

Russia's great power identity on its bumpy journey through time.

Introduction

Recently, Russia has been talking a lot about being a great power.¹ In fact, it has even insisted that such a state like Russia had to either be a great power, or not be at all.² In the western discourse, the term 'great power' immediately evokes unambiguous connotations. Namely, it is believed to be related to some privileged status in the international system. This status is associated either with a claim to be one of a few real policy-makers (as neorealists have argued),³ or with a claim for some rights and responsibilities in relation to the management of international order (as has been suggested by the English School of IR).⁴ Hence, it is those specifically IR-related associations that Russian great power rhetoric elicited in the west. Most observers perceived it as a question of foreign policy.

Yet, if one looks carefully enough, it becomes obvious that Russia's great power discourse does not operate the way the western observers expect it operate. On the one hand, when Russia talks about being a great power, it often places itself in a strong opposition to the rest of the great power club and shows its clear dissatisfaction with the existing international order.⁵ As a result, it is perceived by the west as an unpredictable trouble-maker rather than a great power in the English School's terms. On the other hand, this discourse seems to have an extremely important domestic function. Instead of being exclusively confined to the realm of foreign policy, the great power narrative has become a powerful tool of social consolidation and one of the

¹ E.g. Vladimir Putin, *Inaugural Speeches* (7 May 2000, 7 May 2004, and 7 May 2012); Putin, *Addresses to the Federal Assembly* (26 May 2004, 25 April 2005, 10 May 2006, 26 April 2007, 12 December 2012, and 12 December 2013); Dmitry Medvedev, *Addresses to the Federal Assembly* (5 November 2008, 12 November 2009, 30 November 2010, 22 and December 2011); Mikhail Leontiev, "Kontsept 'Rossiya kak energeticheskaya sverkhderzhava' [Concept 'Russia as an Energy Superpower']," *Russkiy Zhurnal* (27 October 2006); and Vladislav Surkov, "Natsionalizatsiya buduschego [Nationalization of the Future]," *Expert*, No. 43 (537), (20 November 2006).

² Surkov, "Nationalization of the Future"; Leontiev cited in Viatcheslav Morozov, "Sovereignty and democracy in contemporary Russia: a modern subject faces the post-modern world," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11: 152-180 2008: 162; Nikita Mikhalkov, "Manifest Prosveschennogo konservatizma [Enlightened Conservatism Manifesto]," *Polit.ru* (26 October 2010); and Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), p. 175.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (WW Norton & Company, 2001).

⁴ Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵ Putin, *Speech at the Munich Security Conference* (10 February 2007), Putin, *Speech at "Valdai" International Discussion Club* (24 October 2014); and Sergei Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy: Historical Background," *Russia in Global Affairs* (3 March 2016).

foundational stones of the current regime's stability.⁶ Hence, Russia's great power talk that appeared in international context may even be argued to have been an epiphenomenon of its domestic necessity, not of Russia's position in the system of states.

There is also a wide consensus in the literature that greatpowerhood is one of the most essential elements of Russia's self-identity, both at the societal level and at the level of elites.⁷ As such, the extensive utilization of this narrative by Russian policy-makers and its wide acceptance by the masses makes it very similar to what Clifford Geertz understood by the term 'ideology'.⁸ That is, the role of great power has been and still is presented in the Russian political discourse as a natural and commonsensical goal of social development, and is, at the same time, the most widely shared popular image of Russia's soviet and imperial past, desired present, and the only possible future. It is functioning as a symbolic guide for behavior amidst transition, when other traditional and institutional guides are either undergoing a fundamental transformation or are broken down completely.

Most recently, this Russia's identity feature manifested itself very explicitly in a whole number of programmatic texts written by Russian politicians, as well as forecasts and policy analyses prepared by Russian think-tanks. For instance, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, finished his important article in *Russia in Global Affairs* with a philosophical coda entirely focused on Russia's greatpowerhood, which, according to the minister, "is not determined by the size of [a country's] territory or the number of its inhabitants, but by the capacity of its people and its

⁶ In a 2013 survey, Russians were asked what they thought was the greatest achievement of Vladimir Putin as a president. The most popular response was "the restoration of Russia's great power status." Increase of salaries and pensions, economic stability and the rule of law turned out to be not as popular as the great power status. In 2014 in another survey the people were asked whether they would prefer to live in a great power that is respected and even feared globally, or in a prosperous and economically advanced state. The majority answered they would prefer the former.

⁷ Ted Hopf, *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Cornell University Press, 2002); Hopf, "Common-sense constructivism and hegemony in world politics", *International Organization* 67:02 (2013): 317-354; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Christian Thorun, *Explaining change in Russian foreign policy: the role of ideas in post-Soviet Russia's conduct towards the West* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Bo Petersson, "Mirror, Mirror...: Myth-making, Self-Images and Views of the US Other in Contemporary Russia," in Raymond Taras (ed.), *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 11-23.

⁸ Clifford Geertz, "Ideology As a Cultural System," *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Responding to Talcott Parsons and others, who understood ideology as a deceptive politicized narrative always deviant from what could be established as scientifically correct, Geertz conceptualized ideology as a performative speech act capable of transforming unrealized and disconnected private emotions into public possessions, or social facts.

government to take on the burden of great world problems and to deal with these problems in a creative manner.”⁹ Similarly, two big Russian think-tanks, Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) and the Council for Foreign and Security Policy (SVOP), in their recent reports took a pronouncedly normative stance and insistently presented Russia as a “first-class great power” (*pervoklassnaya velikaya derzhava*)¹⁰ that had its “existentially important”¹¹ interests threatened by the western “democratic messianism”¹² and that *had to* and *would* participate in the global restructuring in the face of the “tough challenge [of] permanently falling behind.”¹³

It becomes obvious that both IMEMO’s and SVOP’s documents are as much a normative undertaking as they are an analytical one. By describing the world around, the experts, wittingly or unwittingly, also describe the world that Russia *wants to*, or thinks *it has to* inhabit. And that world is in crisis, which Russia, with its unquestionable and existentially important great power status, is prepared to tackle. Importantly, this world is not simply a world of neorealist anarchy, where power is defined in predominantly material terms. This world is also a field of fierce normative contestation. According to Russia, the world order is in flux. But this also means that there is no place for great powers in it, if one interprets this term in the English School fashion. Hence, Russia’s great power narrative is certainly much more than a simple foreign policy question.

In addition, a brief look into history shows that this narrative is a re-emerging phenomenon in Russia. From very early on, it often concurred with political crises, modernizing leaps and large-scale reforms. Russia has always been talking about being a great power and has always been having problems with being recognized as one.¹⁴ Then, what is going on? What is this greatness

⁹ Ivan Ilyin cited in Sergei Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 (2016).

¹⁰ Sergei Karaganov et al, “Strategiya dlya Rossii. Rossiyskaya vneshnyaya politika: konets 2010-kh – nachalo 2020-kh godov [Strategy for Russia. Russian Foreign Policy: end of the 2010-s – beginning of the 2020-s]”, *The Council for Foreign and Security Policy* (2016), p. 18. From etymological perspective, this formulation “*pervoklassnaya velikaya derzhava*” is, actually, a double tautology. The Russian word *derzhava*, as opposed to *strana* or *gosudarstvo* that could be translated as ‘country’ and ‘state’ respectively, already contains within itself a connotation of political greatness and ‘true’ sovereignty.

¹¹ Karaganov et al, “Strategy for Russia”, pp. 12, 14, 17, 21, 22.

¹² Karaganov et al, “Strategy for Russia”, pp. 8, 12, 23.

¹³ Aleksandr Dynkin et al, “Russia and the World: 2016. IMEMO Forecast”, *New Perspectives*, 23(2) (2015): 100.

¹⁴ Iver B. Neumann, “Russia as a great power, 1815–2007,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11.2 (2008): 128–151; Iver B. Neumann, “Russia’s Standing as a Great Power, 1494–1815,” in Ted Hopf (ed.) *Russia’s European Choice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 13–34; and Iver B. Neumann and Vincent Pouliot, “Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in Russian-Western relations over the past millennium,” *Security Studies* 20.1 (2011): 105–137.

that Russia is talking about, and what function does it perform in Russia's political evolution? What relation, if any, does this greatness have to the European ideas about greatpowerhood?

While a number of IR and Russian Studies scholars noted that Russia had always talked about being a great power, none of them ever scrutinized what Russia actually meant by insisting on being one, merely assuming that it meant what it means elsewhere; nor did they try to explain the reasons behind Russia's obsession with its political greatness.¹⁵ It is those issues that I have decided to tackle here. In this short paper, I would like to present just a few results of an ongoing analysis of a much bigger scope. To make this undertaking more illustrative and to demonstrate how and when the Russian and the European great power discourses met, interacted and (mis)aligned, I focus on the time period when such notions as "the balance of power" and "the concert of great powers" first appeared and gradually established themselves as the key ideas regulating international politics, i.e. the second half of the XVIII and the first half of XIX centuries. While analyzing this historical period I am trying to understand where this idea of Russian greatpowerhood originated from, how it evolved throughout history, and what happened to it when it crossed the borders of Russian polity and came into interaction with the international society. I believe that such an analysis would help understand why Russia is yet again utilizing the great power narrative, what it means in Russia's own terms, and why it is presenting a problem for some international actors, while seeming attractive for others.

Within the framework my analysis I look at both primary and secondary sources. Among them, I pay the most detailed attention to diplomatic correspondence, as well as to both contemporaneous and modern students of international political thought. I begin with a short introduction to the evolution of the idea before XVIII century. Then, I sequentially look at the Russian 'golden age' (second half of XVIII century) and post-Napoleonic wars period. I conclude by briefly peeking into the present in an attempt to interpret what everything that I have discovered in the past means for today.

Evolution of Russia's political greatness before the 'golden age'.

Initially, the idea of political power in Russia, just like in the west, was deeply embedded in the religious discourse.¹⁶ The word they use for great power in modern Russian – *derzhava* – back

¹⁵ Peter JS Duncan, *Russian messianism: third Rome, revolution, communism and after* (Routledge, 2002); Neumann, "Russia as a great power, 1815–2007"; Petersson, "Mirror, Mirror..."; Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy*.

¹⁶ All the provisions of this section have been formulated as a result of an extensive analysis of Old Russian literature and diplomatic correspondence. For the sake of saving space, I present them here in an enumerative

then was first and foremost god's attribute. God, in his turn, was enthroning a grand prince temporarily endowing him with great power. The prince, however, did not possess any personal charisma of his own.

Then, around the XV and XVI centuries the word *derzhava* began to signify 'a polity' in addition to 'great power', and the greatness of Russian polity and power started to be explicitly emphasized through the addition of the word 'great' to it – it became *velikaya derzhava*, which could be literally and somewhat tautologically translated as 'great great power'. I suggest that arguably the vision of Russia being a 'great great power' emerged as a conservative response to European modernity. As follows from contemporary literary sources and diplomatic correspondence, the labels *velikaya derzhava* or *velikoye tsarstvo* (great kingdom) attached to the Russian polity were supposed to emphasize that the power of Russian princes continued to be interpreted as divinely instituted, unconditional and undivided. While some European rulers, in the eyes of the Russian political elite, may have preserved their power, but lost greatness.

This was the case because in some other countries kings began to be elected by the nobles (e.g. in Poland), or the supreme authority got dispersed among the ruling class (e.g. in Sweden). *So, in early modern Russia, instead of being about some international hierarchy or recognition, political greatness was utterly and completely a quality of domestic regime, related to the Russian understanding of political power proper.*

It is important to reiterate that *derzhava* was god's attribute, i.e. it could be associated with the tsaric office, but never with the tsar himself. Endowed with *derzhava*, the tsar was perceived as a father of the family holding his daughters and sons in complete possession. Yet, although he had full *potestas*, i.e. the performative dimension of power to govern through force, his *auctoritas*, or power through authority, was still very much dependent on the Orthodox Church and the Russian Patriarch. It was only through them that the tsaric office was endowed with *majesty*, or true greatness.

This arrangement was very close to the Byzantine idea of *symphony*, when the tsar and the patriarch shared supreme power between them. One was governing, while the other one represented majestic authority. And as long as things remained like this, Russian domestic regime

way without extensive referencing and illustrations. Each and every one of those provisions is open to questioning and contestation. I would be happy to provide more support for my conclusion during the general discussion.

was perceived to be great, or *majestic*, regardless of whether any foreign polity actually recognized it. Hence, for example, it was impossible to glorify the monarch by comparing him to a deity. It would have been perceived as a clear blasphemy.

By the time of Peter the Great (beginning of XVIII century), the narrative on Russia's greatness not only remained in place, but also intensified. However, it also turned entirely into a bulk of panegyric poetry and sermons glorifying the monarch himself and comparing him to a living deity. This was an unthinkable comparison by the standards of the XVI century. It was also in the XVII and XVIII centuries when many western travellers were noticing that Russians considered their tsar almost as god. The monarch seemed to have acquired some personal charisma and mystical significance.¹⁷

Political greatness remained an important quality of Russian domestic regime, but it changed its meaning, because the regime changed as well. By subjugating the Church to the state authority, Peter became the head of the Church. Thus, he accumulated the power in full scope: *auctoritas* and *potestas*, mysterious charisma acquired through the ruler's direct connection to transcendental majesty (as the head of the Church) and unlimited power to govern (as the head of the state apparatus). Consequently, the transcendental kind of greatness (or *majesty*) of the Russian polity turned into personified *glory*, which manifested itself through excessive glorification of the monarch. In Petrine Russia, the greatness of Russian *derzhava* was perceived as an outcome of its salvation by Peter-Christ. (Correspondingly, those who opposed the official line labeled him Antichrist). Be it his military victories or reforms, it was only through his sacrificial policies that the true Russian great power was conceived and brought to maturity. Russia's greatness was either believed to be born with Peter, or re-born through a fundamental metamorphosis. That is, there was no longer anything primordial about it. Instead, it revealed itself through official panegyric literature and official and unofficial sacralization of the monarch.

These two understandings of greatness were of fundamentally different kinds. In the first case, political greatness was perceived as an *ontological fact*, as some objective truth that required (and stood) no scrutiny or verification. This was a very religiously rooted understanding, both substantively (it was just like god's greatness) and procedurally (there was no point in trying to

¹⁷ Boris Uspenskiy and Viktor Zhivov, "Tsar i Bog [Tsar' and God]," in: Boris Uspenskiy, *Izbrannye Trudy* [Selected Works], Vol. 1, second edition (Moscow: Shkola 'Yazyki russkoy kultury', 1996), pp. 205-337.

verify or measure it – it was the truth which was absolute, non-relative and transcendental – hence, people just believed in it). In the second case, greatness was understood *performatively*. It was thought of as sheer power instantiated through the act of performance. That is, it was intrinsic to the discourse itself, it justified and reproduced itself within political discourse by means of its own articulation. One pitched for greatness by acting it out. Notably, this understanding of greatness also received a very visible symbolic manifestation. It was in the time of Peter the Great, when Russia began to use fireworks on a massive scale as “an official language that integrated the sophisticated and the illiterate, those who understood the changing assortment of languages of the Empire and those who did not.”¹⁸ This was a very anti-foundationalist understanding of greatness. It also could not be scrutinized or verified. It worked like speech acts.¹⁹ Its validation mechanism was persuasion, though not through substantiated argumentation.

Most importantly, just like the first kind of greatness, the second kind remained alien to comparison and international hierarchies. In its performative form, Russian idea of political greatness was not at peace with the kind of greatness that was later attributed to great powers that have to be “*comparable* in status”²⁰ and that should also be somehow “*rank[ed]*”²¹ vis-à-vis the rest of the international society. Moreover, the claim for ontological uniqueness and superiority, as opposed to performative glorification, would also and unavoidably have great difficulties with international recognition, i.e. with the third criterion of greatpowerhood put forward by Hedley Bull.²² It is at this point when the period I would like to analyse more thoroughly in this paper starts. And although I presented the two understanding of Russian political greatness as a temporal sequence in which one understanding replaced the other, I would like to begin with a few remarks about how it was actually *not* the case.

Old and new greatness

When I argued that one understanding of political greatness in Russia gave way to another understanding, this was not to imply that one simply replaced and erased the other. Of course,

¹⁸ Alexander Etkind, *Internal colonisation: Russia's imperial experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 120.

¹⁹ John Austin, *How to do things with words* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

²⁰ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 194, emphasis added.

²¹ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 195, emphasis added.

²² Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 195.

the discursive transformation was taking place on the basis of stark antitheses. In Viktor Zhivov's words,

the contradistinction between the old and the new Russia was founded on a set of mutually exclusive characteristics, so there was no space for any succession. ... [If] the new Russia was accredited with enlightenment, the old one was associated with ignorance; if the new Russia was perceived as rich and magnificent, the old one was seen as miserable and poor. The new Russia was kind of drawing a caricature of the old Russia.²³

The same can be said about the utmost importance of patriarchs (especially, starting from the Time of Troubles (1598-1613)) in the old Russia and the complete submission of the Orthodox Church to the mighty state in the new one; about the impersonal and transcendent nature of political greatness in the old Russia and the highly-personalized, almost 'biological' ownership of both executive and authoritative power in the new one.²⁴

However, discursive positions live their own lives, in the course of which they may become dominant, be shifted to the margins, get silenced and re-emerge again. Naturally, the belief that Russia was a great polity in ontological terms was preserved by those who opposed Peter's reforms and his new status. In the XVIII century, it was nurtured by the old believers, who quit the sphere of the political, for its practice no longer conformed to their conviction that Russia was the last ark of the true faith.

In the XIX century, the same idea of Russia's internal ontological greatness was picked up by Slavophiles. For instance, Konstantin Aksakov, one of their earliest representatives, insistently argued that Peter "glorified Russia [by] giving her a lot of *external* greatness, but he also corrupted her *internal* integrity."²⁵ He then went on to suggest that "External greatness of imperial Russia is certainly bright, but this external greatness can only be enduring when it

²³ Viktor Zhivov cited in Sergei Sergeyev, "'My ... vse zhelayem emu smerti...': O nepopulyarnom vlastitele i onday 'evropeyskoy' epokhe ['We ... all wish he died...': On an unpopular ruler and one 'European' epoch]" *Gefter* (23 December 2015) available at: <http://gefter.ru/archive/17062> (accessed 17 February 2016).

²⁴ Such 'biologization' of supreme power actually started before Peter's reforms. According to Sergei Ivanov, it was already partially characteristic of Ivan IV's (1530-1584) self-perception. This is why the latter could "seat Simeon Bekbulatovich [the Khan of Qasim] on the tsaric throne [and call him the Grand Prince of all Russia], for the supreme authority anyway remained only his, he was the 'biological' tsar [of Russia]." Such perception of power was very different from Ivan IV's predecessors, but it remained in force for several centuries after. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the most (in)famous Russian rebel, Yemelyan Pugachev (1742-1775), while trying to convince his fellow Cossacks that he was the true tsar, "showed 'tsaric signs' on his body while bathing" (Sergei Ivanov, "Rossiya – naslednitsa Vizantii? [Russia – the successor of Byzantium?]" Interview for *Arzamas*, available at <http://arzamas.academy/materials/877> (accessed 15 February, 2016)).

²⁵ Konstantin Aksakov, *Rannie slavyanofily* [Early Slavophiles], Vol. 5 (Moscow: Istoriko-literturnaya biblioteka), p. 88, emphasis added.

emanates from the internal one ... And it is this *internal greatness* that must be the first and the most important goal for the people, and, of course, for the government.”²⁶ For Aksakov, such internal greatness resided somewhere in the arcane and pure might of the pre-Petrine Russia and, no doubt, in the institution of the Orthodox Church.

A similar exchange about internal and external greatness appeared in an 1860 issue of *Kolokol*, a censorship-free London-based Russian newspaper, which was a stronghold of Russian liberals and a major platform for the Westernizers’ position of the big debate. One of *Kolokol*’s Polish authors admitted that it was “through no fault of his own that the Russian has been accustomed from his infancy to ... far reaching dimensions and goals, and that therefore even his dreams tend involuntary towards *outward greatness*. [Yet,]” he continued, “with his mental powers fresh, and his mind not yet matured, he develops *every* idea into prodigious dimension and has no presentiment of some other, *inward greatness*. This is childish enthusiasm, not manly thoughtfulness,” concludes the reader in the end.²⁷ The paper’s editor, Alexander Herzen, initially fended off the Pole’s accusations by asserting that “a desire that the ‘Russia of the future should be *democratic and socially just*’ ... cannot ... be called ‘outward’.”²⁸ Yet, in the following sentences, he also immediately revealed the transcendence and non-relativity of his ideals by insisting that the mode of goal-setting described by the reader was, in fact, “a tremendous strength [and] a mainspring of forward movement, ... [for they] only achieve great things who have even greater things in mind.”²⁹

In addition, Herzen added another feature of Russian thought that had been missed out by his correspondent. He asserted that Russia has great intellectual freedom, because “it does not think of political independence and national uniqueness at all; we do not have to prove our nationality, [for] it is such an unshakable, indisputable and obvious fact that we forget about it as we forget about the air we breathe or about our own heartbeat.”³⁰ The editor also compared this Russian feature with French and British political self-confidence, but he urged to specify that unlike the old western nations, whose tradition was as alive as their present, Russia was “as *independent in time*, as it was in space, [for she] forgot [her] distant past and tr[ies] to forget even [her] previous

²⁶ Aksakov, *Early Slavophiles*, emphasis added

²⁷ Alexander Herzen, “Rossia i Pol’sha [Russia and Poland]”, *Kolokol* (The Bell), No. 67 (April 1, 1860), p. 555.

²⁸ Ibid, emphasis original.

²⁹ Herzen, “Russia and Poland”.

³⁰ Ibid.

day.”³¹ Thus, whether Russia’s greatness was inward- or outward-oriented, Herzen tried to make sure his readers understood that it was non-relative and that it was founded on some ontological facts.

For another XIX-century thinker, Vladimir Solovyov (who actually defended Peter), the true greatness was achieved by peoples in their quest to resolve the great questions. In those great questions, however, “it was the salvation of a people’s soul that was the crux of the matter, and hence, each people [had to] think only of its own duty, without looking at all other peoples, without expecting or asking anything from them.”³² Speaking for all off Russia, Solovyov maintained that “while fulfilling our own duty, we thereby serve the common universal cause; for in this common cause every historic people ... has its own special kind of service.”³³

But most importantly, if one looks close enough at the Russian diplomatic practice in both XVIII and XIX centuries, it becomes obvious that the two understandings of greatness not only entered into a dialectic relationship with one another, but also started to interact quite closely with the European ideas of greatness based on international hierarchies and material strength. One of the most interesting agents of this process was Russian Chancellor Alexander Gorchakov (1798-1883), who became the craftsman of Russian foreign policy after the Crimean War (1853-1856), a military conflict which was widely believed to have undermined Russia’s great power status. I will return to a more detailed analysis of his ideas in the final section of this paper. Yet, the initial signs of the interaction between the ontological and performative ideas of greatness were already visible during Catherine’s rule. Before I address those interactions I, however, ought to discuss how performative greatness could operate on its own.

The kind of greatness that Aksakov called “external” and “bright” can clearly be compared to glory, or what I called *performative* greatness. It is also clear that for Aksakov and, arguably, for the *Kolokol*’s addressant, such greatness seemed artificial and short-lived, for it was a kind of smokescreen of glory spread over some internal essence, which was either immature or corrupt. Hence, both of them admitted that Russia, in order to become a truly great state, had to rid of its outward-oriented ambitions and either recover its true essence from the pre-Petrine past, or

³¹ Herzen, “Russia and Poland”, emphasis original.

³² Vladimir Solovyov, “*Mravstvennost’ i politika: Istoricheskie obyazannosti Rossii* [Morality and Politics: Historical Duties of Russia],” *Natsional’ny vopros v Rossii* [Russia’s National Question], available at <http://goo.gl/KaYmgK> (accessed 17 February 2016).

³³ Ibid.

first develop its internal greatness into something sound and ripe. I, however, believe that treating performative greatness as a mere veil hiding internal immaturity and powerlessness is shortsighted. It is this objection that brings me to the second caveat I wanted to make.

Real and unreal greatness

Performative greatness can only be called 'unreal', when it comes to transparency and measurement. The latter however are not necessary preconditions for the validity of *social facts* that can be evaluated on an altogether different scale. One could think of a theatrical performance, for example. It is not necessary for a theater audience to believe in the historicity of the play on stage or in the truthfulness of all actors to still admit that the performance itself is capable of producing profound social effects and of being recognized as a great work of art. The point is that, when one attends a performance, one looks at it through a slightly different lens, assesses it using a different set of criteria, and participates in it utilizing a different selection of practices. A theatrical performance is not subject to verification. It can, of course, be compared to other performances, but only very subjectively. The recognition of its success hinges upon the feeling of transcendence that it has to be able to create. In order to become great, it must be persuasive.

There has been no lack in attempts to theorize international and domestic politics as a dramaturgical interaction lately.³⁴ It is perfectly intuitive that performance and persuasion are politics' essential parts, not only on the superficial level of diplomatic rituals and political ceremonies, but also, as Erik Ringmar has argued recently, on a more profound level of constructing political subjects.³⁵ Yet, whether one believes it to matter only superficially or fundamentally, there is one feature of performance that all would agree with: performance comes into force through its own enactment. It has no 'real' foundation that would be detached from the act itself. This, however, does not mean that the act itself cannot have effects, which would be very real.

³⁴ E.g. Erik Ringmar, "How the world stage makes its subjects: an embodied critique of constructivist theory", *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2016) 19, 101–125; Frank Schimmelfennig, "Goffman Meets IR: Dramaturgical Action in International Community," *International Review of Sociology*, 12:3: 417-437; Jenny Edkins and Adrian Kear (eds), *International Politics and Performance: Critical Aesthetics and Creative Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); and Lyman Chaffee, "Dramaturgical politics: the culture and ritual of demonstrations in Argentina," *Media Culture Society* (January, 1993) vol. 15 no. 1: 113-135.

³⁵ Ringmar, "How the world stage makes its subjects".

At the same time, the enactment of performative greatness requires a number of important conditions to be fulfilled. The first condition is that its 'backstage' must remain hidden. It capitalizes on mystery and gets dismantled immediately, once the 'makeup' is washed away. The more enigmatic it is the better. Only through maintaining this mystery can one create a 'charm' of performative greatness. The second condition is that it must be actor-centered. It crucially depends on the leading roles.

And indeed, taken together, these two conditions manifest themselves very explicitly in the Russian great power discourse since Peter the Great. When it comes to both domestic and international manifestations of Russia's greatness, there is a clear element of theatricality to its political conduct. For example, Klyuchevsky argued that Catherine the Great "did not give freedom and enlightenment to her people, ... but she gave [people's] minds an opportunity to feel the value of those weals, if not as principles of public order, then, at least, as conveniences of private, individual existence."³⁶ The historian continued by insisting that "this feeling was ever more encouraging, as it was not yet weakened by the realization of all the sacrifices and efforts that need to be made for acquiring those weals, while the congestion of the sphere allocated for their enactment was not yet noticed; the narrowness of the boot could not be felt under the *spell of immortal glory*, which she acquired around the world."³⁷ Then, openly utilizing a theatrical metaphor, Klyuchevsky asserted that

This glory was a new impression for Russian society, and it is in this glory where the secret of Catherine's popularity lies. In her worldwide glory the Russian society felt its own international strength, they discovered themselves through it: *Catherine was admired just like we admire an actor*, who opens up and awakes previously unknown feelings inside us; she was admired because through her we began to admire ourselves. Since Peter, Russians hardly thought of themselves as people, let alone true Europeans; under Catherine, however, Russians not only felt they were people, but they also felt as if they were the first people in all of Europe.³⁸

Such feeling was a powerful motivating force, and because of it Catherine was forgiven for numerous smaller failures and losses in her foreign policy and domestic administration alike. Such feeling was also carefully guarded, and it was no surprise that in her busy correspondence with the representatives of the European Enlightenment she preferred to be viewed from the

³⁶ Vasily Klyuchevsky, *Imperatritsa Yekaterina II* (1729-1796) [Empress Catherine II (1729-1796)], available at <http://goo.gl/TuvTzo> (accessed on 17 February 2016).

³⁷ Klyuchevsky, *Imperatritsa Yekaterina II*.

³⁸ Klyuchevsky, *Imperatritsa Yekaterina II*, emphasis added.

distance. This is why, as noted by Elizabeth Hill, Catherine advised Voltaire against visiting her in Russia, justifying her insistence by voicing concerns about his poor health.³⁹

The mode of Russia's international glorification during Catherine the Great could, perhaps, be described as *political impressionism*. It was due to such mode of conduct that "the Empire ... was seen by law and by general impression as a magnificent and harmonic building, while at a closer look it revealed chaos and disorder, as a painting with sweeping brushstrokes only fit for observing it from the distance."⁴⁰ At home, such mode of conduct also prevailed. Yet, it would be too shortsighted to describe it as mere pretense, as it is often done in the case of infamous Potemkin villages. As argued by Andrei Zorin, Potemkin installed those colorful facades of happy village life along the banks of Volga River not to hide the real poverty and misery, but to present how those lands could look like at the culmination point of Catherine's famous Greek Project, i.e. this was done for the purpose of inspiration, not for covering something up.⁴¹

On Potemkin's example, one could actually see how pretense and acting characteristic of the anti-foundationalist mindset of those, who believed political greatness to be a matter of appearance, overlapped with the conviction that greatness was something primordial and predestined. The Greek Project, which today's Crimea owes all of its Hellenic toponymy to, was a claim for some ontological greatness of Eastern Christianity, which would have manifested itself in the restoration of the Byzantine Empire centered in Constantinople, whose throne should have been occupied by Catherine's second grandson Konstantin.⁴² Hence, Potemkin's villages, ridiculed so much in the west, appeared to be a perfectly natural phenomenon for Russia, given the combination of the two ideas of political greatness that prevailed there – the idea of greatness as an ontological fact and as a performative appearance.

More on the performative side of the story, when Alexander I (1777-1825) represented the "new and enigmatical" Russia at the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), he was generally perceived as "a theatrical, mystical, and versatile personage."⁴³ Perhaps, the French representative, Prince

³⁹ Voltaire and Catherine the Great, *Selected correspondence*, translated, with commentary, notes and introduction by Anthony Lentin, with a foreword by Elizabeth Hill.

⁴⁰ Klyuchevsky, *Imperatritsa Yekaterina II*.

⁴¹ Andrei Zorin, *Kormya dvuglavogo orla* [Feeding the Two-headed Eagle] (Moscow: Novoye literturnoe obozrenie, 2001).

⁴² Zorin, *Feeding the Two-headed Eagle*.

⁴³ M.G. Pallain, *The Correspondence of Prince Talleyrand and King Louis XVIII during the Congress of Vienna* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), p. xii (hereinafter referred as 'Talleyrand').

Talleyrand, captured something beyond mere flattery when he told Alexander that “the foremost of [his] interests is the care of that personal glory which [he] has acquired, and whose lustre [was] reflected upon [his] Empire,”⁴⁴ because it was solely on the account of this personal glory that the acceptance of “the intervention of Russia in the affairs of Europe ... [had] been suffered to take place.”⁴⁵ Pointing in the same direction as Klyuchevsky pointed when he was writing of Catherine, Talleyrand also added that “[His] majesty must guard that glory, not for [his] own sake only, but also for the sake of [his] people, whose patrimony it [was].”⁴⁶ Further, I will return to Alexander’s performance in Vienna. At this point, however, a few words on the reverse side of the performative understanding of greatness would be in place.

One obvious weakness of political impressionism is disclosure, for it is through disclosure that the charm of performative greatness is dispelled. Russian elites may have understood this quite clearly, but naturally they did not rush to emphasize this explicitly in the international arena. This was not the case for some of their private correspondence though. For instance, in 1795, Grand Chancellor and the architect of Russian foreign policy, Alexander Bezborodko, while complaining to Prince Nikolai Repnin about the lack of resources, wrote that “Fortunately, everyone believes that we [Russia] are stronger than we really are in our essence, and such good impression will help us get out of this chaos, given that we act modestly and with prudence.”⁴⁷

Similarly, the issue of ‘charm’ as an attribute of great powers was brought forth and discussed at the very dusk of the Russian empire. In 1910, Prince Grigoriy Trubetskoy quoted Baron Roman Rosen, Russian ambassador in Tokyo, who wrote before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War that Russia could not pursue two foreign policy goals in the Far East simultaneously, and that the only option was “to concentrate all its efforts ... in Manchuria, ... for Russia could not withdraw from it without significant damage to its *charm* [*obayanie*] and *political interests* as a world power in the Far East.”⁴⁸ Rosen also believed that the Japanese had been effectively deterred by that “*charm* of Russia as the greatest world power.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Talleyrand, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* [Collection of Imperial Russian Historical Society] (hereinafter referred to as ‘Collection’), Vol. 16, p. 207.

⁴⁸ Roman Rosen cited in Grigory Trubetskoy, “Rossiya kak velikaya derzhava [Russia as a Great Power],” V. P. Ryabushinskiy, *Velikaya Rossiya* [Great Russia] (Moscow: Tipografiya P.P. Ryabushinskiy, 1910), p. 46, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Ibid, emphasis added.

This last example, however, was evoked by a group of people, whose main objective was to build material and military foundation beneath Russia's claim for political greatness, for they understood that Russia could not continue being deaf towards the influence of international context. This was also what Prince Gorchakov understood quite well. Agreeing on this point, however, Trubetskoy and Gorchakov were polar opposites in everything else. While Trubetskoy would certainly support one of his interlocutors from V.P. Ryabushinskiy's edited volume *Velikaya Rossiya* ('Great Russia'), who argued that Russia was infected by the 'virus of pacifism' and insisted that "the restoration of Russia's military might [was] its main and the most urgent objective,"⁵⁰ Gorchakov, even if not indifferent to Russia's military capabilities, still always emphasized the utility of diplomatic means and internal reforms.⁵¹ Thus, both of them believed that, however effective the charming dimension of great power might have been, it was not enough to maintain Russia's international status.

However, already in the XVIII century, the sensitivity of the Russian idea of political greatness to disclosure and measurement became fairly obvious. Perhaps, the most telling discursive example revealing such sensitivity was an anonymous opus called *Antidote* (1770), which was often attributed to Catherine the Great herself. This 238-page (!) pamphlet was nothing else but a critical analysis of one "obnoxious, but gorgeously printed book."⁵² Namely, *Antidote* was an outraged response to Abbot Jean-Baptiste Chappe d'Auteroche's unflattering 1768 book about his journey through Russia.⁵³ In her autographic rescript from the pamphlet Catherine bitterly noted that "out of all the agents, who, driven by selfishness and intrigue, have been disturbing peace in the world, I would eagerly believe the abbot to be the most cunning and methodical."⁵⁴ The empress seemed to have been revolted by the fact that the Abbot, "having been warned that Europe holds too high an opinion about Russian power and that this opinion might become too widespread and harmful for general lines of French politics took it upon himself to debunk it and

⁵⁰ ***, "Mirosozertsaniye naroda i dukh armii [The world-outlook of the people and the spirit of the army]," V. P. Ryabushinskiy, *Velikaya Rossiya* [Great Russia] (Moscow: Tipografiya P.P. Ryabushinskiy, 1910)p. 19.

⁵¹ Gorchakov, 351.

⁵² Catherine II, "Antidot. Polemicheskoye sochinenie [Antidote. Polemical Essay]," Pyotr Bartenev (ed.), *Osmnadsaty vek: Istoricheskiy sbornik* [Eighteenth Century: Historical Collection], Vol. 4, p. 226 (hereinafter referred to as 'Antidote').

⁵³ Chappe d'Auteroche, *Voyage en Sibérie...* (1768)

⁵⁴ *Collection*, Vol. 10, p. 317.

to prove that our empire has nothing to be afraid of and that such opinion exists only due to the lack of research.”⁵⁵

According to the author of the opus, the Abbot “under the pretext of observing the Venus, ... started *measuring* in his own way *the sources of our power* [*mogushchestva*], i.e. bringing out the worst in our political regime, and in the features and character of our people. In addition, he began to belittle our state’s annual profits, its land and naval forces, its population, efficiency of its trade and mines, and the quality of its soil.”⁵⁶ As a result of such exercise, d’Auteroche presented a collection of detailed tables that were supposed to “*measure and expose* all powers and profits of the Empire to the last kopeck.”⁵⁷

The general line of critique employed by the author of *Antidote* was to insist that d’Auteroche’s data and observations were either non-credible, or non-generalizable, or typical of all European nations and not Russia alone. As such, the author insisted that the Abbot’s observations were nothing but “printed defamation”⁵⁸ characteristic of those who “force their minds to believe [that Russia] is insignificant against all evidence and the truth.”⁵⁹ The evidence of Russia’s significance, however, was not presented in *Antidote* in the kind of format that d’Auteroche would accept (e.g. as corrected numbers and tables). Throughout all 238 pages the author did not move beyond deconstruction. Yet, one important feature that did, in the author’s opinion, make Russia great and that was expanded upon in the text of the pamphlet was the ability of Russian people to connect in one unified feeling during times of trouble. In *Antidote*, this ability was referred to as *obshchiy golos naroda* (i.e. ‘common voice of the people’) or *soglasie* (i.e. ‘consonance’).⁶⁰ Such consonance always emerged when the country was weak and endangered, and it usually brought about breakthroughs and revolutions.

This idea of people’s consonance is, in fact, another re-emerging theme in Russia’s political development. Its importance should not be underestimated, for in it one could actually see how the two ideas of political greatness overlapped again. Since neither ontological facts nor persuasive performance can actually be effectively scrutinized the only way of their collective

⁵⁵ *Collection*, Vol. 10, p. 317.

⁵⁶ *Antidote*, p. 298, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ *Antidote*, p. 258.

⁵⁹ *Antidote*, p. 299.

⁶⁰ *Antidote*, p. 302-303.

validation is a consonance of some sort, for such validation would necessarily need to follow a binary logic.

On the one hand, if appearance does not matter, for greatness is perceived as some objective truth, all arguments and discussions become irrelevant. A belief can only be true as long as it perfectly corresponds to some ontological entity. If this entity is not there, or if the belief itself is debatable, this belief immediately becomes false.⁶¹ Therefore, I compared such understanding of political greatness with god's greatness. And the only possibility of its collective acclaim is unison.⁶²

On the other hand, if there is no real foundation, and it is only appearance that matters, there is no etalon for anything at all, just like there are no universals. Truth, in this case, is internal to the process of signification. And an endless debate and arguing that comes as its consequence can only stop in persuasion.⁶³ When it comes to political entities, this moment of persuasion is always problematic, for it has to be overwhelming in order to work at all. This is why, for example, however convincing Leviathan looks in the end, Hobbes could not convincingly demonstrate how an arrangement like this would actually come about to begin with. Similarly, for the author of *Antidote* people's consonance was a natural and necessary precondition of breakthroughs and revolutions. Given that greatness is mere appearance, Russia's greatest moments came about when all the people were persuaded as one.

It was with this baggage that the Russian great power discourse came into permanent interaction with the European system of states in the XVIII century. Further, I try to reconstruct some encounters between the Russian and the European discursive fields that happened after.

⁶¹ For more information on philosophical realism and the correspondence theory of truth see: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Truth", available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/> (accessed 27 March 2016).

⁶² The importance of unison comes to the fore in a whole number of occasions in Russian political evolution. For example, here is how Lev Löwenson described the procedure of *vieche*, i.e. the adult inhabitants' assembly in the city of Novgorod in pre-modern times: "Whenever the Prince or the city elders had anything of importance to communicate, the *vieche* bell was rung and the adult inhabitants assembled in an open place... There was no secret or individual vote. The assembly made known its will by a mighty shout, and if there was no strong opposition the vote was regarded as unanimous. If, however, the opposition was loud and persistent, the question was finally settled by a free-fight" (Lev Löwenson, "A Thousand Years of Russian Government", UCL SSEES Library Archives, Loewenson Collection (1631-1963) (circa), LOE/2/12, Texts of lecture on Russia given by Loewenson (1936) p. 7-8). But also the unison of the people figures very prominently in the story of the 1613 Assembly of the Land and Theophan Prokopovich's (1681-1736) political philosophy.

⁶³ For more information on philosophical nominalism see: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Nominalism in Metaphysics", available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/> (accessed 27 March 2016).

Russian greatness meets Europe

Unsurprisingly, the European tendency towards measuring political greatness and the troubles that Russia seems to have had in this regard that revealed themselves in *Antidote*, were also characteristic of contemporaneous Russia's diplomatic relations with some of its European neighbors. For example, in 1766, Sir George Macartney, British ambassador in Saint-Petersburg, was quick to notice that "the two powers [Russia and Great Britain] [were] under mutual mistakes with regard to each other... [and the British mistake] with regard to [Russia was] in looking upon this nation as a civilized one and treating them as such, [for] it by no means *merit[ed]* this title."⁶⁴ Frustrated with ill success in his negotiations Macartney wrote in a different letter to London that Russians "have such extravagant ideas of their own power, and seem to have so little apprehension from other nations, that they really believe such a method of negotiation (for they seriously call this negotiating) the most suitable to their circumstances, situation of affairs, and convenience."⁶⁵ Trying to rationalize such behavior of the Russian court, Macartney, recalling how much Russia was courted by "the most formidable powers of Europe," suggested that the insolence that Russians were "swelled with" was "generally the attendant of *unmerited* good fortune,"⁶⁶ thereby making clear that for a Brit merit was the only measure of greatness.

In another piece of correspondence that took place in 1768, Macartney's successor, Mr Henry Shirley, wrote to Lord Viscount Weymouth about his personal feelings towards Russians:

One cannot help pitying Russians, who think themselves so wise, so powerful, when they are at such and immense distance from the happy situation of some nations in Europe. I confess that their credit and influence is great, that their army is numerous, though not invincible, as they believe; but as the brightness of their power proceeds in a great measure from the weakness of some of their neighbours, and the strength of the King of Prussia ... it would be injudicious to suppose that it will shine for ever.⁶⁷

However, the most interesting diplomatic exchange occurred a year earlier between Shirley and the then-current British Secretary of State for the Northern Department, Lord Henry Seymour Conway. While trying to negotiate a trade agreement with Russia, Shirley assured Conway of his certainty that Russia would "conceive advantageous notions of the grandeur of Great Britain, and ... perceive how beneficial it would be to them to have such a power for their ally ... [and],

⁶⁴ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 248-249, emphasis added.

⁶⁵ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 253.

⁶⁶ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 253.

⁶⁷ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 330.

notwithstanding the late coquetry, [the Empress would] ... accept most readily and alliance with [Britain], although never ... without the Turkish clause, because otherwise this alliance would appear to her dishonorable..."⁶⁸ In response, Conway agreed with Shirley's opinion on British grandeur, and suggested him "several topics which [should be] occasionally ma[de] use of in [Shirley's] future conference with [Count Nikita Panin, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs]" and should remind him of Britain's "grandeur and glory."⁶⁹ These topics included "the unparalleled successes of the last war ... important acquisitions gained in every part of the world [which] render[ed] the success of [British] arms not a *vain blaze of glory*, but the source of such a *solid increase of power and riches*, as [would] be of the most durable advantage to the Nation... [and a] revenue of four million sterling... from the rents of land [in the East Indies]."⁷⁰ Conway also added that "the finances of the whole Russian Empire [would] not, *on comparison*, be found more superior."⁷¹ In addition, he also evaluated Russia's strengths (e.g. its remote situation, land and manpower) and concluded that "each State seem[ed] *calculated* by nature to supply the defects of the other, and were their union once established and generally known, it would add consideration to both, and enable them ... to pursue ... those arts of peace and cultivation which form the real grandeur and happiness of a people..."⁷²

Having discussed the matter of Britain's greatness with Panin, Shirley reported the latter's response, which turned out to be as interesting for the present study as it was puzzling for both British diplomats. Reportedly, Panin, "observing the warmth with which [Shirley] spoke, smiled, and taking [Shirley] by the hand [said that he] could show [him] the same fair prospect on [Russia's] side."⁷³ When Shirley assured Panin that he did not intend "to under-rate the power of Russia,"⁷⁴ Panin interrupted his interlocutor and, promising to open his heart to Shirley, tried to articulate the real obstacle that he saw in front of him. For Panin, those measurements and justifications of greatness were missing the point. And the point was that Russia wanted "to render it unnecessary ... to renew her former connection[s] ... She ought to be not only absolutely independent of every other connection, but the base also of every other connection..."⁷⁵ That is,

⁶⁸ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 310.

⁶⁹ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 311.

⁷⁰ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 311, emphasis added.

⁷¹ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 312, emphasis added.

⁷² *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 315-314, emphasis added.

⁷³ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 318.

⁷⁴ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 318.

⁷⁵ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 317.

she could not afford, given her unquestionable highest dignity and status, putting herself in a position of needing to seek, in addition to the alliance with Great Britain, some other alliances to protect herself from Turkey. In Panin's opinion, Russia needed to minimize potential further compromises and maximize its independent, almost isolated position, and, together with Great Britain as an equally great power, she should have been able to hold the fate of European war in her hands, which would not have been the case, had the Turkish clause been excluded from the agreement.

In other words, if for Great Britain its greatness gave her some competitive advantage, which could be measured, explicitly articulated and eventually translated into *leverage* in international negotiations, Russia's greatness was treated, if anything, as an *obstacle* for international negotiations, because it made it impossible to agree to anything which could be perceived as dishonorable or degrading for the dignity of the Russian great sovereign. The issue of sovereign dignity was also mentioned on several other occasions in Russia's negotiations with Great Britain. One example would be a 1765 document *Pro-Memoria*, in which the Russian side maintained that the British ambassador "[knew] the mindset of the Russian court too well to admit a possibility that it could be persuaded to sign a declaration, humiliating its dignity and unacceptable in both its wording and its form."⁷⁶ Another example was a 1766 letter of already familiar Sir George Macartney, who reported Panin saying that Russia "would not so far derogate from her own Sovereignty, honour and prudence as to enchain herself to a foreign power without necessity..."⁷⁷

Here again in Russian diplomatic argumentation one could potentially discern the traces of two understandings of political greatness. On the one hand, there are clear references to some ontological quality that made Russia great almost by default, and any attempt to verify this greatness would unavoidably miss the point. Yet, on the other hand, one could also read this inability to agree to anything on the international level through the nominalist philosophical lens. Since there is now objective truth and no universal standard for measurement, the primary function of any sovereign was to maintain monopoly on the meanings of things (e.g. that Russia was a great polity). This monopoly, in turn, could be compromised by an international agreement

⁷⁶ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 233.

⁷⁷ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 259.

that would make Russia seek more friends, as if it was not great enough, and as if it could not become “the base ... of every other connection.”⁷⁸

Viewed in this light, Russia’s stubbornness and pomp in international negotiations, which had been noted by numerous European observers, may have, in fact, been the function of its domestic legitimization. It was naturally difficult for the Russian elites to suddenly adopt a different mode of interaction at the international level; especially if that mode anticipated a different understanding of political greatness established through hierarchies and competition. It was no surprise that such alternative way of glorification was perceived as undermining the principles of Russia’s political conduct.

If continuous socialization brings actors closer together, one common enemy brings them closer together ten times as fast. In this respect, the rise of Napoleon and his joint defeat were the most important factors facilitating Russia’s speedy rapprochement with Europe. As such, the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) that immediately followed the Napoleonic Wars and became the main site for the renegotiation of the European political order was the next critical juncture in the evolution of Russian great power discourse.

As is the case for any critical juncture, there were a number of ideational clashes and unpredictable individual transformations during the Congress and in its immediate aftermath. Some of those clashes and transformations remain puzzling until today. Perhaps, the most puzzling metamorphosis that occurred in Vienna was the shift in Alexander I’s position that Andreas Osiander described as “an image neurosis”⁷⁹: from hardcore progressive liberalism to religious mysticism, i.e. from an almost revolutionary stance that conservative European powers were as yet unprepared to accept to a hyper-conservative position, which was perceived by the Western states as doltish and almost insane (even though, despite such perception, they, as the outcome of the negotiations showed, were a bit more comfortable with the latter position).

In the very beginning of the Congress, Alexander truly astounded his counterparts with his radical views. He began with arguing forcefully that there was no coming back to the old European order:

⁷⁸ *Collection*, Vol. 12, p. 317. See also: Michael Williams, “Hobbes and international relations: a reconsideration,” *International Organization*, 50:2 (Spring 1996): 213-236.

⁷⁹ Andreas Osiander, *The states system of Europe, 1640-1990: peacemaking and the conditions of international stability* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 181.

“The consequences of the revolutions of our time that changed the relations inside states cannot be eliminated and superseded by a sudden return towards former principles.”⁸⁰ Alexander admitted that the time he lived in was the time of nationalism: “From now on the only possible order is the order founded on the harmony of interests between nations and governments.”⁸¹ “... [It is impossible],” Alexander continued, “to only accommodate in the agreements the exclusive and misinterpreted interests of cabinets, as if nations were their property.” Such position met a very cautious reaction on the part of the European monarchs. For instance, Talleyrand reported that when Alexander insisted that “sovereigns are obliged to conform to the wishes of the people and to observe them, [and that] the wish of the Saxon people is not to be divided,” the last Holy Roman Emperor Francis II responded that he “[knew] nothing about that doctrine, [and that he believed that] a prince may, if he likes, give up a portion of his country and the whole of his people.”⁸² This was Francis’s conviction and he was not prepared to depart from it. In Alexander’s opinion “That [was] not according to the intelligence of the age.”⁸³

Notably, in the beginning of the Congress, Alexander also exhibited an acute understanding and appreciation of what his grandmother, Catherine II, was so much trying to avoid, i.e. the fact that Russia could only effectively integrate into the European society of states, if it adopted its principles of competitive recognition and comparability. While outlining Alexander’s principles, Count Karl Robert Nesselrode, who was the head of the Russian delegation in Vienna, was emphasizing that the governments,

having estimated the sacrifices [of European] peoples, should ... receive ... a share *proportional* to those sacrifices, and not for expansion, but in order to guarantee the prosperity and independence of their states by *increasing their relative power* [*otnositel’naya sila*] that could strengthen this guarantee and make others respect it.⁸⁴

The same principles were also communicated to Turkey through Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Andrey Italinsky.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii XIX i nachala XX veka* [The Foreign Policy of Russia in XIX and the beginning of XX century], (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Series II, Vol. VIII, p. 146 (hereinafter referred to as ‘*The Foreign Policy of Russia*’).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Talleyrand, p. 101.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, p. ...

⁸⁵ *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, p. 339.

This initial Alexander's position was a clear departure from the principles of Russia's political greatness described above. Evidently, the emperor desired to tie Russia's status to some transparent and generally acceptable foundation. His desire was eagerly welcomed by his European counterparts.⁸⁶ However, quite shortly, the emperor seemed to have radically changed his initial liberal stance. As Henry Kissinger put this, "As he followed the armies towards France once more, the Tsar began to ascribe the squabbles at Vienna to the lack of religious inspiration of the protagonists and he recurred to a proposal submitted on his behalf to the Congress which had called for a fraternal association of the sovereigns, guided by the precepts of Christianity."⁸⁷ This proposal was the Holy Alliance, which significantly reformulated his liberal ideas – at times, to the point of turning them on their head.

As Andrei Tsygankov rightly pointed out, "the Holy Alliance was anything but a diplomatic document"⁸⁸ (at least in the European understanding of this term). It had only three articles and none of them preserved any traces of Alexander's idea of the post-revolutionary situation. Instead, the emperor was appealing to the maxims of the Christian faith and admitted that it was necessary to submit "both ... the administration of their respective States, and ... their political relations with every other Government [to] the precepts of [the] Holy Religion."⁸⁹ Alexander suggested that religious principles were "far from being applicable only to private concerns, [and had to] have an immediate influence on the councils of Princes, and guide all their steps..."⁹⁰ In practical terms, "the Three contracting Monarchs [would need to] remain united by the bonds of a true and indissoluble fraternity, [and would need to] regar[d] themselves towards their subjects and armies as fathers of families."⁹¹

Many contemporaries believed that such a drastic turn in Alexander's position happened due to some intimate transformation of his world views that may have been caused by Alexander's

⁸⁶ At least, judging by the British Foreign Secretary's reaction to it: Lord Castlereagh claimed that he understood what Alexander was after and suggested that it was for the purpose of creating "a system of real political equilibrium, of reaching in legitimate and orderly ways the provisions from which it must spring, of making it rest on the solid base of the real and intrinsic strength of each power, that Russia has taken it upon itself not to anticipate on the dispositions of the general settlement [of the Polish question, before] its allies would have taken the true measure of the power falling to their lot" (Castlereagh cited in Osiander, *The states system of Europe*, p. 241).

⁸⁷ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, pp. 187-188.

⁸⁸ Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, p. ...

⁸⁹ *The Holy Alliance Treaty* (26 September 1815), available at <http://goo.gl/CGGs6Q> (accessed 17 February 2016).

⁹⁰ *The Holy Alliance Treaty*.

⁹¹ *The Holy Alliance Treaty*.

intensive communication with Madam de Krudener, “an old fanatic who [had] a considerable reputation amongst the few highflyers in religion that [were] to be found in Paris.”⁹² That is, the adherents of this opinion would simply claim that Alexander became a religious fanatic himself. No doubt, this opinion was also shared by some of the top European ministers, who occasionally testified in their correspondence that the emperor’s mind had “latterly taken a deeply religious tinge,”⁹³ “was [clearly] affected,”⁹⁴ and was “not completely sound.”⁹⁵ Correspondingly, the project of the Holy Alliance was received as a “piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense,”⁹⁶ “insolent and nonsensical document ... claiming to lay down the law,”⁹⁷ and “high sounding nothing.”⁹⁸ And it was only signed by some great powers because of the general belief that Alexander was “disposed to found his own glory upon a principle of peace and benevolence.”⁹⁹ Yet, all of those who originally signed the declaration and those who joined later “realized they needed to be a part of the Alliance, but hoped to mold it into something that [could] fit their own worldviews.”¹⁰⁰

I, however, argue that such interpretation of the outlined shift is superficial. It does not take long to discover, for example, that religion, which occupied an important place in Russia’s communication with European powers, was absolutely and understandably absent from its contemporaneous relations with Turkey, which changed neither the general theme (construction of durable European political order), nor the tone (fairly benevolent and inclusive) of those relations.¹⁰¹ Additionally, those Europeans, who actually had a chance to follow Russia’s domestic politics a bit closer, also attested that religious fervor was not characteristic of the tsar, as a person. For instance, in July 1816, Lord Cathcart, British ambassador to Russia, was writing to Castlereagh from Saint-Petersburg that he knew “of no secret influence [on Alexander], nor [did he] believe that there exists[ed] any excess of predominancy of religious disposition.”¹⁰²

⁹² Charles Kingsley Webster, *British Diplomacy, 1813-1815* (G. Bell and Sons, 1921), p. 382.

⁹³ Webster, *British Diplomacy*, 382

⁹⁴ Ibid, 383

⁹⁵ Ibid, 384

⁹⁶ Ibid, 383

⁹⁷ Talleyrand, p. 128

⁹⁸ Metternich cited in Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, p. ...

⁹⁹ Webster, *British Diplomacy*, p. 384

¹⁰⁰ Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, p. ...

¹⁰¹ E.g. see *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, pp. 335-341.

¹⁰² Charles William Vane (ed.), *Correspondence, despatches, and other papers of Viscount Castlereagh, Second Marquess of Londonderry*, Vol. XI (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1853), p. 264.

It is also important to note that Alexander's position was *always* seen as somehow deviant from the norm. In western sources, Alexander was constantly presented as mystical, prone to exaltation, fond of ethical and religious maxims, as opposed to his pragmatic counterparts who were always in touch with reality. Be it his early radical liberalism, or his later religious turn, he was invariably thought to be detached from concrete practical matters (ironically, it was actually him, who consistently argued that it was impossible to effectively govern on the basis of the ideas that were out of synch with the time). Hence, the problem that European ministers had with Alexander was not his religious fanaticism, but his idealism. As Kissinger put this, while comparing the tsar's disposition to that of the Austrian Foreign Minister Klemens von Metternich,

Alexander sought to identify the new international order with his will; to create a structure safeguarded solely by the purity of his maxims [liberal or religious]. Metternich strove for a balance of forces which would not place too great a premium on self-restraint. The Tsar proposed to *sanctify* the post-war period by transforming the war into a moral symbol; Metternich attempted to *secure* the peace by obtaining the definition of war aims expressing the physical equilibrium.¹⁰³

As such, the transformation of Alexander's views stops being a real transformation, when one realizes that it was his approach and political style that the European audience had most difficulties understanding. Maintaining similar approach to liberalism and religiosity, the emperor simply changed the subject matter, while he continued to insist that the true political greatness lied in the purity of one's moral principles, which could inspire political communities to accept and obey them. And despite the fact that the ministers mostly mocked the content of Alexander's propositions, it would be fair to conclude that it was rather his approach than his subject matter that caused their dissatisfaction.

At the same time, I argue that Alexander's approach, instead of deriving from his personality or from the context within which he was acting in 1815, was a result of the ideational evolution of the Russian political space that I have been tracing so far. Read through the lens of everything described above, Alexander's position stops seeming odd. In fact, given the baggage of Russian ideational evolution that the emperor brought with him to Vienna, as well as his progressive upbringing and his known willingness to include Russia into the European political order, it comes as no surprise that one could identify the presence of all three ideas of greatness in the transformation of his ideological position. Initially, his principles reiterated by Nesselrode

¹⁰³ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, p. ..., emphasis original.

postulated European unity, which would be based on the liberal maxims of nationalism, the equality of all great powers, and the relative distribution of gains proportional to the losses that each great power had suffered.

When this position did not find support, Alexander turned to the Holy Alliance, in which he proposed to base the new European order on the ontological foundation of Christian religion. At the same time, Alexander refrained from any detailed articulation of how this order would subsequently operate, for that, essentially, did not matter, so long as the Christian foundation beneath it was perceived as unshakable and objective.

Finally, the reenactment of another Russian idea of political greatness (that which was heavily dependent on performative glorification) seemed to have persuaded some European ministers that Russia was indeed an equal and great European power (e.g. see Talleyrand's quote above). Yet, at the same time, Alexander's overwhelming presence, his idealism and his explicit theatricality resulting from this reenactment also caused suspicion and even aversion, at times, thereby undermining somewhat his organizational efforts.

If in Alexander's diplomacy in Vienna and Paris the Russian ideas of its political greatness revealed themselves in a fairly unordered fashion, hindering many of his pursuits and demonstrating uneasiness with which those ideas crossed the Russian border to confront the European society of states, by the second half of the XIX century, the situation has changed significantly. A detailed analysis of that portion of the discourse will have to become the object of further research, yet, perhaps, one illustration of how Russia's ideas of greatness operated in its international conduct could also be given here. I will provide such an illustration by referring to the legacy of Prince Gorchakov, the Head of Russian Foreign Ministry from 1856 till 1882.

In his *Note on Russian Foreign Policy from 1856 till 1867*, Gorchakov extensively discussed the so-called 'Eastern Question', i.e. the struggle of Eastern Christians (predominantly Orthodox) for political independence from the Ottoman Empire and Russia's political projects related to their support. His thoughts that are most noteworthy for the purposes of my analysis appeared towards the very end of his text. They deserve to be quoted at some length.

... we should expect, – writes the Chancellor, – that the Eastern Christians, left to their own means, will not be able to avoid the influence of western capital and material progress, which is so powerful today. But can we count merely on their Christian gratefulness and the bonds of our faith and ethnicity connecting our peoples? Undoubtedly, we should not neglect this inner impulsion, for it is our only strength at the current moment.¹⁰⁴

Gorchakov then went on to insist that “Eventually, they [Eastern Christians] will appreciate this friendship ... comparing it to the dubious sympathies of France that is giving them away at usurious interest.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, in the Chancellor’s opinion, “in order for Russia to have an influence worthy of it in those regions, it needs to fortify these moral ties by military, financial, industrial and trade relations, which could bond Russia’s and those countries’ destinies together inseparably.”¹⁰⁶ Gorchakov concluded his thought by suggesting that the latter could only be achieved, if Russia developed its inner forces, which “[at that] point in time, constituted *the only true source of states’ political greatness*.”¹⁰⁷

As becomes evident, Gorchakov was a very pragmatic statesman. In his take on the Eastern Question, he presented the ontological foundation of Christianity as the only available, but still insufficient instrument of political influence. He, however, did not underestimate its importance, for he understood that, however abstract and intangible it may have seemed, it was very real for the peoples in question. Because of their idealistic nature these bonds also had some advantages in front of the previously mentioned capital and material progress. For the same reason, however, these bonds were also becoming too loose to found a truly great union – they were likely to retreat in front of more immediate and palpable matters. So, in order for this ontological tie to be translated into coordinated mobilization, it had to be backed by financial and other connections. Hence, it was the restoration of the country’s material capabilities and domestic reforms that became the main objectives of the Russian Cabinet in the 1860-s.

Then, however, Gorchakov’s argument took a circular and a very important twist. He insisted that the Russian Cabinet

perceived it as a duty to follow this path, without flattering oneself for what has been already achieved, and without retreating before that what needed to be accomplished, remaining convinced that hasty agitation was unbecoming for a healthy nation, just like cunning agility was

¹⁰⁴ Aleksandr Gorchakov, “O vneshney politike Rossii s 1856 po 1867 god [On Russia’s Foreign Policy from 1856 till 1867]” in Viktor Lopatnikov, *Gorchakov* (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2003), p. 350.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Gorchakov, “On Russia’s Foreign Policy from 1856 till 1867”, p. 350.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, emphasis added.

unworthy of a people, whose future was even greater than its past; 20 years of idleness and stagnation were nothing for the life of such a people...¹⁰⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, the Chancellor argued that Russia should have been able to restore its material resources and strength, because it was a truly great power. That is, he employed the narrative of Russian ontological greatness during the moment of weakness, after the defeat in the Crimean War, while remaining, at the same time, very pragmatic in his approach to foreign affairs, still not discounting the ontological argument altogether. By this I do not want to say that Gorchakov was himself aware of these different understandings of political greatness and simply manipulated them in a conscious way – as any statesman, he simply wanted to get things done – but as someone, who lived in that discursive environment, he could not but utilize, perhaps unreflectively, the discursive instruments available in the popular image bank. And to speak about Russia being a great state or a great power (*velikaya derzhava*) during crises had been a common practice since premodern times. The moments of the widest proliferation of great power rhetoric of such kind was the beginning of what is often referred to as the Tartar yoke (early XIII century), as well as the Time of Troubles (early XVII century). During such moments the ontological greatness can be capitalized on due to its unifying and mobilizing potential. Instead of being exclusively a foreign policy question, as becomes clear from Gorchakov's note, it also functions as a consolidating ideology amidst transition and ensures the necessary social cohesion for autonomous political action and coordinated reforms. As I have mentioned in the introduction to this paper, this is what the Russian great power rhetoric may also be today.

Summary and conclusions

In my argument, as it has been developed so far, I put forward several main claims. First, I argue that the idea of greatness became important in Russian political discourse from very early on: while it may have been there implicitly from the very first written sources (the idea of political power originating in religious discourse was always perceived as something transcendental and great), it started to be emphasized explicitly around the XV-XVI centuries, as a conservative response to European modernity. At that point, political greatness had nothing to do with international hierarchy or recognition, but it was exclusively a characteristic of Russia's domestic regime.

¹⁰⁸ Gorchakov, "On Russia's Foreign Policy from 1856 till 1867", p. 351.

Second, the acute need to justify Peter's reforms that fundamentally transformed Russian domestic regime invariably altered Russia's essential narrative on its political greatness. Political greatness was no longer perceived as an *ontological fact*; instead, it began to be interpreted as a result of Russia's salvation by Peter the Great. Entirely attached to the figure of the monarch it reproduced itself within political discourse by means of its own articulation in panegyric poetry and sermons. After losing its ontological foundation, greatness turned into *performative glory*, and as such it remained as detached from international hierarchies and comparisons, as its preceding incarnation.

Third, this shift, however, did not eliminate the former discursive position completely – that position, although it was initially marginalized, reclaimed its presence not only through schismatic and Slavophil circles and Russian religious philosophy, but it also sneaked into Russian political practice, forming an ideational construct which became a mixture of the two ideas. In such shape, the Russian great power discourse confronted the European international society in Vienna.

Later, Russia gradually began to adopt the language of European political greatness, which was mostly founded on pragmatic and verificationist ideas of truth, which allowed for hierarchies and comparisons. Yet, it did not abandon its traditional ideas completely. It valued and utilized the ideas founded on the ontological unity of Christian peoples, as well as on the 'charming' aspect of great power in its international conduct throughout the XIX and the beginning of the XX centuries, although it was fairly disillusioned regarding their universal applicability.

However, the main point I have been trying to make in this paper has been that both recently and historically, when Russia spoke about being a great power, it did not always speak about its foreign policy. Although the words Russia used for identifying itself as a great power (*velikaya derzhava*) remained unchanged at least since early modernity, the meaning of these words not only transformed and divided significantly, but also underwent some functional differentiation. Russia could speak about being a great power in both international and domestic contexts, during crises and in the position of strength. But the narratives of greatness it employed in each of these situations were very different in their origin and nature. When in a position of weakness, it often utilized the great power rhetoric in its ontological form as a powerful domestic ideology, which did not necessarily translate in assertive or aggressive foreign policy. Indeed, this usually came about, when Russia could not pursue any independent foreign policy at all. It could also speak

about being a great power in explicitly international context, when the future of global order was at stake and when Russia was one of the great powers its management was dependent upon. However, one thing is certain: the Russian great power discourse has been as versatile as it has been essential for many aspects and stages of Russia's political evolution. At the same time, I argue that, however polysemic and contradictory it seems, it is always possible to uncover its essential elements and meanings through attentive discourse analysis.

A brief look at how this discourse operates today, suggests that one of its most important functions is ideological. Russian politicians and experts utilize the great power narrative in very essentialist, non-relational terms. In their interpretation, the "value of greatpowerhood [for Russia] is a constan[t] that must be taken for granted."¹⁰⁹ Being a great power is presented as an existentially important thing, which alone would lead Russia through the global crisis in one piece. In this sense, it is not important that Russia's GDP is "10 times smaller than China's GDP and 17 times smaller than that of the US,"¹¹⁰ Russia still can be presented as an equal part of the great "triangle."¹¹¹ While the Russian great power talk certainly reeks of imperial ambitions, it is, in fact, much less a foreign policy question than one could think. Endless historic references aiding self-reassertion, inward-oriented glorification of international events when Russia's great power role was least questionable, markedly conservative disposition when it comes to the transformation of contemporary world – all these features make Russian great power discourse somewhat autistic. It is capitalized upon to ensure regime's stability, and it works perfectly as a Geertzean ideologeme. This, in its turn, reflects Russia's position of weakness.

¹⁰⁹ Karaganov et al, "Strategy for Russia", p. 18.

¹¹⁰ Anton Barbashin, "Dorogiye mechty o velikoderzhavii [Expensive dreams about greatpowerhood]", *Intersection*, 1 June 2016.

¹¹¹ Karaganov et al, "Strategy for Russia", p. 8.