



# Conspiracy theory in the construction of the new Russian identity

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# Outline

1. Conspiracy theory: key texts and mythologies
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*)

# Vladislav Surkov: “The enemy is at the gate”



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- “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”



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- “...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.”

*Komsomolskaya Pravda, 29  
December 2004*



# The conspiracy of the ‘Color 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

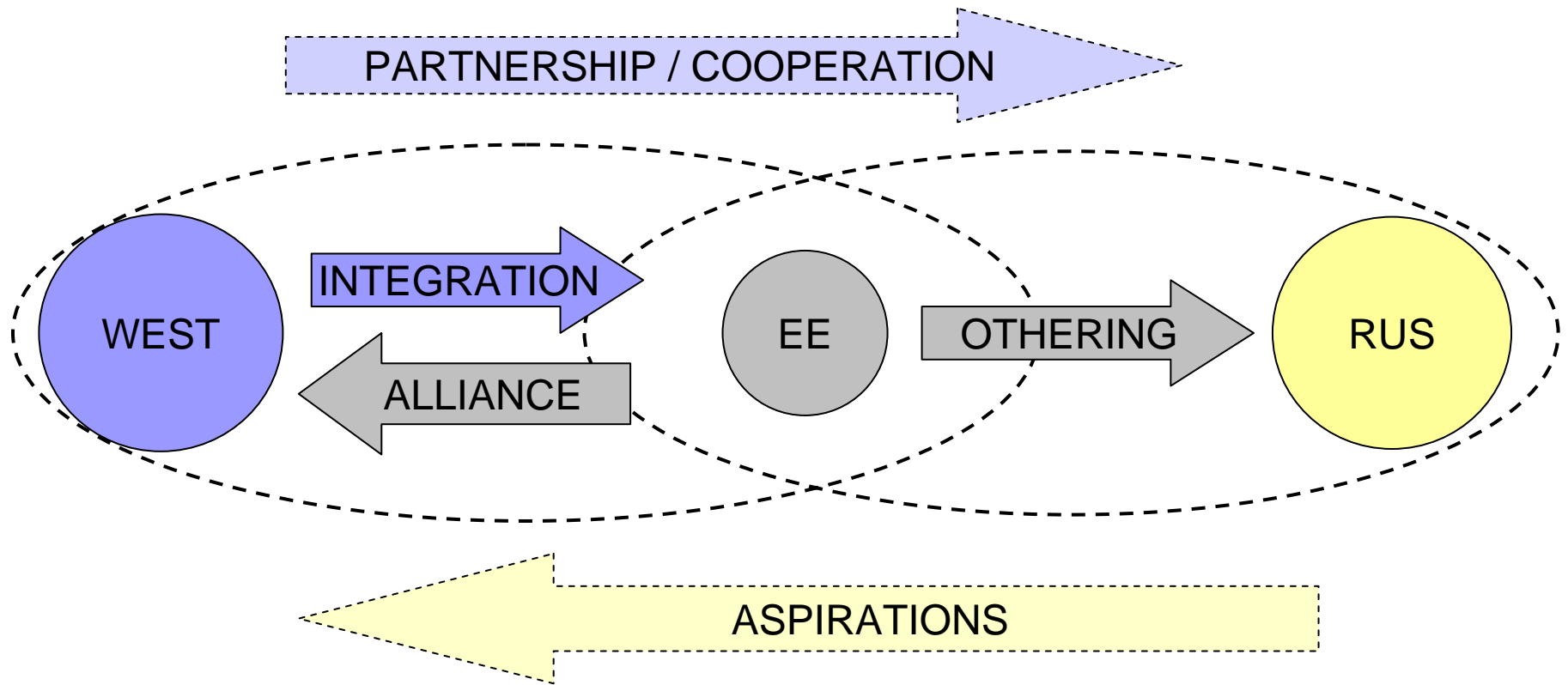
# Advance of the West

- The USSR breakup seen as an episode in the perennial geopolitical confrontation
- 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 the Chechen emissaries (Akhmedov and Zakayev)
  - Western reactions to Dubrovka and Beslan
  - May 2005 Victory celebrations as a source of major political conflict
  - “Gas war” with Ukraine, West distrustful of Russia

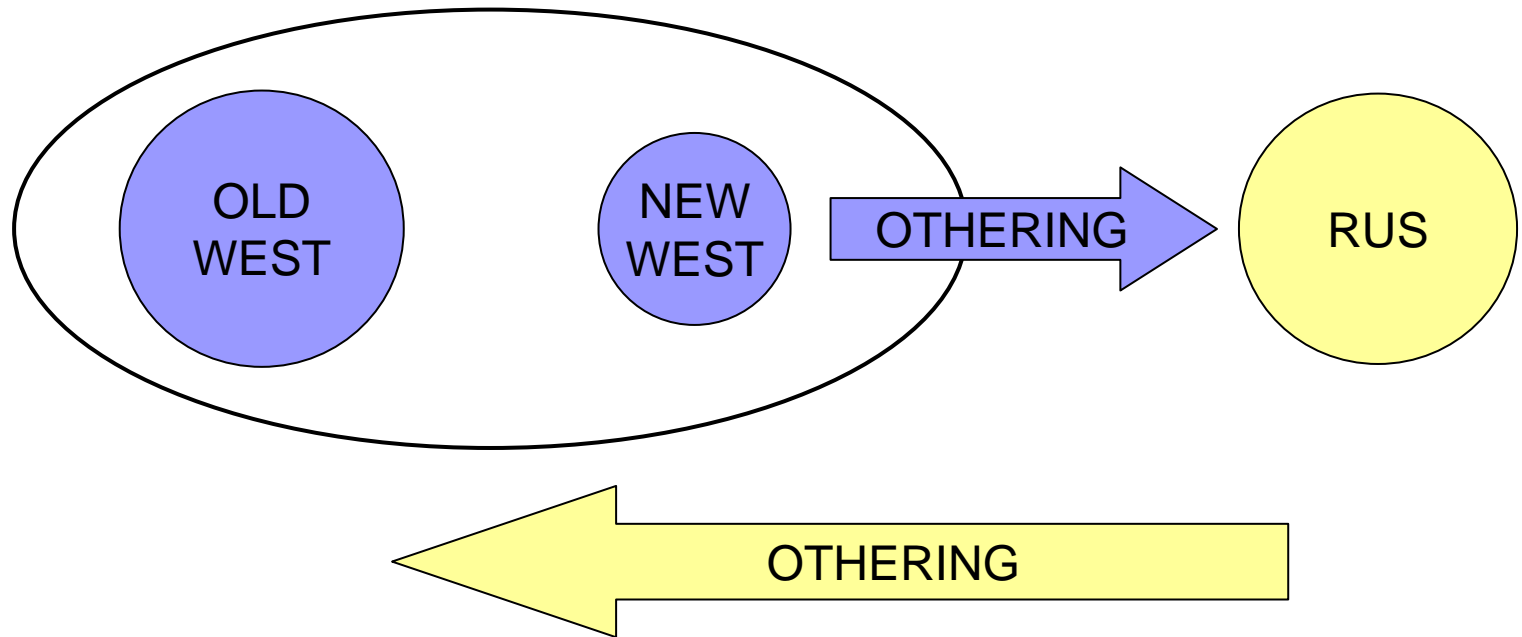
# Identity is a two-way street

- 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)
- V-Day celebrations 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



# Identity games in the 2000s





# The trauma of the Soviet breakup

- Putin: breakup of the USSR “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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



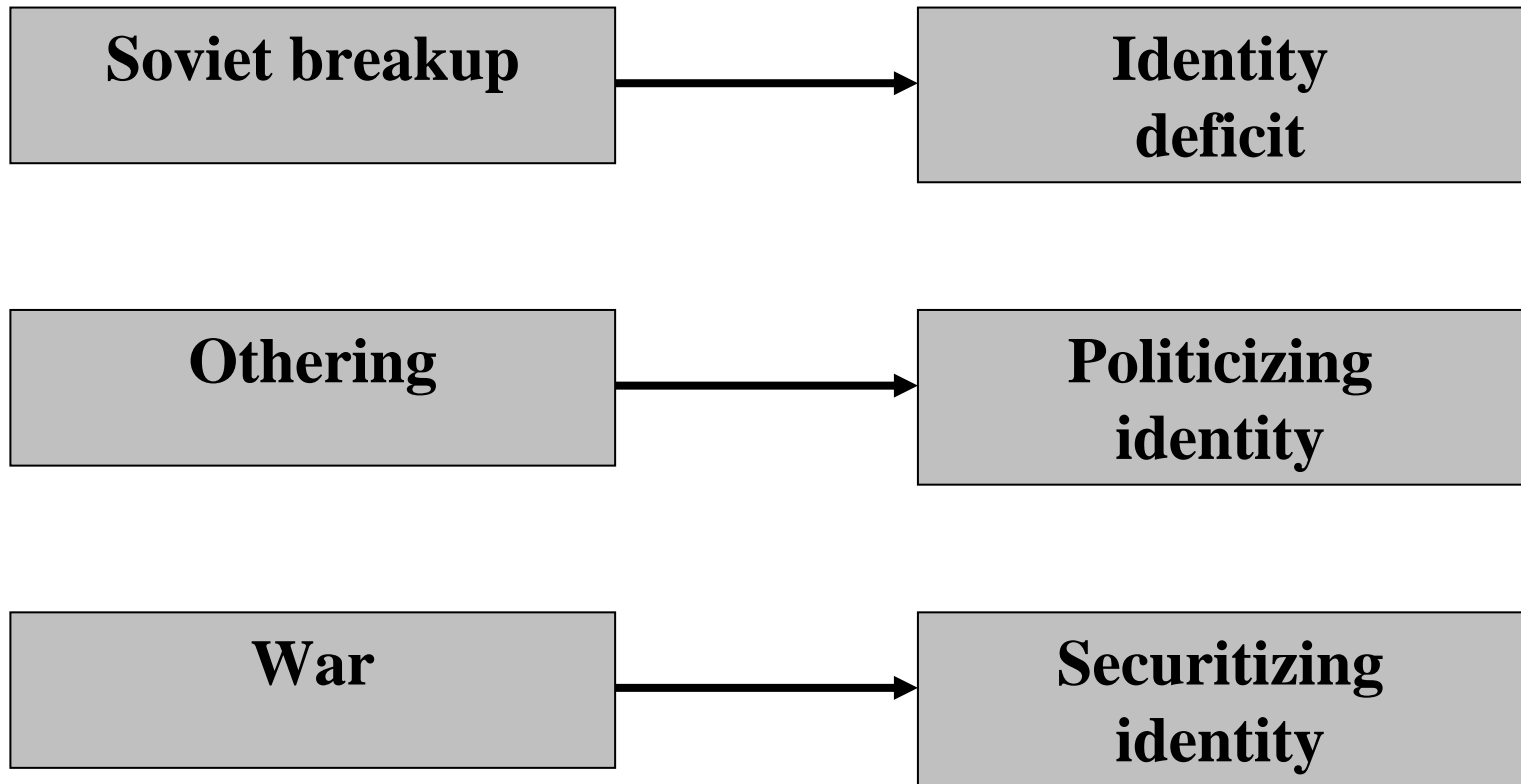
# Resisting globalization

- Conspiracy theory as Russian resistance identity
- Reaction of societies to the universal instrumentalism (fundamentalism, racism, terrorism)
- The perennial Russian/Soviet tradition of blaming the outsiders
  - ...“*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



# 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
  - ensuring the continuity of the regime
- Property re-distribution
  - *Siloviki* claiming the most lucrative assets

# 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 short-term FP fallout
  - other powerful externalities: Putin’s personal identity/partnership projects, war on terrorism, G8, “energy security”, etc.
  - no isolationism/ revisionism in foreign policy outputs: Russia is still retreating on all fronts
  - long-term foreign policy losses: decreased competitiveness of Russia, reputation damage