

Conspiracy Theory and Neoconservative PR Strategies in the 2000–2010s: The Case of Aleksandr Prokhanov

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Aleksandr Prokhanov (born 1938) has written a number of novels since the first half of the 1990s that offer a conspiracist interpretation of political life in post-Soviet Russia. In *Poslednii soldat imperii* (*The Empire's Last Soldier*, 1993), republished in 2007 as *Gibel' krasnykh bogov* (*The Death of the Red Gods*), the 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, were presented as the result of a major operation conducted by Western intelligence services and a Soviet intelligentsia who shared Western values. In *Gospodin Geksogen* (*Mr. Hexogen*, 2001), a series of apartment bombings in Moscow in 1999 and the subsequent Chosen One's rise to power were regarded as the result of KGB-planned actions. In *Politolog* (*The Political Scientist*, 2005), the death of children during the Beslan school siege and parliamentary election results also appeared to be steps taken by a security force's secret operation aimed at establishing "biological fascism" in Russia. In *Virtuoz* (*The Virtuoso*, 2009), a power struggle between the national spiritual leader Dolgoletov (Vladimir Putin) and President Lampadnikov (Dmitrii Medvedev) was introduced as a network of sophisticated conspiracy intrigues. *Vremia zolotoe* (*The Golden Times*, 2013) showed how mass protests at Bolotnaia Square and the threat of the

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“Orange Revolution” were neutralized with the help of a carefully designed secret operation. And, finally, in *Krym (Crimea, 2014)*, the protagonist’s unintentional participation in conspiracy was interpreted as a grievous sin that must be atoned for.

Prokhanov is not only an author of conspiracy fiction. As the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zavtra (Tomorrow)*, he has also written a number of articles primarily discussing conspiracy theories. In many of these works, he criticizes political decisions taken by Russian authorities, although his accusatory rhetoric has become more moderate in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Interestingly, his critical approach did not prevent him from becoming a sought-after media personality. Prokhanov is a frequent guest on various talk shows. In 2012, a documentary about him, *Soldat imperii (A Soldier of the Empire, 4 episodes)* was made by the state-owned Russian television channel *Russia-1*. That same year he headed an influential conservative think-tank by the name of “Iz-borskii klub” (Izborsk Club). Prokhanov is a very informed person due to his long-standing connections to Russia’s political elites, security services, and military forces. In the past few years, he has positioned himself not only as an advocate of ultra-conservative views, but also as a figure whose beliefs and writings have a real impact on some of the representatives of the Russian ruling elite. In an interview with Aleksandr Dugin, the writer mentioned his private conversation with the President of Russia. Prokhanov underlined—and his remark is of a primary interest to my chapter—his intention to influence the Russian leader’s worldview.

It seems to me that Putin feels his mission. I had a private conversation with him a few weeks ago. I told him about himself, the way I see him and understand him, by means of mysterious Russian codes that are awakening in him. He listened to me with interest, attention, and understanding.¹

Sometimes Prokhanov’s inclination to conspiracy theories is interpreted fairly broadly: for instance, Lev Danilkin examines the writer’s conspiracy thinking in relation to the “sacral topography” of his novels and publications.² However, I

1 «Мне кажется, что Путин чувствует свою миссию. У меня несколько недель назад была с ним личная встреча, и я рассказывал ему о нем самом, так, как я его вижу и понимаю через таинственные русские коды, которые в нем просыпаются. Он слушал это все с интересом, вниманием и пониманием». – “Chetvertaia politicheskaia teoriia” 2017.

2 Cf. Danilkin 2007: 85–86.

will examine Prokhanov as a conspiracist in the strict sense, implying the use of conspiracy explanatory models in public discussions or in political analysis. Prokhanov has earned a reputation as a conspiracy theory supporter thanks to his novels *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, which have been generally perceived by scholars as a manifestation of post-Soviet conspiracy thinking. It is worth taking into account that conspiracy theory in these novels came from the protest moods of the 1990s. At that time, conspiracy models were used mainly by politically marginalized groups that did not have any access to outlets of real power. Their interpretation of the decade's major developments (from privatization to the shelling of the Russian "White House" in October 1993, from the confrontation of media corporations to military operations in Chechnya) sharply challenged an official opinion and delegitimized Russian liberal elites who had come to power, supposedly, as a result of long-term subversive activities and conspiracies. In response to this criticism, the authorities and liberal politicians declared conspiracy theorists to be social and political losers unable to put forward any satisfactory (that is rational) arguments.

Prokhanov's novels are rightly regarded as an attempt to articulate "the post-Soviet unconscious" and to express an experience of "mass-reproducible trauma."³ *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen* are examples of the creation of "a new master narrative of social suffering"⁴ and they can therefore, be considered from the perspective of the construction of collective trauma through the implanting of "traumatic" meanings into interpretations of destructive social processes and events. Economic, political, social, and cultural causes that led to the collapse of the USSR were thus reduced by the writer to a single cause: the use of conspiracy technologies (from brainwashing to magical practices) by geopolitical enemies. Mastery over these weapons was still attributed solely to an enemy, while the novel's protagonist was presented as totally defenseless and vulnerable to them. Issues fundamental to collective identity, such as control, governance, guilt, and responsibility, were discussed in these novels within a conspiracy discourse in which the line between the victim and the culprit was sometimes extremely vague. This resulted in the fetishization of painful experience and in the persistent recurrence of the latter in different types of discourse. This is what Prokhanov has been engaged in for many years, including in his late novels, journalism, and public appearances⁵—he has been creating an atmo-

3 Ryklin 2003: 288.

4 Alexander 2003: 97.

5 Motifs of penetration into the brain and the body, fear of loss of (self-)control—the infernal images of these two novels were a cultural representation of morbid experienc-

sphere of anxiety and calling for the utmost vigilance against faceless, cunning, and ubiquitous enemies.

Despite Prokhanov's more recent novels seem to be repeating previous conspiratorial ideas and metaphors (for instance, fear of enemy invasion, the potential loss of control, self-sacrifice, and a determination to sacrifice other people), they are certainly being written within changed cultural and political circumstances. The novels concern the conservative turn in Russia in the 2000s–2010s that directly affected neoconservative circles. It is well known that the patriotic milieu, represented by Prokhanov, was skeptical of Vladimir Putin at first. When Putin required a new image and new PR strategies in the first years of his presidency they could not offer him anything because the patriotic opposition, as Aleksandr Dugin put it, “was exhausted by the years of marginalization and by the government pressure.”⁶ However, by the middle of the 2000s, the patriots' state of mind and their attitude towards Putin had changed, so Prokhanov might have felt the possibility to influence the Russian authorities' rhetoric in order to enlighten them, and to offer them new self-identification models. Such an approach is characteristic of the post-Soviet neoconservative community that has existed and developed, in Maria Engström's words, as a “metapolitical intellectual movement ... at the junction of art, literary, philosophy, and politics.”⁷ Engström supposes that these metapolitical communities consider culture to be a political instrument and that they try “to influence public opinion in order to establish the dominance of pro-conservative political power and/or to introduce ‘the new order.’”⁸ By creating “a new mythology of the empire,” they have been primarily solving social mobilization tasks, which is why their texts “do not represent some political program, but rather resemble futurist manifestos and pamphlets.”⁹ Prokhanov's books, written after 2005, exemplify these intentions and strategies vividly. His novels *Virtuoz*, *Vremia zolotoe*, and *Krym* increasingly resemble literary and ideological schemes with the articulated enlightenment-

es of abrupt and unexpected social changes, but at the same time the ideology and imagery of Prokhanov's writings paved the way for a contradictory social mythology of “the restoration of order” in the 2000s with Putin. In this respect, his novels might be considered as a rich source of metaphors that are typical of different kinds of conservative political demonology.

6 «Патриотическая оппозиция ... за годы маргинализации и прессинга со стороны власти выдохлась». – Dugin 2012: 13.

7 Engström 2014: 358.

8 Ibid.

9 Engström 2016: 329.

prognostic message addressed both to a wide audience and a particularly important reader—the Russian authorities.¹⁰ These novels’ conspiratorial ideas were formulated by Prokhanov from the perspective of groups sympathizing with a current political course of the Russian authorities and sought to keep their influence. I believe Prokhanov’s novels of the 2000s–2010s are the quintessence of neoconservative “strategies of influence” based, among other matters, on conspiracy theories and appropriate rhetoric devices. In this essay, I will focus on the question of how the writer exploits conspiracy theories as a tool for maintaining traditionalist ideological trends. But first it is worth giving at least a general outline of the contexts and ideas, which have predetermined the writer’s propensity to conspiracy thinking.

“In the Beginning There Was a Conspiracy...”

The factor that influenced Prokhanov’s conspiracy views was his enthusiasm towards esoteric knowledge. As is known, in the late 1960s he contacted the Iuzhinskii circle in which esoteric concepts were being passionately discussed and occultism was being intensively practiced. Despite the writer’s social background and ideological preferences being different from those of the circle’s members,¹¹ he appeared to be impressed by a macabre atmosphere of the “occult underground.”¹² Later, he carefully read Dugin’s *Konspirologiia: nauka o zavorakh, tainykh obshchestvakh i okkul’noi voine* (Conspirology: The Science of Conspiracies, Secret Communities, and Occult War, 1993, 2005) which bore ob-

10 It would be incorrect to say that Prokhanov’s contribution to the expansion of conspiracy rhetoric directly influenced the official ideological discourse; it is doubtful that Russian politicians read his novels and became infected with a virus of “political paranoia.” A mutually beneficial alliance, however, began to form precisely at that time. On the one hand, the contemporary Russian Neo-Conservatism and the political regime that was formed in Putin’s Russia appeared to be quite susceptible to conspiracy rhetoric and adopted some of its devices. On the other hand, conspiracy theories supporters who were not very similar to the agitated “seekers of truth” used the favorable ideological conjuncture for their self-promotion.

11 Cf. Prokhanov 2015.

12 In his *Aleksandr Prokhanov and Post-Soviet Esotericism* Edmund Griffiths (2016) examines thoroughly the writer’s ideology imbued with Gnostic beliefs and with ideas borrowed from Nikolai Fedorov’s *Filosofia obshchego dela* (*The Philosophy of the Common Cause*).

vious marks of the author's contacts with the Evgenii Golovin's "mystical underground." Prokhanov's new conspiracy ideas and style have been largely inspired by Dugin's provocative book. According to Prokhanov, various conspiracies are historically specific versions of an eternal struggle between God and the Devil, or of a *superconspiracy* interpreted in the vein of millennialism.¹³ The writer, basically, recognizes the occult nature of conspiracy and views the latter as the manifestation of a "dark side" of being, or, in René Guénon's terms, a form of counter-initiation, that is "a special type of tradition in which ... all the accents are rearranged oppositely."¹⁴ That is why to deny conspiracies and conspiracy theory, in his view, is absurd. It is like denying the existence of evil as such. "[World] history," as Prokhanov put it, "is a history of conspiracies."¹⁵ Nevertheless, he believes the "classic" conspiracy theories (the international Jewish conspiracy, Masonic conspiracy theories, etc.) need to be updated.¹⁶ Trying to avoid associations with caricature paranoid conspiracists, he describes himself as an artist who tends towards conspiracy thinking and at the same time as a researcher of the mass interest in conspiracy who is exploiting conspiracy theory because it is "very convenient for a text ... Such a flow of events ... All this can be organized only through rather simplified conspiracy metaphors ..."¹⁷ He specified:

Starting with the September 11 attacks and ending with the horrors of Beslan ..., all of these [conspiracy theories] programmed public consciousness in a special way. People tend to think that all the most interesting things are produced by certain secret structures. ... I can be accused of encouraging these conspiracy attitudes that play into the hands of enemies of Russia. I do not claim that the notorious bombings of houses or the submarine disasters were directly executed by security services. ... The bottom line is, the authorities

13 According to Michael Barkun's classification, "this term refers to conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically. ... At the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors" – Barkun 2003: 5–6.

14 «Особый тип традиции, в котором ... все акценты переставлены на противоположные». – Dugin 2005: 28.

15 «Всемирная история – это история заговоров». – "Aleksandr Prokhanov v programme *Shkola zlosloviia*" 2002.

16 Latysheva 2007.

17 «Очень удобна для текста ... Такой поток событий ... Все это может быть организовано только через довольно упрощенные метафоры заговора». – Aleksandr Prokhanov v programme *Shkola zlosloviia*" 2002.

feel the effect of their helplessness before series of catastrophes better than the others and use it in their own interests. ... [E]verything I described is just a reaction to this effect of helplessness.¹⁸

Being ironical towards the traditional conspiracy rhetoric, however, Prokhanov is well aware of its powerful mobilizing effect. If history, as Dugin alleges, “is ruled by the combination of archetypal schemes, expressed in various ideological forms,”¹⁹ then conspiracy theory, combining political and “basic religious facts,” using the language of symbols and metaphors, gives an opportunity to form some ideological strategies and to appeal primarily to the emotional sphere. Such a view of conspiracy theory refers to both “the paranoid style,” described by Richard J. Hofstadter, and to the link between this phenomenon and political populism (the difference being that Prokhanov simulates the paranoid belief in conspiracies). In his analysis of Hofstadter’s work, Mark Fenster adds that “conspiracy theory is a particularly unstable element in populism,” and “its successful and thorough-going incorporation within a large populist movement would most likely occur in authoritarian or fascist regimes.”²⁰ To be sure, Prokhanov was familiar with the use of conspiracy theories by totalitarian regimes and tried to exploit this experience in the present-day political situation. He has usually taken inspiration from the conspiracy culture of the Stalin era, borrowing metaphors and rhetoric to excite and to mobilize his audience. He has provided various images of the enemy and has used populist clichés since the early 1990s, when a confrontation between new “corrupt” political elites and the “deprived” Russian people became commonplace in his fiction and journalism. Depending on the political situation of the time, his novels’ political demonology has in-

18 «Начиная от 11 сентября 2001 года и заканчивая ужасами Беслана ... – все это [теория заговора] по-особому кодирует общественное сознание. Люди начинают постепенно думать, что все самое интересное производится действиями неких закрытых структур. ... Меня могут обвинить в том, что я поощряю эти конспирологические настроения, которые могут сработать на руку врагам российского государства. Я не утверждаю, что пресловутые взрывы домов или гибель подлодок были инспирированы напрямую спецслужбами. ... Главное другое – власть чувствует лучше других эффект своей беспомощности перед серией катастроф и использует его в своих интересах. ... все, описанное мной, – лишь реакция на этот эффект беспомощности». – Prokhanov 2005.

19 «... управляется комбинацией архетипических схем, выраженных в различных идеологических формах». – Dugin 2005: 54.

20 Fenster 2008: 89.

cluded satirical images of manipulated Russian politicians, sinister images of the oligarchs like Berezovskii or Gusinskii, as well as of corrupt KGB officers, political technologists, lying journalists, spoilt representatives of “the creative class,” etc. Obviously, such a demonology has clearly identified Russia’s enemies and appealed to mass resentment. In more recent articles and novels, it has allowed for the simulation of a kind of ridiculous conspiracy panic towards Russia’s ruling elites²¹ thereby provoking a mobilizing mood.

As mentioned previously, Prokhanov has been inclined to a very broad understanding of conspiracy. Everything that seems to him to be an activity by “servants of the devil” is treated as a conspiracy to prevent Russia from the implementation of its messianic mission.²² It is also worth taking into consideration that the USSR’s collapse became a paradigmatic situation of a successful conspiracy for Prokhanov and his like-minded public. This catastrophic development, the writer asserts, occurred as a result of the prolonged use of a so-called “organizational weapon” (*organizacionnoe oruzhie*)²³ against the USSR. In Pro-

21 Prokhanov has been ready to discover signs of diverse psi-attacks against the current Russian President everywhere. He has often defined any anti-Putin statements and actions as attempts to compromise the President, thereby weakening the Russian state. For instance, the writer interpreted Aleksandr Litvinenko’s death as a “shahid” suicide and a vivid “episode of the psychotronic operation that is being conducted against Putin personally. It aims at exhausting his psyche, deforming his will, inducing him to abandon the third presidential term and to open thereby the way to a ‘liberal revenge’” («...часть психотронной операции, которая проводится против Путина лично. Она имеет целью измотать его психику, деформировать волю, побудить отказаться от Третьего президентского срока, что открывает дорогу “либеральному реваншу”». – Prokhanov 2011: 220). The murder of Anna Politkovskaia was another example of the same psychotronic “explosion.” This crime, from the writer’s point of view, was supposed to have an occult implication, so it was committed on Putin’s birthday, when his psyche was most “exposed to external influences” («открыта для внешних воздействий» – *ibid.*).

22 Cf. “Metafizika russkoi istorii” 2013: 28–29.

23 In the early 1990s, Prokhanov most likely began to use the term “organizational weapon” as a result of the influence of two Soviet scholars, Spartak Nikanorov and Sergei Solntsev, experts in the field of conceptual design of control systems. – cf. Danilkin 2007: 393–95. Nikanorov supposed that it was Solntsev who used the term “organizational weapon” for the first time “to refer to a wide variety of techniques to block a productive activity of organizations. ... The term became popular quickly. The tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union was explained as a consequence of the

khanov's interpretation, the notion of the "organizational weapon" implied a wide range of means and methods that influences collective and individual identity—from attacks on the population's psyche to the use of psi-generators, from discrediting the opponent's moral values to sophisticated intelligence service operations. In other words, the "organizational weapon" in his writings has always been an emphatic metaphor for a clandestine subversive activity, which is more dangerous the harder it is to detect. Therefore, Prokhanov insists on developing various skills to defend oneself against the "organizational weapon" and on creating special institutions that would deal with it. Russia, he believes, should master new technologies to influence consciousness and to exploit them in its conspiratorial counter-play and/or within "soft power" strategies as efficiently as its opponents have been doing. Prokhanov's novels of the second half of the 2000s–2010s were written when the post-Soviet "culture of influence"²⁴ was beginning to take shape rapidly; moreover, they actively contributed to its formation, providing it with flashy metaphors and appropriate rhetorical schemes.

A Political Scientist as a Hero of Our Time

The novel *Politolog*,²⁵ which retrospectively might be called a bridge between the protest conspiracy theory of *Poslednii soldat imperii* and the later novels' conservative conspiracy theory, has been usually read as evidence of Prokhanov's complete disappointment in most political actors in the mid-2000s. A

organizational weapon application" («Для обозначения широкого разнообразия приемов, блокирующих продуктивную деятельность организаций. ... Термин очень быстро стал популярным. Трагедия краха СССР объяснялась как следствие применения против него организационного оружия». – Nikanorov 2011). Some of Nikanorov's ideas, and those of his colleagues, shone through in Prokhanov's novel *600 let posle bitvy* (*Six Hundred Years After the Battle*, 1989). In addition to the language of Soviet analysts-conceptualists, belief in the organizational weapon and psi-effects in Prokhanov's articles and novels refer to popular topics of the post-Soviet culture of the 1990s.

24 «культура воздействия» – Prokhanov 2011: 229.

25 It is symptomatic of this phenomenon that Prokhanov deliberately merged the profession's two designations—"political scientist" and "political technologist." This is probably because their functionality and professional domains were not differentiated clearly in the Russia's political culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

new character—the political technologist, Mikhail Strizhailo, who personified all of the Russian elite’s most repulsive features, replaced the two previous conspiracy novels’ protagonist, an intelligence officer and a mystic, Belosel’tsev. The writer attributed to him some features of well-known political technologists, primarily Stanislav Belkovskii and, to a lesser extent, Gleb Pavlovskii. Prokhanov’s interest in political technologists, however, could also be predetermined by deeply personal motives. As Stanislav Belkovskii wittily remarked, Prokhanov has always been not so much a writer as a PR man:

The best job for him would have been Leonid Il’ich Brezhnev’s media spokesman in the late 1970s and early 1980s because the young, still very handsome Prokhanov would have looked great at Kremlin briefings, talking about Leonid Il’ich’s good firm handshake, and he could have changed the Secretary General’s image, both within the country and abroad. But then again there was no such position as media spokesman at the time, so Prokhanov became a writer.²⁶

Indeed, Prokhanov’s preoccupation with political activity and his ambition to be at the center of public events, maintaining contacts with the ruling elite expressed his aspiration, inherited from the late Soviet period, firstly to be integrated into a stable management system and secondly to affect public attitudes and to construct a new worldview. It is noteworthy that Prokhanov often describes his activities as a writer, a public figure, and an editor by comparing himself with a gardener, a collector, or a design engineer.²⁷ Put differently, his ambitions have never been limited to creating a new literary (fictional) world, but also extended to the creation of a social reality.

The appearance of a new protagonist also highlighted Prokhanov’s susceptibility to political tendencies that emerged in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. In fact, the role played by political technologies in Russia’s public life at that time was enormous. An empirical study of this phenomenon was provided by Andrew Wilson who believed that the intensive use of political technologies

26 «Идеальное для него поприще было бы пресс-секретарь Брежнева Леонида Ильича в конце 70-х–начале 80-х годов прошлого века, потому что тогда Проханов, молодой, еще очень красивый, прекрасно смотрелся бы на кремлевских брифингах, рассказывая о крепком рукопожатии Леонида Ильича и мог бы несколько изменить имидж генсека и внутри страны, и за ее пределами. Но тогда такой должности не было, пресс-секретарь, поэтому Проханов ушел в литературу». – Bez durakov 2014.

27 Cf. Prokhanov 1997.

in post-Soviet Russia, based on media manipulations, an “administrative resource,” dirty tricks, and “active measures” developed by both tsarist Okhrana and by Soviet secret services, had given rise to virtual politics. This created a quasi-democratic facade (“faking democracy”) by eliminating genuine democratic procedures: “Politics is ‘virtual’ or ‘theatrical’ in the sense that so many aspects of public performance are purely epiphenomenal or instrumental, existing only for effect or to disguise the real substance of ‘inner politics.’”²⁸

Prokhanov, like other Russian writers of the 2000s (Viktor Pelevin being chief among them), shared the widespread opinion that Russia’s politics had a virtual nature. However, “democracy” in Wilson’s formula of “faking democracy,” seemed to cause a lot more irritation in the writer. From his perspective, it was precisely electoral democracy that could provoke the rapid development of a market for political technologies. Shifting the focus to a public space, democracy requires additional evidence of the authorities’ legitimacy (for example, during honest elections) and thereby stimulates virtual political techniques that imitate notorious “democratic procedures.” Being an ardent supporter of a strong state power, and an equally zealous opponent of “democratic procedures ... and the disgusting nonsense of constitutional order,”²⁹ the writer insists on the exact opposite: authority is legitimate when it is able to hear a mystic “call of history” and to direct the nation to the fulfillment of its mission. Political technologists, who professionally create simulacra, are only able to offer a virtual political and ideological project. In Prokhanov’s eyes, political technologists personify all the main defects of Russia’s ruling elites, who feel comfortable within fictional political realities and postpone the launching of a new modernization project. The latter would require the willingness to use violence on the part of the authorities and a high level of engagement and sacrificial efforts by the Russian people.

As a matter of fact, Prokhanov identifies political technologies by the various methods of influence on consciousness and mind control, specifically those related to the sphere of conspiracy. In a sense, he follows the popular opinion by attributing many of the capabilities of an all-powerful manipulator, and a creator of conspiracy intrigues, to a political technologist. It would seem that there is every reason to closely associate the methods of constructing conspiracies and the use of political technologies: they are both created behind the scenes and are based on manipulation and they both claim to control public attitudes and behavior (following the same arguments, Samuil Markov called political technologists

28 Wilson 2005: 47.

29 «... демократических процедур, ... и бреда отвратительного конституционного» – “Desiat’ vekov russkoi demokratii” 2006.

the “heroes of political behind-the-scenes”).³⁰ However, in response to the demonization of political technologists, Pavlovskii has argued that the keen interest in the manipulators themselves merely demonstrates a drive to be manipulated and to be involved in conspiracy.³¹ Prokhanov has expressed this neurotic tendency in his novel once again. The identification of political technologies with methods of influence on consciousness was also rooted in his longtime interest in social management issues combined with the broad interpretation of mind control practices in the vein of New Age culture.

Shifting the focus from the unlucky conspirator to the creator of sophisticated behind-the-scenes intrigues, Prokhanov nevertheless retained the plot scheme of *Poslednii soldat imperii* and of *Gospodin Geksogen*: the protagonist, who considered himself as a kind of Demiurge and claimed to solve the most complex intellectual and creative tasks, suddenly realizes that he has ended up as a puppet, obediently playing a role in another, much more sinister conspiracy. Having observed the death of the children in Beslan, Strizhailo eventually realized that this bloody sacrifice had been designed to shock Russian society and, in so doing, to prepare it for the establishment of a regime of biological fascism. He tried to expose the conspiracy, but he failed. His death, on the one hand, was equated by the author with a ransom sacrifice, and on the other, he argued that any conspiracy always “devours its children.” *Politolog*, like Prokhanov’s previous conspiracy writings, can again be called a symptom that shows a desperate attempt to regain control over the course of events, as well as the failure of these attempts. Nevertheless, the subsequent novels do demonstrate a partial success in these attempts.

Virtuoz and Vremia zolotoe: Conspiracy and Political Technologies vs. the “Call of History”

Prokhanov continued to discuss the use of political technologies and conspiratorial intrigues in his subsequent two novels, in which the eccentric and narcissistic postmodernist Strizhailo, brought up in the atmosphere of the late 1990s, gives way to the tragic characters of Balaev (*Virtuoz*) and Beketov (*Vremia zolotoe*). Both protagonists were portrayed, in typical fashion, as the real power behind the throne. These characters, as the writer argued later, were inspired by

30 «геро[и] политического закулисья» – Markov 2005: 9.

31 Quoted in Izmailov and Gamalov 2001.

contacts with the Deputy Chief of the Russian presidential administration Vladimir Surkov,³² whom Prokhanov held in high regard:

He is such a clairvoyant ... he understands the structure of society and he constructs it according to his own patterns. To be sure, this is a feature of a major political strategist. Although the society he had been constructing is deeply hostile and alien to me, but that does not prevent me ... from praising him as a master and as a virtuoso.³³

The renewed ideology of conspiracy theory in both novels took shape during discussions about Putin's third presidential term. Prokhanov gave unreserved support to Putin's re-election for a third term using all of his eloquence and his criticism to convince Russia's society and the leadership of this option's appropriateness. During the discussion surrounding the issue of the third term, the writer persistently paid attention to Putin's patriotic and statist views and reminded him about a leader's mission, namely about starting a new modernization project in Russia. In fact, at that time, Prokhanov had transformed his conflicting evaluations of Putin's activities into a completed narrative based on the conspiratorial idea about the controllability of Russia's leaders. Since the early 1990s, he has been obsessed by the issues of loss of control and controllability, and the post-Soviet society's vulnerability to external hostile influence. In both *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, he argued that while Russia seemed to be a sovereign state in the 1990s, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were in fact under the control of secret para-Masonic organizations (hence Prokhanov's fears and prophecies about secret societies' plans to turn Russia into the Second Khazaria and to set up a regime of biological fascism). Given the circumstances of Putin's emergence onto the political scene, the writer believed him to be a product manufactured by Berezovskii, the notorious Yeltsin Family,

32 Marlene Laruelle argues that "Surkov played a key role in structuring a public landscape during Putin's second term and Dmitrii Medvedev's presidency, and in orchestrating many patriotic projects" – Laruelle 2016: 628. "Surkov's worldview," she continues, "largely opposes that of the Izborsky club," and the latter was able to emerge as a unified platform for nationalists "only after Surkov fell from grace" – *ibid.*: 628–29.

33 «У него такое ясновидение, он понимает устройство общества и выстраивает его под свои лекала. Это, конечно, способность такого крупного политического стратега. Хотя общество, которое он выстраивал, оно мне глубоко враждебно и чуждо, что не мешает мне ... высоко его превозносить как такого мастера, как виртуоза». – Prokhanov 2013.

and by political technologists. That is why Prokhanov depicted Putin as a puppet or as a kind of clone: for example, “Putin had never existed before. He was cloned like Dolly the sheep.”³⁴ Later in *Gospodin Geksogen*, the Chosen One was described as an obscure figure: the conspirators found him to be an obedient and easily manipulated puppet, but the writer stressed this character’s mutability and uncertainty. In 2002, unsatisfied with an inconsistency in the President’s political decisions, Prokhanov called Putin “the genius of emptiness,”³⁵ who was acting in his patrons’ interests by taking cover behind, in the words of Dugin, “verbal patriotism.”³⁶ Subsequently, Prokhanov’s depiction of Putin’s political career took on a new twist: after a while the writer asserts that Putin gained strength and began acting against a “world corporation,”³⁷ i.e., against the secret structures that had brought him to power. For example, from Prokhanov’s point of view, the conspiratorial message to Putin was encrypted in the James Bond movie *Casino Royale* (2006). The writer found a striking similarity between Putin and Daniel Craig, who played the main part, and this circumstance provided a stimulus for the conspiratorial interpretation of *Casino Royale*. According to Prokhanov, *Casino Royale* presented a scenario that the “world corporation” would like to impose on Putin (it was about rejecting the third presidential term in exchange for a high office in a reputable international organization like the United Nations). In order to get rid of their influence and to turn Russia into a strong and independent player in the world political arena Putin, however, came into conflict with “secret para-political centers.”³⁸ For this reason, as Prokhanov claims, Putin must run for a third term regardless of the constitutional restrictions.

When the government ignored Prokhanov’s calls, the writer, trying to defend his position, depicted the possible tragic consequences of this decision in *Virtuoz*. Russia’s political life during the presidency of Lampadnikov (Dmitrii Medvedev) was presented as a power struggle, threatening the stability of the State. Balaev, the ideologist of a new Russia’s statehood and a “behind-the-scenes Kremlin maestro,”³⁹ nicknamed “Virtuoso,” is placed at the heart of these intrigues and conspiracies and seems to manage them well. All credit for image-

34 «Путина раньше не было. Его клонировали, как овцу Долли». – Prokhanov 2011: 28.

35 «гений пустоты» – Prokhanov 2011: 141.

36 Dugin 2012: 11.

37 «мировая корпорация» – Prokhanov 2011: 220.

38 «секретные парapolитические центры» – *ibid.*: 238.

39 «закулисный кремлевский маэстро» – Prokhanov 2009: 6.

making of the former President Dolgoletov (from the reinterpretation of the Kursk submarine disaster to the Munich speech writing) and for constructing a political system, preserving the stability of Russia after Dolgoletov's rejection of the third presidential term, is given to Balaev by the author. But all of the Virtuoso's efforts are destroyed as the pro-Western liberal Lampadnikov, who was brought to presidency just to observe legal formalities, begins plotting against the national spiritual leader Dolgoletov. Lampadnikov's proponents organize a kind of a coup d'état, resulting in liberal elites coming to power. As a political technologist, however, Virtuoso is fully integrated into an existing system of power relations. So, even after having been morally crushed by the triumph of the liberals, he seems ready to serve his new masters.

The fact that political technologies and conspiratorial methods are ineffective when they encounter the mysticism of Russia's history is illustrated in Dolgoletov's life story: over the years, he had distanced himself from the control of the behind-the-scenes circles and had prepared a "development" project, but having been scared of unfavorable predictions, he handed over power to his old friend Lampadnikov. The absurd death of Dolgoletov, the narrator claims, becomes a retribution for trying to refuse his historical mission. Thus, the main novel's storylines are unfolded against the backdrop of multiple conspiracies. In a sense, political technologies and conspiracies are normalized and legitimized as a tool to protect the Russian State from internal and external enemies. This legitimization, however, remains limited. Russian history's mysticism and its inherent sacrificial impulse, in Prokhanov's opinion, can destroy the most intricate conspiracies, given that these are at work only on the political level, and not the spiritual one: "Politics, however, differs from history in that the latter is being created not by technology but by Providence."⁴⁰

In *Vremia zolotoe*, Prokhanov pursued his efforts to rehabilitate political technologies and conspiracies, in a word, the "culture of influence," applied for neutralizing ideological enemies. It is noteworthy that the novel's character Prime Minister Chegodanov (Putin at the end of Medvedev's presidential term), who yearns to regain the presidency, pins all his hopes on an "éminence grise," a political analyst and technologist Beketov, capable, in his opinion, of suppressing the liberal protest on Bolotnaia Square. Being a stalwart supporter of rigid political power, Beketov, like Balaev in *Virtuoz*, is ready to use any method to defend the State. At the same time, like Belosel'tsev in *Poslednii soldat imperii*

40 «Однако политика отличается от истории тем, что последняя творится не технологиями, а промыслом». – Prokhanov 2009: 15.

and *Gospodin Geksogen*, he is a bearer of “mysterious knowledge.”⁴¹ Creating a secret scenario to counteract liberal unrest, he follows his visions and Orthodox prophecies (the Russian Orthodox Church is presented here as a loyal ally of Russia’s government in protecting the State against a rebellious spirit and dissident elements). For example, his toughest actions towards the opposition leader Gradoboev (Aleksei Naval’nyi) are preceded by a conversation with a monk, Father Filip. The latter likens protestors to demons and refers to the prophecy about the appearance of a young tsar after which Russia will become “invincible.”⁴² In this novel, a series of conspiracies developed by Beketov is again interpreted as a countermeasure to neutralize another secret operation aimed at shaking the Russian State’s foundations, but which is disguised as a protest against electoral fraud. This activity is led by all of the same secret para-political centers and the world Jewry that want to discredit Chegodanov, who had freed himself from their influence, and to replace him with Gradoboev. They continue to practice psi-attacks against Russia’s leadership, but now they also use new technologies: the Internet and social networks are presented in the novel as the main tool for mobilizing the liberal community and for discrediting the authorities.⁴³ *Vremia zolotoe* can be regarded as an eloquent illustration of, in Il’ia Kalinin’s words, “antirevolutionary exorcism,”⁴⁴ of the tendency of Russia’s current political elite to stigmatize any spontaneous mass movement as a manipulated one, a potentially destructive one, something that causes chaos and catastrophic revolutionary changes. Prokhanov, however, not only explicates the ruling elite’s deep fears but also shows how these fears, integrated into appropriate discourses by professional political technologists, can be used to form public moods. Beketov claims:

It is necessary to do everything so that the square would be crowded with people. So that the number of new protestors would increase more and more ... We should show to the people the horrible face of rebellion ... It is necessary to compare the Bolotnaia Square to Perestroika, Yeltsin, the Belavezha Accords. Russia is destined to be disintegrated and to be occupied like the USSR. It is necessary to convince people—no matter how abhorrent

41 «таинственное знание» – Prokhanov 2012: 37.

42 Ibid.: 45.

43 Some ideas of *Vremia zolotoe*, in particular about the Internet’s fundamental importance for starting mass anti-government protests during so-called “revolutions 2.0,” have gained wide currency within the radical conservatives’ environment. – Cf. Cheremnykh and Voskanian 2013: 60–93.

44 Kalinin 2013: 130.

you may appear—that you are the last protector of the State. Your destruction is a destruction of the State.⁴⁵

In other words, the fear of social chaos and of revolution is not just a culturally significant mass emotion for Prokhanov and for his novel's protagonist, but also a tool of political technologies used by Beketov against the opposition.

Interestingly, Prokhanov portrays Beketov once more as a mystic who can decode hidden meanings in Russian history (for a long time Prokhanov considered the detection of mysterious signs and codes to be his main creative task).⁴⁶ Beketov has managed to destroy its opponents' conspiracy by using Russia's enemies' methods, so that liberal "demons" fail to reverse the course of events. At the end of the novel, Beketov, who has been subjected to disgrace, goes to a small Russian town to wait for the appearance of the Chosen One from the old royal race.

Thus, the novels in question offer various ideas that are fundamental for Prokhanov's "theory of power" firstly, this involves the confrontation of conspiracy and history; secondly, it concerns the political and religious mission to be implemented, or the chosenness of a leader and the Russian State, and finally it concerns the sacred and mysterious nature of power and the authorities. This "theory of power" is, in fact, a set of authoritarian ideas that discredit the rational (legal) aspects of the management of State affairs and emphasize the allegedly irrational and unfathomable nature of Russian statehood.

Inspired by the annexation of Crimea and guided by his "theory of power," Prokhanov has rushed to showcase a positive scenario of Russia's development in the novel *Krym*. He once again describes mysterious forces that try to obstruct

45 «Надо делать все, чтобы площадь ломилась от народа. Чтобы на ней появлялись все новые и новые бунтари. ... Надо показывать народу чудовищное лицо бунта. ... Надо сравнивать Болотную площадь с перестройкой, Ельциным, Беловежьем. Россия уготована судьба СССР, распад, оккупация. Надо убеждать людей, что ты, каким бы нелюбимым и ненавистным ни выглядел, являешься последним защитником государства. Твое уничтожение является уничтожением государства». – Prokhanov 2013: 59.

46 Prokhanov never stops portraying his own personality: he endows both novels' characters, who are his *alter ego*, and their opponents with some facts of his own biography and with his own psychological characteristics. For example, Verkhoustin, a key figure in the conspiracy against the Russian authorities (*Krym*), collected folk songs and participated in writing an open letter "A Word to the People" («Слово к народу») on the eve of the August coup (1991) just like Prokhanov.

Russian history's messianic course, but this time without getting into details about conspiracies. A central figure of the novel, Lemekhov, the Deputy Prime Minister for defense issues and a possible successor to the President, turns out to be involved in the conspiracy against the Russian State and President Labazov personally. Following his political ambitions, Lemekhov does not suspect that he has been manipulated. He believes that he is implementing his own political project to create a new *Victory Party*. But there is a weird philosopher among Lemekhov's proponents, Verkhoustin, who represents a deeply secret intelligence organization *Acorn* (these are allusions to the conflict of two secret "orders," one of which includes pro-Western-oriented KGB officers—they apparently are *Acorn*—and another one which brings together patriotic GRU officers).⁴⁷ Verkhoustin is a collective image of a conspirator, many-faced and elusive, like a werewolf. He possesses all means of mind control, including singing folk songs and reading Pushkin's poems aloud. Lemekhov has become the main target of conspirators because he really has been chosen by Russian history to become Russia's next president. So, Verkhoustin and political technologists familiar to him have managed to compromise the protagonist in the eyes of President Labazov, but Lemekhov atones for the sin of political ambitions and for his backroom political tactics. As a result, he is forgiven by the President and, probably, would return to power to participate in the "Great Project" finally initiated by Labazov. The annexation of Crimea is interpreted by Prokhanov as the beginning of this Great Project, which has been launched largely thanks to Lemekhov's spiritual efforts and through Labazov's political will. In contrast to the psychotic experience expressed in *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, Prokhanov asserts that serving the State and, as he puts it, a "Russian miracle" could weaken the potential impact of any underhanded enemy's activities. In this novel, as in *Virtuoz* and *Vremia zolotoe*, there is a heuristic aspect (that is unmasking conspiracy and conspirators) which seems to be subordinated to a performative aspect of conspiracy rhetoric: in *Krym*, it serves primarily to create and to reproduce an image of the mysterious and dangerous enemy, or of the omnipotent Other who constantly threatens Russia. Moreover, taking part in protest is considered by Prokhanov to be evidence of participation in a liberal anti-Russian conspiracy that is headed by world para-political centers, although its participants appear not to realize that they are being manipulated. In this sense, the conservative conspiracy discourse functions in a proven way—it is adapted

47 In Dugin's *Konspirologiia*, it has been suggested that the "Eurasian" and patriotic GRU are waging war with another secret service, the "Atlantic" and cosmopolitan KGB. Later, Prokhanov developed this idea further in *Gospodin Geksogen*.

to construct the enemy through the projection of our own fears and desires onto them⁴⁸ (the fact that the image of liberal opponents is based on psychological projection has been usually emphasized by a symmetrical logic of conspiracy thinking: any conspiracy requires a counter-conspiracy, this involves fighting a strong enemy using the same methods, weapons and strategies as the enemy).

Another function of conspiracy rhetoric in Prokhanov's late novels, especially in *Krym*, is to maintain and reinforce mass anxiety that, according to the writer, can be the best basis for social mobilization. Such a paranoid persecution of the enemy and their demonization dates back to the conspiracy culture from the time of Stalin and similar cases of conspiracy panics for political purposes (for example, the witch hunt in the USA during the McCarthy era), but given that the conspiracy discourse is considered by the writer to be a weapon in the information wars, the functioning of the latter is defined by the rules of modern media. It turns out that a referent is not necessary for a widely interpreted conspiracy, into which—according to Prokhanov—his political opponents are involved. He claims:

When there are battles, wars—to hell with the truth! ... And what is the truth anyway? I understand what an “information war” is, but I do not understand what “truth” is. “We, journalists, stand solely for truth” ... What nonsense is this? There is no truth in the information space—there is only war.⁴⁹

Thus, conspiracy, still functioning as an effective political tool, turns into a phenomenon of a virtual reality within which it is more important not to prove the existence of real conspiracies, but to manage the various emotional effects on an audience. In this case, however, Prokhanov's previous criticism of political technologists, who have moved political life into a “symbolic space,” no longer appear to be justifiable, given that the writer exploits the very tricks practiced by political technologists.

48 Cf. Ryklin 2003: 288, 291.

49 «Когда идут сражения, войны—какая на хер правда! ... Да и что такое правда? Я понимаю, что такое “информационная война”, но не понимаю, что такое “правда”. “Мы, журналисты, только правду...” Ну что за хрень! В информационном пространстве нет правды – есть война». – Prokhanov 2016.

Conclusions

Prokhanov, as we see, remains committed to conspiracy explanatory models and to appropriate metaphors thereof, but he alternates the manner in which he represents them in his works. For example, the grotesque monstrous images from *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen* are replaced by the pseudo-realistic style of *Krym*, which is supposed to remind the reader about both Russian classical literature of the nineteenth century and novels of socialist realism. The liberal/mondialist conspiracy (the rather obvious anti-Semitic subtext of Prokhanov's novels suggests that he is talking about an international Jewish conspiracy too) was, and remains, the main object of the writer's unmasking efforts; thus, he seems to welcome any ways to use conspiracy theories in order to expose the enemy.

In his novels and political journalism of the 2000s–2010s, Prokhanov has pursued his long-standing ambition—to create a new imperial ideology. Since the collapse of the USSR had been the main impetus in the creation of this resentment ideology, the latter turned out firstly to be permeated with conspiracy motifs and secondly to be aimed at legitimizing institutions that are capable of developing and implementing counter-conspiracies to protect the Russian State. According to Prokhanov, nowadays conspiracies are usually realized in political and cultural spheres, although they always originate from mystical spiritual reality: political conspiracies go back to the eternal conflict between Good and Evil, God and the Devil, but the important target of the enemy's secret subversive activities are the Russian authorities and the State. This is because they serve, in Prokhanov's words, as tools to perform the “Russian miracle.”⁵⁰ Proceeding from such an understanding of conspiracy, the writer endows any action, or any step taken in politics or culture, with a hidden meaning in order to interpret them from the perspective of strengthening/weakening the Russian State.

At the same time, Prokhanov makes good use of conspiracy explanatory models to achieve specific tactical objectives, particularly to strengthen the position of Russia's neoconservative circles, to exclude any opportunity for liberal-minded politicians to come to power, and finally to encourage Putin to start the conservative modernization project, by inspiring him with the idea of having been chosen. In a sense, the intensive exploitation of conspiracy rhetoric is dictated by precisely this tactical consideration.

Exacerbating anxiety-provoking situations, trying to reveal to Russia's leader the true mystical meanings of some political developments, Prokhanov, in my

50 «Русское чудо» – cf. Prokhanov 2014: 207.

opinion, tends to invent a special stance in the political field. He persistently defines himself not only as a political analyst, but as a visionary, knowing “spiritual codes” that are accessible to only a few “metaphysicians” with “mystical experience.”⁵¹ He spares no effort in enhancing the relevance of such a cultural figure that would be valuable for the authorities, on the one hand—as a political expert and a wise adviser connected with exalted spiritual spheres—and for the Russian people on the other hand as the creator of an inspiring myth. In this new stance, Prokhanov mobilizes all of the institutional and symbolic resources available to the political analyst and the writer to promote the traditionalist mythology of power, according to which normally functioning institutions, legal procedures, and political mechanisms can never replace a charismatic leader who has comprehended a sacred meaning of power and the “theory of the Russian state which ... will create Heaven on Earth.”⁵² Thus, the use of conspiracy models can be considered a feature of the Neoconservatives’ self-promotion strategy and a time-honored way of flirting either with Putin as a personified quintessence of power or with the representatives of the security services (*siloviki*). Turning the world of politics into a world of conspiracy, Prokhanov and his proponents perform like ‘panic entrepreneurs’ who influence public moods and the authorities’ intentions and make a profit on it.⁵³

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51 Prokhanov 2007: 348

52 «Теория о Русском государстве, которое... созиждет Земной Рай». – Prokhanov 2014: 297.

53 No matter how ridiculous or hypertrophied Prokhanov’s fears about the psi-attacks on the President are, they seem to have achieved certain goals, namely the encouragement of those who can protect the authorities and the prevailing political order, i.e., both the well-developed and modernized security structures and the Russian Orthodox Church. Hence, the references to monks who pray in monasteries for the President and repel magical psychological attacks, or to the allusions about the mysterious connection between Putin and Father John (Krest’iankin) and Father Nikolai (Gur’ianov). – Prokhanov 2011: 209.

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Abstract

Aleksandr Prokhanov, writer, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*), and leader of the post-Soviet neoconservatives, is an individual who actively contributed to the expansion of conspiratorial thinking and rhetoric into the field of political analysis. Since the USSR’s collapse, he has attempted to provide insight into both the occult nature of secret subversive activities and into the use of conspiracy technologies in politics. Although conspiratorial ideas have always been a crucial element of his prose, in his recent novels these ideas are formulated from the perspective of groups that sympathize with the conservative turn of the 2000s and the Russian authorities’ current policies. This article focuses on Prokhanov’s attempts to create the Russian version of a so-called “culture of influence,” to promote a traditionalist mythology of power, and to legitimize

conspiracy theories as a tool to protect the Russian State from both internal and external enemies.