the West + Eastern Europe + Color revolutions/CIS/GUAM + Chechens + Arab world = Strategic encirclement
- “The anti-Russian conspiracy” is constructed by the Russian elite. Why?
  - identity construction (Pavlovsky on Putin’s Beslan speech: “the birth pangs of a nation”)
  - consolidation of the regime (2008 problem)
  - re-distribution of property
Securitizing the Russian identity

Soviet breakup (early 1990s) → Identity deficit

Othering (late 1990s-early 2000s) → Politicizing identity

War (mid-2000s) → Securitizing identity
Domestic policy implications

- After Beslan, conspiracy theory has become part of the official discourse
- Legitimizing the power vertical
- Increasing the controllability of the system in the conditions of the systemic crisis, the revolutionary contagion and the growing social costs of reform
- The 2008 problem
- Property re-distribution in favor of *siloviki*
Foreign policy implications

“The anti-Russian conspiracy”
- a reaction to globalization and Soviet breakup
- reacting to external hostility/identity projects
- Siege mentality a way to construct/imagine the outside world

A deplorable trend but no immediate FP fallout
- other powerful externalities: Putin’s personal identity/partnership projects, war on terrorism, energy cooperation, etc.
- no isolationism/revisionism in foreign policy outputs: Russia is retreating on all fronts, post-imperial accommodation
- long-term foreign policy losses: decreased competitiveness and attractiveness of Russia.