Uses of Greatness in Russian International Politics: A Conceptual History of Velikaya Derzhava

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Abstract
Recently, Russia has been talking a lot about being a great power. And even though it can be said to have acted upon this rhetoric by pursuing assertive foreign policy during the last decade, Russia’s great power discourse still exhibits several oddities at a closer look. First, whenever Russia talked about being a great power, this discourse always exhibited a sense of unfulfillment, urgency and trauma, as opposed to confidence and concerted managing efforts characteristic of how the institution of great powers usually worked historically. Second, instead of appealing to normative universals that, as a rule, accompany the conduct of great powers, Russia reasoned in terms of self-defence, which seem to contradict great powers’ functional specificity. Third, Russia’s great power rhetoric performed an important domestic function creating a semblance of social cohesion and re-politicizing Russia’s traditionally apathetic domestic public sphere. These discursive patterns contributed to persistent suspicion and misunderstanding on the part of international community, when it came to interactions with Russia. In addition, a brief look into history shows that the great power narrative is a re-emerging phenomenon in Russia. From very early on, this rhetoric often concurred with political crises, modernizing leaps and large-scale reforms. Russia has often talked about being a great power and has always had problems with being recognized as one.

I argue that Russian great power discourse in its current ambivalent shape is a product of Russia’s international and inter-lingual relations with the European society of states. It is the outcome of a problematic conceptual entanglement that European and Russian discourses on political greatness underwent historically. In this thesis, I reconstruct a conceptual history of velikaya derzhava, i.e. the Russian equivalent of ‘great power’ to demonstrate how Russia used greatness in its international politics from the very emergence of this discourse in pre-modern times, through Russia’s entry into the international society in the XVIII and XIX centuries, till Russia’s exodus from the family of nations in 1917. I show how the dominant understanding of greatness in Russian political imaginary changed through centuries from being an ontological fact to becoming a matter of appearance to getting into a problematic conceptual entanglement with European ideas about greatpowerhood in the XIX century. The latter presupposed a progressive understanding of world history and an international hierarchy based thereupon.

Reflecting this state of affairs in its political thinking and trying to align with the European society of states, Russia found itself in an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, it aspired to remain an active participant of European politics and was not prepared to abandon the role of a European great power it had managed to arduously secure. On the other hand, thoroughly Europeanized by that time as a subject of Western cultural hegemony, it found itself deficient in terms of then-current civilizational standards. As a result, Russia utilized a rich conceptual baggage its ideas about political greatness had come to possess to turn its great power discourse into a domestic ideology. This ideology started to present in foreign policy terms what essentially was a domestically-oriented policy of self-
What was, in fact, an internal problem of perceived underdevelopment and civilizational deficiency was externalized and given an appearance of a foreign policy issue. It turned into a story of Russia having to become and to resist Europe at the same time. Without having to accept a straightforward position of a European colony, and being unable to claim the status of a proper European great power, Russia opted for an ambivalent position of an under-civilized civilizer, whose main object of colonization was Russia itself. And the ideology of being a great power whose status was insecure and unfulfilled, but, at the same time, historically predetermined, began to function as a popularly accepted and welcomed cover-up for the queer position of a self-colonizing colonizer.