The coup of 19-21 August 1991 became an important turning point in Russian history. The attempt of 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 failed. This failure to suppress the opposition symbolized the victory of democratic forces over the communist regime and was commemorated in the 1990s as the starting point of a new, democratic state.

In anti-Western conspiracy discourse the events of August 1991 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 2014, 23 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.\(^1\) Hence, the initial symbolism of the coup as a victory of democracy in Russia has been left behind.

This paper 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 struggles of post-Soviet Russia. I argue 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 2000s Kremlin officials realized the value of the conspiratorial idea of the Soviet collapse for the purposes of nation-building and the delegitimization of political opponents. As a result 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.

In the first part of the paper, I shall provide a short methodological background of my project. Then I shall look at the three cases of how conspiratorial interpretation of the recent past directly related to the Soviet collapse helps relocate power and legitimacy among political actors in post-Soviet Russia. I shall consider the impeachment to El’tsin and will look at the conspiratorial aspects of this event to explore how the conspiratorial language and the division of Russian society between the majority of “patriotic Us” and “conspiring Them” helps politicians achieve desired political goals. Later I will look at the language of conspiratorial texts about the Soviet collapse. After that, I shall consider activities of Russian author of anti-Western conspiracy theories Nikolai Starikov – a notorious proponent of the 1991 events as a part of the ‘Western conspiracy’.

**Studying conspiracy theories**

After decades of debates about the nature of conspiracy theories, scholars have concluded that they are more than just a product of a “paranoid style” of political thinking.\(^2\) The new approach, developed by Mark Fenster, suggests that conspiracy theories can become an important device for the reallocation of power

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between different political actors and an efficient element in political strategies; they can expose the inequities of a political, economic and social order. Since conspiracy theories are usually disseminated on a political level through populist rhetoric, Fenster has concluded that a 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 as a secretive “power bloc”.

Fenster’s argument is built on the broad interpretation of populism introduced by Francisco Panizza and Ernesto Laclau who suggest 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.” The important feature of this concept is its antagonistic division of the social into two camps: between the “people” and the “Other.” “The people,” united on the basis of popular demand, oppose the “Other,” the power bloc; this represents the typical – for conspiracy theories – juxtaposition of “Us” versus “Them.” In Laclau’s words, the social is divided into two camps: “the power” and “the underdog.” The latter’s appeal is based on popular demands and its role is to challenge the social order and gain power, thereby fulfilling popular demands.

Populism performs the function of gathering different elements of the social into a new identity. 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 it fails to address certain cutting-edge issues. This reading of populism could be applied to the analysis of how conspiracy theories operate on the public level. The invention of “the people” requires a persuasive image of the “Other” that can be provided by the conspiratorial narrative through the

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3 Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)
4 Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 84-90.
generation of a fear of subversion. In addition, such discourses address concerns about the inequities of a social system and occasionally pose a positive challenge to the existing social order.\(^9\) Hence, the usage of conspiracy theories on the political level helps the actor who disseminates these theories undermine the position and reputation of another actor – the powerful “Other” who purportedly benefits from conspiring against “the people”.

In the Russian case, the ultimate “Other,” historically, has often been the West, 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.\(^10\) In this context, fears expressed through anti-Western conspiracy in Russia 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 to demonstrate Russia’s equality or superiority to it.\(^11\) In the mind of a Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as an ultimate and insidious “Other” seeking to undermine the progress of the Russian nation towards its glorious future.

**El’tsin’s Impeachment (1998-1999)**

In May 1999 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

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\(^9\) Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 89-90.


referredendum, 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.”12

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.13

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 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

13 “Vrag naroda.”
several Union ministries and agencies, as a result of conspiracy headed by B. El'tsin.\textsuperscript{14}

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.”\textsuperscript{15} 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 (kholuistvuiushcie prispeshniki) of the US, were obliged to realize the people’s will.\textsuperscript{16}

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.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, despite the attempts of patriots, like Iliukhin, to prevent any further destruction of Russia, El'tsin, in a letter to President

\textsuperscript{14} Viktor Iliukhin, “Obviniaetsia El'tsin” (public address, Moscow, Russia, May 13, 1999), http://www.viktor-iluhin.ru/node/328.


\textsuperscript{16} Viktor Iliukhin, “Obviniaetsia El'tsin.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Clinton on 18 September 1998, allegedly confirmed that there would be “no turning back, the reforms will continue.”

However, the notion of genocide when employed as a political instrument indeed possesses a powerful potential: it strengthens the moral and legal pretentions 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. 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. But 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” (оккупационное правительство). 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.”

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 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.” 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

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18 “Враг народа...”
21 Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide,” 57.
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 votes.\textsuperscript{22}

The impeachment gave the Kremlin cause for concern about the outcome of the forthcoming presidential elections. The rise of Evgenii 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.\textsuperscript{23}

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.\textsuperscript{24} 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

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\textsuperscript{24} Fenster, \textit{Conspiracy Theories}, 90.
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trap, both fearful of an unleashing of populism and suspicious of the representative institutions.  

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.

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

An important element of anti-Western conspiratorial discourse is the linguistic terms which encapsulate the dangerous character of “conspiring enemies” within the Russian nation. These terms have gradually been introduced in the day-to-day language of post-Soviet Russia and eventually acquired a prominent place in the rhetoric of leading politicians and pro-Kremlin intellectuals.

For instance, 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. At the same time it also refers to the number of concepts utilized in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Another term, “foreign agents”, 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 representatives as a serious crime against the Soviet state, often punishable by death.  

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

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25 Shevtsova, Putin's Russia, 20.
subversive element (podryvnoi element). However, these terms first became popular among conspiracy theorists and later spread among general public.

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. 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.29

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. 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.

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

28 Viacheslav Shironin, Agenty perestroiki (Moscow: Éksmo, 2010), 21-22.
29 Igor’ Panarin, Pervaia Informatsionnaia Voïna. Razval SSSR (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 154, 176-181.
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 literature these organizations play major roles in creating the New World Order, but do not mention Russia specifically.  

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. It is noteworthy that the anti-Western ideology in Putin’s Russia is being established through the active adoption of American and Western European conspiracy theories. However paradoxical it may look, this 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.

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 Serguei Oushakine argued, this connection to the language of the past simultaneously demonstrates the remoteness of the context in which this language was initially utilized. For example, in the case of Stalin’s repressions the accusation of being a “foreign agent” could cause immediate arrest. In turn, in Putin’s Russia it is 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

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31 Panarin, Pervaia Informatsionnaia Voïna, 154-155.
foreign sponsor.\textsuperscript{33}

The conspiratorial concept of a “subversive agency” can be a convenient and powerful tool as it may bring into doubt former and current politicians’ loyalty to the state and its people and, thereby, undermining their reputation.

**Why does the West hate us? Nikolai Starikov’s interpretation of the Soviet collapse**

In the voluminous body of Russian literature on Western conspiracies published in the 2000s the works of Nikolai Starikov occupy a particular place due to the popularity of the writer and a particular persistence with which he advances the idea that the West destroyed Russia in 1991. The total number of printed copies of his books is estimated to run to approximately 230 thousand.\textsuperscript{34} He regularly travels around Russia with public lectures and book presentations, takes part in TV shows, and, in 2011, became openly involved in Russian political life.

Starikov claims that a permanent war of the Anglo-Saxon world against Russia is being waged, which caused at least two collapses of Russia: in 1917 and in 1991.\textsuperscript{35} Due to territorial size and resource capabilities, Russia has always been an object of hostile policies of the Western countries, in the first place of Great Britain, which challenged Russia’s geopolitical interests in the world. In Starikov’s mind, the ultimate plan of foreign enemies is to destroy Russian sovereignty and her ability to realize independent politics, thus placing Russia under British control.


\textsuperscript{34} In the absence of clear numbers of published copies, provided by the publishing house, I use the numbers from the article on Wikipedia. Wikipedia contributors, “Starikov, Nikolai Viktorovich”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%9D%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B9_%D0%92%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87 (accessed April 15, 2015).

The revolutions of 1917 in Russia attract the heightened interest of Starikov because, from his point of view, the events of February-October 1917 symbolized the ultimate plan of Anglo-Saxon civilization to destroy Russia. He argues that these revolutions were repeated in a similar way in August 1991. In one of his interviews he explained:

When I understood that the February and October revolutions were parts of one operation of the British intelligence to [bring about the] collapse [of] its geopolitical rival, the signs of repetition of the same scenario at the end of the 20th century became obvious to me. It has become especially apparent during the August events of 1917 and 1991...36

In the same manner the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to Starikov, was a result of global operation of the British and American intelligence together with a mass betrayal of top-ranking Soviet officials. In 1985, almost simultaneously with Gorbachev’s appointment as a general secretary of the CPSU, Saudi Arabia increased petroleum production and dramatically brought down oil prices that caused fatal economic problems to the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia engaged in this unprofitable action so as to gain a number of economic advantages from the United States, which stipulated rapid economic development of this country. However, according to Starikov, this was only possible when Americans saw that the person who became the leader of the USSR, “is able to destroy the state he is heading.”37

Starikov argues that the final collapse of Russia was only staved off at the turn of 1999-2000 by the return of diplomatic sovereignty, which was gained as a result of policies of Vladimir Putin.38 The figure of Putin is played off against Gorbachev, an ultimate anti-hero, who occupies an important place in Starikov’s writings; thus, the author develops his concept on the well-established corpus of

37 Nikolai Starikov, Shershe lia neft’: Pochemu nash Stabilizatsionny fond nakhoditsia TAM? (Saint-Petersburg, Piter, 2009), 80.
38 Starikov, Shershe lia neft’, 17-18.
conspiracy theories from the 1990s which describes Gorbachev as a key conspirator who agreed with the US to destroy the USSR.\(^{39}\)

Among the ideas that differentiate Starikov’s writings from the previous concepts about Gorbachev’s conspiracy, is a notion of Russian sovereignty that was lost as a result of treason and almost fully recovered by Putin by the end of 2000s. Being a traitor by nature, in Starikov’s words, Gorbachev managed to convince Soviet people to destroy their own country, thereby implicating every adult in the act of destruction of the USSR. However, a particular merit of Putin in the first decade of the 21st century was the overcoming of general disorientation, produced by Gorbachev’s policies, and the revitalizing of patriotic feelings which eventually helped save the country.\(^{40}\)

The specific focus of the author on the figure of Gorbachev is interesting also because of Gorbachev’s involvement in Russian politics. In his interview to Radio Svoboda in 2009, Gorbachev criticized Putin and the United Russia party for the destruction of the electoral system and its total control over political parties.\(^{41}\) In his post, Starikov quickly replied that Gorbachev was unable to repent of his sin of destroying Russia in 1991, which voided his right to make any critical remarks on Putin and other “patriotic” politicians.\(^{42}\) This allowed for the delegitimizing of Gorbachev’s critiques in future. For instance, in December 2011, during the protests against the results of elections to the State Parliament, Gorbachev recommended Putin to avoid running for presidency as it would be too much for him.\(^{43}\) Putin’s spokesman Dmitrii Peskov shortly replied that “former head of the huge country, who


\(^{41}\) Mikhail Gorbachev, „Chiort poberi, do chego my dozhili,” interview by Liudmila Telen’, Radio Svoboda, October 22, 2009, http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/article/1858368.html;


basically destroyed it, suggests to another man, who managed to save Russia from the same fate, to resign.”

Starikov’s responsive reaction to current political issues and actual topics attract additional attention to his personality and increases his popularity as an “expert” in Russian history. The overlaps of his rhetoric and the words of leading Russian politicians demonstrate how essential conspiratorial discourse became for Russian politics and society. Moreover, the fact that he develops his theories on the carefully selected and often disparate historical facts attach credibility to his views and help him legitimize conspiracy theories among general public.

Conclusion

A 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 over-dramatized 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.

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.”

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 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.46 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.47