

Chapter Title: Introduction: Great Power vs. Velikaya Derzhava

Book Title: Chasing Greatness

Book Subtitle: On Russia's Discursive Interaction with the West over the Past Millennium

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Published by: University of Michigan Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12333911.6>

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Great Power vs. *Velikaya Derzhava*

Is there a “right to be great”? Russia is not alone, but it is extreme in claiming this right. What Russia wants is an agreement that it can control the destinies of other nations; an agreement which reflects not its present weakness but its past and, it hopes, its future power.

MARTIN WOOLLACOTT, “TO THE FINLAND BUS STATION,” *GUARDIAN*,
22 MARCH 1997: 9

On the one hand, Putin wants you to believe that Russia is a great power. On the other Putin claims that mighty Russia is threatened by Ukraine. Both of these claims cannot be true.

MICHAEL MCFAL (FORMER US AMBASSADOR TO RUSSIA) ON TWITTER,
15 DECEMBER 2021

In the last couple of decades, Russia has been talking a lot about being a great power (*velikaya derzhava* or simply *derzhava*).¹ Such rhetoric often appears in various programmatic speeches and political manifestos,² in expert op-eds and interviews,³ as well as in forecasts and policy analyses published by Russian think tanks.⁴ Russia also seconded its great power rhetoric with aggressive military action both in its immediate neighborhood (Ukraine and Geor-

1. The Russian expression for “great power”—*velikaya derzhava*—is a pleonasm, meaning that, in modern Russian, the second element of this expression (the noun *derzhava*) already expresses the meaning of the attached characteristic (the adjective *velikaya*). *Derzhava* designates not any power or state, but only “an independent power/state, capable of exerting influence in international affairs” (Ushakov 2014, 113).

2. Putin 2004a; Surkov 2006; Medvedev 2009; Medvedev 2010; Putin 2013a.

3. Bordachev 2022, Sushentsov 2022.

4. Dynkin et al. 2015, 122.

gia) and in other regions (Syria). In the West, the concept “great power” evokes unambiguous connotations. Namely, it refers to some privileged status in the international system. A great power either claims to be one of only several “real” global actors, as neorealists have argued,⁵ or, in addition, assumes some rights and responsibilities in managing international order, as suggested by the English School of International Relations (IR).⁶ Constructivists, who admit that greatpowerhood can be part and parcel of political identity—that is, an important facet of self-perception—also often interpret it as a constructive element of *international* politics.⁷ Hence, in the Western eye, Russian great power rhetoric is routinely interpreted as, first and foremost, a foreign policy question that is normally expected to be raised by a state, which (1) had presumably solved its immediate existential problems, (2) had accumulated enough resources and strength to project those beyond its own borders, and (3) had decided to engage in a global power competition, having rationally assessed its capacities and risks.

However, at a closer look, most contexts in which Russia speaks about being *velikaya derzhava* often have little to do with foreign policy, relational superiority, or joint management of international order. For instance, Russian elites often insist that Russia *must* be a great power, or else *it will perish*, as if there is no middle ground between shining success and total annihilation.⁸ In this context, greatpowerhood functions as the only remedy for otherwise imminent catastrophe, while foreign policy is put at the service of domestic survival, a concern that Western great powers would normally have left behind. On other occasions, Russian politicians show that they are prepared to tolerate sanctions and be excluded from global financial flows, even to be the most sanctioned country in the world, overtaking Iran and North Korea, as the recent developments related to the war in Ukraine have shown.⁹ According to Russian officials, this is exactly the kind of pressure that a real great power can and should withstand.¹⁰ So much for international recognition and joint management efforts. Yet, most often, Russian political elites use great power talk when they address their domestic audience, and instead of appealing to the international status quo, they appeal to

5. Mearsheimer 2001; Levy and Thompson 2005; Walt 2011; Parent and Rosato 2015.

6. Bull 2002; Buzan 2004; Cui and Buzan 2016.

7. E.g., Hopf 2002.

8. E.g., see Surkov 2006; Leontiev cited in Morozov 2008, 162; Mikhalkov, 2017; Shevtsova 2003, 175.

9. Bella 2022.

10. Lavrov cited in Trenin 2017.

some version of traditional legitimacy,¹¹ capitalizing on the public's nostalgic feelings, on their current desires and future hopes.¹²

Evidently, Russian great power discourse connects several seemingly incompatible features: internal modernization and foreign policy, domestic ideology and international aggression, political strength and weakness, economic prosperity and underdevelopment. It also often combines the roles of an established great power and a global challenger. What is more, this pattern is, apparently, nothing new. Back in the 1990s, Russia also bedazzled the international audience that could not help wondering whether "there [was] 'a right to be great'?"¹³ It often seemed strange to the Western observers that Russia always wanted "an agreement which reflects not its present weakness but its past and [. . .] its future power."¹⁴ While, economically speaking, Russia was in much better shape in the first two decades of the twenty-first century than it used to be in the 1990s, the ambiguity persists.

Consequently, Russia's behavior frequently seems irrational to its international partners. Its actions remain misunderstood and are often treated with suspicion. Its aggressive moves that cause death and destruction also tear the fragile normative fabric of international society, creating panic and shock. That "understanding Russia" has recently become a new cottage industry,¹⁵ indicates quite clearly that the Russian "enigma" is back.¹⁶ Such a handle may boost Russia's self-esteem, but it surely remains an obstacle for a major actor seeking recognition from the international community. It is equally problematic for the international community to have a major actor that constantly remains misunderstood, and hence, unpredictable. This opens a whole set of difficult questions. (1) *Why is the idea of being a great power so important to Russia?* (2) *Why does Russia stick to this identity even when*

11. Here I use the concept "traditional legitimacy" in the Weberian sense, as related to the type of political legitimation that appeals to the traditional order of things (Weber 2008, 157). Usually, such type of legitimation exists in monarchies and other old-style patrimonial regimes. While contemporary Russia is not a monarchy, the kind of authority its politicians often invoke when they talk about Russia's great power status is the authority of the "eternal yesterday"—Russia has always been a great power, therefore, it remains one today, and will continue being one in the future.

12. Putin 2004b, 2013b, 2017a.

13. Woollacott 1997, 9.

14. Woollacott 1997, 9.

15. E.g., Neef, 2017; Oskanian, 2014; Curtis, 2017.

16. Coined by Winston Churchill in relation to the Soviet Union in 1939, this metaphor survived both Churchill and the Soviet Union. Some recent uses related to Russia include Zarakol (2010) and Tassinari (2005).

doing so clearly damages its international standing and economic health? (3) What does Russia, in fact, mean when it speaks about being a great power, given that its subsequent actions often do not conform to other actors' expectations about proper "greatpowerly" conduct? (4) Why does the Russian story about its political greatness often include elements of dissatisfaction, weakness, and even decay?

Evidently, the first question is related to discursive preconditions for action. Russia does not let this idea go because it somehow helps Russia be Russia, that is, to align its perception of itself with its political circumstances. Since discursive preconditions for action are normally created in the domestic discursive space, the best way to understand how they have developed is to historicize them. Therefore, in this book, I will first trace and interpret Russia's stories about its political greatness on their own terms, that is, emically (from the subject's perspective). Like any other national discourse,¹⁷ Russian great power discourse must (and does) have its specifics, even if only for linguistic and cultural reasons.¹⁸ But there are also historical reasons for this, which spring from the evolution of Russia's¹⁹ self-perception vis-à-vis the outside world. That is why I will also reconstruct a genealogy of Russia's self-perception as a great polity going all the way back to the very first uses of the concepts genealogically related to greatpowerhood. Toward this end, I unearth and analyze an extensive amount of original source material to reconstruct a millennial history of the Russian political concepts that express greatness and superiority (*velikaya derzhava* and some adjacent signifiers).

At the same time, the specifics of the subject matter—international hierarchy, political preponderance, and so on—presuppose relationality. Such categories as *velikaya derzhava* and great power involve and are partially shaped by outsiders. Outsiders, in this case, are neither a stable gold standard, nor irrelevant—they are actors just like Russia, who often contest or misunderstand Russia's claims. Studying these discursive interactions is essential for answering questions two, three, and four, which are formu-

17. Together with Dunn and Neumann (2016, 2), I define discourses as "the systems of meaning-production that fix meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world and to act within it."

18. Both languages and cultures are always asymmetrical in cross-comparison and translation. Certain cultural phenomena either have no direct equivalents in other cultures, or may be developed to varying degrees. The same holds for concepts and their semantic baggage (Tymoczko 2014, 211).

19. In this book, I use the word "Russia" both in its conventional meaning (to refer to the Russian Federation that appeared in 1991) and, sometimes, anachronistically (to refer to the Russian Federation's predecessor polities, such as the Kievan Rus', early modern Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union).

lated relationally.²⁰ To provide enough historical and interlingual depth, while also keeping relationality, I reconstruct a conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* and place it in international context, comparing the history of this concept to the evolution of related non-Russian concepts, such as “great power.”

Despite its substantive historical depth, this book is not a book of history. Rather, it is a synthesizing social science work inspired by the continental tradition of the critical history of modernity.²¹ As such, the book is more about the present than about the past. Its main aim is to provide an interpretive explanation of the tacit rules that shape Russia’s great power identity today, as well as historically. The second aim of the book is to present a displacing critique of those rules by showing how the Russian notion of greatness in its present (but also some preceding) semantics remains a kind of mobilizational ideology that can never achieve its declared intentions, given Russia’s relative position in the global economy and the current discursive hegemony on this issue. This creates an everlasting perceptive dissonance among the Russian elites, which is also conveyed onto the Russian public through often tightly controlled state-society communication channels. As Anatol Lieven put this, reacting to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, “great power mixed with great resentment is one of the most dangerous mixtures in both domestic and international politics.”²² In pursuing its two main aims, the book combines an emic approach, which historicizes Russia’s own arguments justifying its claims for political greatness, with an etic analysis of the place, meaning, and consequences of those claims within a wider international-historic context.

I. I RUSSIA’S AMBIGUOUS GREATNESS

Certainly, I am not the first to notice the pattern. Others have registered both Russia’s quasi-religious attachment to its great power identity and the ambiguity of the great power narrative it promotes. At the same time, those who registered the attachment usually stopped short of explaining its sources, while those who pointed at the paradoxical mix of seemingly

20. I thank Einar Wigen for his remarks about the emic and etic dimensions of this inquiry.

21. Koselleck 2004, 75–92; Foucault 1977; Garland 2014.

22. Lieven 2022.

incompatible elements in the Russian great power narrative tended to ignore its local discursive roots and history, and evaluated that narrative against the assumed Eurocentric standard. Below I engage with the most relevant among the existing accounts of Russia's quest toward political greatness and make my case for an international conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava*.

I.I.I Greatpowerhood as a foundation of Russia's political identities

In his study of Russian and Soviet political identities, Ted Hopf demonstrates that the idea of being a great power was deeply rooted in every version of identity competing in the Russian and Soviet political discourses.²³ Apparently, this point holds true regardless of which political ideologies those identities mainly relied on. Be it international socialism, democratic liberalism, or some form of Russian essentialism, all of those political identities perceived Russia as a great power and could not think otherwise. Similarly, Christian Thorun demonstrates that the evolution of Russian foreign policy from 1992 to 2007 was effectively a sequence of interchanging understandings of greatness: from “normal great power” to “Eurasian great power” to “responsible great power” to “independent great power.”²⁴ Thus, Thorun also registers that, when it comes to Russia's official discourse, a second-class status was never a thinkable option for Russian elites, no matter which political ideology guided their thinking. Just like Hopf, however, he does not problematize this finding and leaves it to his readers to wonder why alternatives to the burdensome great power status remained unthinkable for Russia even during the hardest moments of postcommunist transformation.

Both Thorun and Hopf approach the issue inductively, documenting divergent ideas about political greatness within Russia, but disregarding their fundamentally social nature and conceptual roots. However, greatpowerhood can only acquire meaning in relation to more general ideas about political order and its hierarchies. Hence, this concept should always be viewed in the process of a dialogic construction—its different meanings emerge and replace one another in the process of Russia's conversation with the world. Naturally, the world possesses its own different sets of ideas about political greatness, some more established, some less. Thus, to understand the meaning of Russia's discursive toolkit, it makes sense to try to look at it in

23. Hopf 2002.

24. Thorun 2009, 39.

conjunction with the conceptual baggage accumulated by the international society, where greatpowerhood has a long history as an institution that continues to shape international hierarchies today.

1.1.2 Greatpowerhood as a psychological trauma

A few illuminating studies that can put Russia's quest for greatness into a global context and explain why a state like Russia could be compulsive about its international status come from the authors who took the psychological route. In his study of postdefeat societies, Wolfgang Schivelbusch reconstructs an assemblage of coping mechanisms and archetypes, which those societies tend to use to overcome the negative psychological consequences of their new situations.²⁵ These mechanisms help soften the trauma and reestablish a sense of achievement for the losing side to avert depression and other nasty aftereffects. Some archetypes redefine material defeat as a spiritual victory or denigrate the victor's success as dishonest or unworthy. Thus, when contemporary Russia talks about its spiritual superiority and blames the West for breaking the rules of the game, this may be interpreted as an attempt to deal with the psychological consequences of its defeat in the Cold War.

To be sure, this is how Ayşe Zarakol explains Russia's hypersensitivity toward its great power status and the strange intermingling of greatness and fragility in its rhetorical stance.²⁶ In her interpretation, Russia, just like Turkey or Japan, is a state that was stigmatized in the process of its socialization into the international society. Its recent defeat in the Cold War reinforced the stigma, and Russia had only two available options: (1) to accept the stigma and a second-class status coming with it, or (2) to act as if the stigma was not there and submit to lifelong dissonance. Zarakol argues that Russia preferred to live in denial, for accepting the stigma seemed unthinkable. Consequently, it looks up to the West and treats it with mistrust and suspicion simultaneously; it implicitly accepts its own civilizational inferiority, and, at the same time, asserts its spiritual leadership.

While this explanation makes perfect sense, it is also true that not every great power deals with defeat in an identical fashion. Some states, like Japan and Germany after WWII, delve temporarily into self-reflection and eventu-

25. Schivelbusch 2003, 10. The author does not discuss Russia, but his conclusions may be extrapolated to it.

26. Zarakol 2010.

ally redirect their intellectual and economic resources to excel in alternative competitive fields becoming “geo-economic powers”²⁷ or “aid great powers,”²⁸ for example. In this quest, the relatively more secure position of Germany among the established European nations did not make its restoration path significantly different from that of Japan. Other states, like Sweden, let go of their great power status and global ambitions quite easily, deciding to concentrate on domestic development and well-being. And while today one may think of Sweden as an exemplary Western nation, which would explain why it did not carry a stigma, its place among the founders of the Western civilizational core is debatable. After all, it had to go to war in 1630, despite being poor and economically backward, to put its name on the European map, from which it was soon removed by Russia.²⁹ Hence, from early on, Sweden battled with the same established/outsider dichotomy that Russia, Turkey, and Japan were confronted with, but managed to overcome it successfully without too much psychological damage.

Thus, not only are there significant variations in coping strategies of different postdefeat states, but Russia also seems to be a strange outlier in this list of cases. On the one hand, Russia has been a much better-established power than Turkey or Japan for the last three centuries: it was a member of the European Concert and one of the two protagonists of the Cold War—it is difficult to get more established than that in the international arena. On the other hand, the defeat which should have reinforced the late socialization stigma did not happen on the battlefield and was hardly perceived as a fatal loss by the Russian elites. As Zarakol puts it, Russia switched to “westophilia” “*completely on its own schedule*,”³⁰ exercising a degree of agency unobtainable by other defeated states. As a better-established outsider, Russia may have simply postponed its crushing defeat until later, as its inadequate military performance in Ukraine in 2022 may suggest. Still, perhaps, instead of settling on an explanation that grants European modernity the status of an all-pervasive and undefeatable force (i.e., the only meaningful variable), it makes sense to look at Russia itself and try to identify the configuration of ideas and process that affected its own political development and the dynamics of its encounter with the West.

27. Kundnani 2011.

28. Yasutomo 1990.

29. Ringmar 2007.

30. Zarakol 2010, 33, emphasis original.

1.1.3 Greatpowerhood as a self-colonizing condition

Alexander Etkind takes one step further in explaining the ambivalence of Russia's great power standing and discovering its cultural roots.³¹ He begins by identifying two enduring stories about imperial Russia. One is the story of a great power competing successfully with the most powerful countries in the world. The other one is the story of a backward nation, riddled with violence and misery. To make sense of the contradiction, Etkind represents Russia's imperial experience in the terms relatable to other empires from the past, but also argues that Russia applied colonial practices to its own territory, becoming a self-colonizing empire.³² Thus, Russia was (and remains)³³ a state that colonized its own people, who developed anti-imperial ideas in response. Great power status came with empire and imperialism, while the feeling of unfulfillment was a consequence of internal colonization that turned Russia's hinterlands into colonized territories, rather than an empire's backyard.

Viacheslav Morozov supplements Etkind's argument with an international-systemic dimension.³⁴ In his view, internal colonization is what happens to some peripheral countries. Uneven development causes the inability to compete on common terms, while the internalized hegemonic ideology brings about nervous inward-oriented application of hegemonic categories, such as empire and colonization. He calls the resulting political construct "subaltern imperialism," meaning that in addition to colonizing its own people, the Russian elite has itself become a subject of cultural colonization by the West during its socialization in Europe. Hence, Russia is a subaltern empire that remains outside the hegemonic core (which means that its right to sit at the table is always contested), but also claims a contemporary equivalent of imperial status and a sphere of influence that comes with it (which means that it insists on being a great power).

My objection to this line of reasoning is twofold. First, both Morozov and Etkind take preexisting categories developed in a different sociopolitical environment and try to stretch them to explain a deviant case, whose deviance only becomes apparent against those preexisting categories to begin with. Thus, their analyses remain Eurocentric. Second, Etkind's explanation

31. Etkind 2011.

32. Etkind 2011, 2.

33. The process that still goes on, in Etkind's opinion (2016).

34. Morozov 2015.

of Russia's self-colonizing condition (which may explain the ambivalence of its political discourse) would probably be a materialist one—such was Russia's resource profile and geography. Morozov would also attribute this to uneven development and cultural colonization. In contrast, I argue that Russia's self-colonizing condition and the resulting ambivalence of its great power identity also have conceptual and ideological roots.

The two stories that Etkind identifies do not merely exist side-by-side. In Russian political imagination, they are conceptually interwoven. Moreover, various manifestations of the idea that true greatness and complete submission are two sides of the same coin already emerge a few hundred years before the age of colonialism. It is an important part of the Orthodox Christian philosophy that shaped early Russian political culture, and it keeps reemerging in different forms and shapes as a leitmotif of Russian political thinking at least since the eleventh century. Certainly, the early Russian political concepts did not fully determine the country's response to European imperialism. Still, I believe it is more productive to look at the current Russian great power identity as an outcome of the conceptual evolution of Russian political culture *affected by* Russia's encounter with other empires, as well as the dominant ideas of the age. Without fully understanding the assortment of available discursive resources with the opportunities and limitations they entail, it is difficult to grasp why Russia got stuck in this somewhat erratic state of a self-colonizing polity and why it arguably remains in it until today.

1.1.4 Greatpowerhood as a conceptual legacy

Conceptual history is not a new genre for the scholars of Russia. In fact, there already exists a sizable legacy of comprehensive investigations of Russian political concepts. For instance, Oleg Kharkhordin studies the histories of such concepts as “state,” “civil society,” “the collective and the individual,” and others.³⁵ Sadly, he did not address the equally ancient and complex Russian concepts used to designate “power” and “great power.” Reacting to this omission, Vsevolod Samokhvalov lamented that such a study was long overdue, since the Russian and Western usages of those concepts seem manifestly different, even at first glance.³⁶ The concept Samokhvalov had in mind is *derzhava*. Still, while outlining the differences between equivalent concepts in

35. Kharkhordin 1999, 2001, 2005.

36. Samokhvalov 2017, 12.

different languages, he limits his own study to the last fifty years, that is, virtually nothing on the scale of linguistic and conceptual evolutions. Consequently, he excludes some crucial transformative moments from the analysis—for example, the eighteenth century diplomatic discourse where the concept of great power emerged and took shape, and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Russia was recognized as a great power, having defeated Napoleon.

In contrast, historian Michael Cherniavsky did not shy away from long timeframes. He lays an important groundwork for this study by looking at the early development of the idea of the ruler in Kievan Rus'.³⁷ Cherniavsky discovers that the very concept of “state” was introduced into the Russian discourse as a part of Christian ethos; that is, no concept of secular state existed in Kievan Rus' before it was baptized around 988, no concept outside the purposes of Christianity. Consequently, early Russian princes almost literally embodied the state and its continuity, as there were no other physical or symbolic entities that could embody it.³⁸ Because of this, *personal*, human saintliness was attributed to princes. Their person and their functions could not be divided as neatly as it was done in the West—both the person and the office of the Russian prince were likened equally to Christ.³⁹ With personal saintliness came the most prominent Christian virtues of humility and complete submission to God's will and authority. Hence, “the ideal of the angelic ruler . . . is translated into the concrete image of the monk-tsar, the synthesis of glory and humility; in his glory [the Russian prince] wishes to be humble, and through his humility before God he gains the tsarlike glorious victories.”⁴⁰ This is a clear example of how greatness and humility were already intertwined a few centuries before the age of colonization.

Cherniavsky showed how the myth of political power in Kievan Rus' and some of its successor polities incorporated a mixture of leader-centrism and peculiar Christian ethics which rendered greatness in moral, rather than in relative terms. Alas, he did not look at the concepts *derzhava* or *velikaya derzhava* specifically. In his book, he also pointed at a few historical ruptures in the Russian understandings of the ruler and the people. Yet he did not say anything about the consequences of Russia's interaction with international society and its political institutions. In my turn, I am equally interested in

37. Cherniavsky 1961.

38. Cherniavsky 1961, 33.

39. Cherniavsky 1961, 34.

40. Cherniavsky 1961, 27.

both: the conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* from its very early uses and the political and discursive effects of Russia's entry into the European society of states.

Thus, the main focus of this study is threefold. First, I will trace the uses of greatness in Russia's discourse related to its international stance from the time when Russia's predecessor polities began to contemplate on and assert their special position vis-à-vis their neighbors. Second, I identify the ruptures in Russian understandings of political greatness and reconstruct the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* as a sequence of those fundamental semantic breaks. Third, I pay specific attention to the effects of the conceptual entanglement of *velikaya derzhava* with the related concepts produced and developed within the broader international society. Before I begin, however, it makes sense to provide a more substantiated clarification of the differences between the Russian and the Western usages of the concept designating "great power."

1.2 WHAT IS A "GREAT POWER"?

1.2.1 *Great powers as seen by Western politicians and journalists*

Contemporary policymakers and political writers often hold different opinions on what a great power is supposed to be. Still, there are a few family resemblances in how all of them talk about great powers, at least in the West. For Western policymakers and political writers alike, this concept only makes sense in several interrelated contexts. The first context is *resources and relationality*. Great power is a status which is usually ascribed to *several* states in the international system that are well-endowed with *resources*, are *comparable* among themselves, and happen to be *more powerful* than most other actors. Hence, for example, when someone is trying to assess whether Russia is or is not a great power, it often comes down to measuring Russia's resources and capabilities and comparing those to the resources and capabilities possessed by other states.

For instance, for Jonathan Adelman, Russia is a great power simply because it spends USD 49 billion a year on security, retains 1,790 strategic nuclear weapons, has a population of 140 million (with 13 million college graduates), and because in some of those aspects it is comparable to the US

and surpasses other major powers, such as Japan or India.⁴¹ Similarly, Stephen Fortescue measures Russia's economic potential vis-à-vis other powerful states and concludes that even though "Russia wants to behave as a great power . . . there are serious restraints, resistant to policy action, that limit its economic capacity."⁴²

The second context which always accompanies the discussion of great powers is *norms*. Great powers are also the great responsables that must maintain general peace and order. Or at least, this argument is "always . . . put forward to justify their right to the veto in the Security Council."⁴³ Great powers are supposed to be the moral caretakers of the international system, and as such, their greatness should "not depend on [their] military might but on [their] ability to maintain the balance of forces in the world."⁴⁴ Therefore, when Russia acts disruptively, as it did in 2014 when it invaded Ukraine, it is often reproached as unworthy of great power status. For instance, after the annexation of Crimea, Barack Obama called Russia "a regional power" and insisted that Russia did what it did "not out of strength, but out of weakness."⁴⁵ In Obama's view, by invading Ukraine, Russia behaved irresponsibly, which a legitimate great power cannot afford.⁴⁶

The third context is *recognition*. Great power status cannot be purely self-ascribed. A state may brag endlessly about being a great power, but without systemic recognition, such talk is nothing but empty rhetoric. Hence, it is usually up to other great powers and third states to assign this label. No doubt, great power status is not as formal as the recognition of sovereignty or a state's accountability for grave wrongdoings. Even though, at present, the most pertinent politicolegal reflection of great power status is a UNSC permanent seat, this status remains semiofficial in a sense that no UNSC permanent member would use the concept self-referentially in UN debates, even when it vetoes some resolution; that is, when it de facto exercises its great power privilege. On the other hand, recognition remains the most controversial aspect of greatpowerhood, for it does not emerge out of thin air. A state cannot do nothing and be recognized as a great power. It is also true that greatpowerhood is the power to define what greatpowerhood is. Thus, a

41. Adelman 2016. For a more recent assessment along the same lines, see Rogan 2021.

42. Fortescue 2017.

43. United Nations 1980, 9.

44. United Nations 1980, 9.

45. Obama cited in Borger 2014.

46. Bull 2002, 222.

great power must be capable of both defining and altering the regulating principles of international order, maintain the existing rules and, at times, introduce new rules and have them recognized by other actors.

Consequently, great power politics is always a stimulus-response type of game. In this context, many discussions of Russia's great power status center around a double-stage process: Russia's performative uptake interpreted as a claim for great power status, and a reaction to this move coming from other actors. For instance, Samuel Ramani interprets Russian foreign policy toward North Korea as aimed at achieving an international recognition of its great power status, as well as its role as the leading counterweight to the United States. This and other similar moves, Ramani notes, have not been entirely successful, but have managed to draw support from Cuba and Iran, and may potentially bolster Russia's international status in the future.⁴⁷ In the same vein, Richard Reeve insists that Putin is "developing Russia as a great power again, [and Syria is] a theatre to test out [Russian] military equipment and doctrine."⁴⁸ Russia's involvement in Syria, Reeve concludes, "sends a message to the rest of the world that Russia is a capable, modern military player,"⁴⁹ and it is now up to the world to either ignore this message or take it seriously.

1.2.2 Great powers as seen by Western academics

In academic discourse, the concept "great power" does not have a consensual definition either. Yet, as a rule, it is also related to some privileged status in the international system. The exact meaning and consequences of possessing this status vary across different IR theories. The thin definitional common ground is that a great power conducts foreign policy with global implications, while also having some shared understanding of the international order. Even though almost every IR theory has something to say about great powers, traditionally it remains the bread and butter of realist IR and the English School.

For realists, great powers are the most important international actors, meaning that they are the only ones that matter, when it comes to the configuration of international order.⁵⁰ Consequently, the realist nostrum—

47. Ramani 2017.

48. Reeve cited in Rahman-Jones 2017.

49. Rahman-Jones 2017.

50. As Jack Levy put this (2004, 38), "while balance of power theorists speak very loosely

balance of power theory—has a strong great power bias, as becomes especially obvious in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, where the number of great powers in the international system defines political context for every other member of that system.⁵¹ Realists tend to justify this bias by asserting that smaller and less powerful states simply do not possess enough capabilities to be able to change anything at the systemic level, and hence are not worth scholarly attention, when the global balance of power is concerned.

For the English School, great powers are the members of an exclusive club of powerful states, who (1) possess special rights and responsibilities and (2) jointly manage international order. That is, they perform an institutional function in relation to what Hedley Bull called “international society,” defined as “a body of independent political communities linked by common rules and institutions as well as by contact and interaction.”⁵² In Bull's view, great powers assume responsibility to alter their foreign policies when it may be required for maintaining international order and global peace. Other states in the system both recognize this duty as bestowed on great powers, and expect them to act on it when there is a need.⁵³ While particular circumstances in international systems/societies may either facilitate or obstruct the operation and legitimacy of great power management, as well as widen and deepen its agenda (e.g., include human rights and migration issues in addition to standard maintenance of interstate order), great power management remains one of the primary international institutions within the framework of the English School.⁵⁴

Apart from the realists and the English School, great powers also emerge in other scholarly discussions. For instance, constructivists study greatpowerhood as it manifests itself in national identities. While looking at both official and popular political discourses of certain states, they sometimes discover that those states insist on presenting themselves as great powers to the

about ‘states’ balancing, nearly all [of them] strongly imply that the great powers do most of the balancing.”

51. Waltz 2010. For related arguments, see Huth, Bennett and Gelpi 1992; Mearsheimer 2001; Mearsheimer 2013; Braumoeller 2013.

52. Bull 2002, 196.

53. Bull 2002, 196.

54. Cui and Buzan 2016; Little 2006. For a critical application of the English School's concepts to contemporary Russia, see Astrov 2013.

outside world and their own populations.⁵⁵ It is also the case for Russia.⁵⁶ However, since that identity is mostly based on self-assessment, in the Western discourse such cases raise concern rather than receive recognition. Symptomatically, most constructivist accounts of great power identities involve China, Russia, Turkey, Japan, and other latecomers to the international great power rivalry.

Even though the political and media uses of the concept “great power” may differ from its uses in IR scholarship, those two conceptual fields are entangled. The Western academic discourse both digests the everyday and political uses of the concept and substantiates them with theoretical foundation. It perpetuates their discursive lives by approaching them systematically and bringing forth criteria that define greatness, such as relational superiority, endowment with resources, a specific take on global norms, and a need for recognition. Since the Russian great power discourse does not always operate the same way, this produces misunderstandings. Consequently, when Russia speaks about being a great power, it is usually denied (but sometimes granted) recognition, frequently criticized (and occasionally supported) on normative terms, or assessed against a set of criteria (military, economic, demographic, etc.) to be found fitting, or more often deemed unfit. I take issue with such an approach, because it tends to ignore the local Russian discourse, its history and specifics. Despite its unavoidable relationality, any national great power discourse also feeds on domestic resources, has to answer to certain domestic demands and account for long-lasting discursive legacies to produce resonance. Hence, in the next section, I perform a brief inductive analysis of the contemporary Russian great power discourse to identify its main patterns and to compare them with how great powers are conceptualized elsewhere.

1.3 WHAT IS *VELIKAYA DERZHAVA*?

1.3.1 *Linguistic contextualization*

As already mentioned, the concept “great power” has an unambiguous, yet curious, Russian equivalent—*velikaya derzhava*. It is unambiguous in a sense

55. Rozman 1999; Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014; Foot 2017; Boon 2018.

56. Hopf 2002, 2013; Neumann 2008a.

that it has no synonyms identical or sufficiently close in meaning. It is curious because *velikaya derzhava* is a pleonasm—namely, an expression where one element already conveys the meaning of another element, making the latter semantically redundant. In modern Russian, *derzhava* bears a connotation of real (as opposed to formal) sovereignty and strength and hardly requires a qualifier. Unlike in modern Ukrainian, where *derzhava* means any state, no matter how powerful, the Russian concept *velikaya derzhava* includes a redundant adjective. Consequently, when *derzhava* is used with some other attribute (like “nuclear,” “leading,” or “large”) or as a standalone word, the compound meaning of *velikaya derzhava* (i.e., great power) is always looming somewhere in the background.

For example, while in English it is possible to use an expression “nuclear state” to refer to a country possessing nuclear weapons, in Russian this would sound strange (*yadernaya strana* or *yadernoe gosudarstvo*). On rare occasions when those collocations still appear in the press, they either refer to a nuclear state which is neither a great nor a rising power (e.g., North Korea),⁵⁷ are put between quotation marks to emphasize that this is the only suitable contextual translation,⁵⁸ or are translated from Ukrainian.⁵⁹ However, in most cases, nuclear states, most of which are also great powers, are referred to in Russian as *yadernaya derzhava*—that is, “nuclear great power.” In this expression, the superfluous characteristic “great” is reduced, while the archaic-sounding word *derzhava* keeps a touch of exaltation to it, unmistakably elevating its referent object to the level of great powers.

What follows below is a quick vetting of the uses of *velikaya derzhava* in the official texts published on the Russian president’s website (www.kremlin.ru).⁶⁰ I analyze at least 113 uses of the concept for the years 2000–2019 from the official website, as well as a handful of other occasions when the concept was invoked by the members of the Russian political elite, and discover several discursive trends that appear structural. To facilitate comparison with the previous section, I group those trends around three clusters of meaning: (1) *resources and relationality*, (2) *globalized norms*, and (3) *recognition*.

57. E.g., Vzgl'yad 2016.

58. E.g., Berezin 2008.

59. E.g., Gordon 2016.

60. The texts I am referring to here include speeches, transcripts of public events and meetings with foreign leaders, interviews with national and international media, etc.

1.3.2 *Velikaya derzhava as a nonrelative phenomenon*

The first trend manifests itself in Russia's emphatic refusal to discuss its great power status in *relative terms*. In his speeches and interviews, Putin habitually resorts to comparisons and statistics. However, when it comes to Russia's great power status, all comparisons stall. In rare cases, he can even downplay Russia's resources to emphasize that political greatness is not about relative measurement. For instance, in an interview to the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* in 2000, the journalist pointed out that Russia had increased its military budget by 50 percent and lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, and that the West was concerned with Russia's growing ambition to be a great power. Putin promptly responded that "Russia is not trying to haggle (*ne vytorgovyvaet*) a great power status for itself. It is a great power. This has been determined by its huge potential, history and culture."⁶¹ Then, however, he also noted that Russia's military spending was 100 times lower than that of the US. Apparently, Putin saw no contradiction between Russia's incapacity to compete militarily and its culturally and historically predetermined great power status.

On most occasions, Putin speaks of Russia's current great power status in either historic or prophetic terms—namely, projecting it into the past or the future. For example, in his 2004 inaugural speech he called the Russian people "the heirs of a thousand-year-old Russia, the motherland of distinguished sons and daughters [who] left us as their inheritance a vast great power."⁶² On another occasion, Putin presented a grim picture, in which Russia was surrounded by hostile and economically superior powers with clear "geopolitical ambitions" and was literally fighting for its life. To stay in one piece,

61. Putin 2000a, emphasis added.

62. Putin 2004b. In the original transcript of this speech, there is a comma between the words "vast" (*ogromnuyu*) and "great" (*velikuyu*). Such punctuation would suggest that the two adjectives are equivalent in their function, which should point in the direction that the second adjective (great) must be semantically detached from the compound "great power" and interpreted as a separate characteristic meaning general greatness, not specific greatness attributed to great powers. Presumably, this comma has something to do with the fact that Putin made a clearly audible pause between the words "great" and "power"—it either conditioned the pause or was conditioned by it. Yet, despite the pause, the prosodic (i.e., intonational) structure of the phrase is telling a different story. A rising tone on "great" and a falling tone on "power" unequivocally suggests that the two words should be treated as integral parts of a single semantic compound. Whether Putin intended this or not, his prosody convinces the audience that *velikaya derzhava*, in this case, is a holistic construction, and that the comma is superfluous.

said Putin, Russia had to be a “strong [great] power, [because] in all periods of weakness . . . the country invariably faced a threat of disintegration.”⁶³ Consequently, he continued, Russia had “to possess substantial economic, intellectual, moral and military superiority.” However, every time he invoked some conventional attribute of political greatness, such as military superiority, strong economy, and the advancement of globalized norms, he used the expression “must and will be” in relation to Russia, projecting those qualities into the future.⁶⁴ For outside observers, such claim for greatness probably seemed merely aspirational.

In a similar vein, Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, while addressing the UN General Assembly in 2016, accused the Western great powers of trying “to set the criteria of greatness for one country or another.”⁶⁵ He used the same argument in his programmatic article on Russia’s foreign policy, published the same year. In it, Lavrov cited the Russian religious and political right-wing philosopher, Ivan Ilyin, who insisted that “greatpowerhood is determined not by the size of one’s territory or one’s population, but by the capacity of a nation and its government to take on the burden of great world problems and to resolve those problems in a creative way.”⁶⁶ Here again, the sum and substance of the Russian position on greatpowerhood is that resources and relationality have less importance compared to inherent creativity, whatever it is supposed to mean.

1.3.3 *Velikaya derzhava as the last bastion of morality*

The second consistent pattern is related to *globalized norms* and Russia’s normative antagonism. Russia does speak the normative language, appealing to the supremacy of international law and global peace and security, but it mostly does so in the context of opposing hegemony.⁶⁷ Yet just as it often represents itself as the “true Europe” confronted with the decadent “false Europe”⁶⁸ or even “post-Europe” of the West,⁶⁹ it also poses as a carrier of the

63. Putin 2003a.

64. Putin 2003a.

65. Lavrov 2016a.

66. Lavrov 2016b. My translation of the original Russian text of Lavrov’s article is somewhat different from the official translation published by the Ministry and the journal, but it is also more accurate.

67. Putin 2003b, 2007a, 2014a, 2016b, 2017; Medvedev 2008b.

68. Morozov 2015, 119–28; Neumann 2016, 1383.

69. Karaganov et al. 2016, 16.

true global norms and values, upon which the UN was built. Russia criticizes the Western hegemonic powers (mostly the US) for having corrupted the principles that Russia is still upholding.⁷⁰ Hence, instead of acting in concert with other great powers toward maintaining some normative consensus, it often puts itself in opposition to the rest of the club, revealing its normative marginality.

As a result, it faces criticism for being a revisionist power, but continues using the normative language whose reference point remains the conventionally understood international system (that has apparently been corrupted), not some isolationist, revolutionary, or eschatological alternative. In other words, Russia does not promote any substantive modification of the existing structures and institutions, except for championing multipolarity as a fairer systemic arrangement. Putin insists that those “institutions are sufficiently versatile . . . [to be] filled with more modern content, corresponding to the current situation, [which should create] a new ‘edition’ of interdependence.”⁷¹ Thus, Russia insists on being a great power that stands as the last bastion of international tradition and morality in the system that is no longer capable of recognizing and appreciating its role. In the Western eye, however, it looks rather like a toxic revisionist power.

1.3.4 Velikaya derzhava as a domestic ideology

Finally, the third and, perhaps, the most important pattern is related to *recognition*. Putin demonstrates his perfect awareness of how to play the recognition game. In the vast majority of primary sources that belong to the international context, Russia is normally called a great power by either foreign journalists and politicians,⁷² or some domestic actors only indirectly related to the Russian political elite.⁷³ Putin, by contrast, *almost never* calls Russia *velikaya derzhava* in the foreign policy context. While he uses the expression quite a lot, in most cases, he applies it to other states (mostly the US,⁷⁴ but also China,⁷⁵ France,⁷⁶ and India⁷⁷). In exceptional cases, he refers to Russia

70. Putin 2000b, 2007a.

71. Putin 2014a.

72. Putin 2004c, 2004d, 2005a, 2007b, 2007c, 2013c; Medvedev 2008a.

73. Putin 2006, 2007d.

74. Putin 2002a, 2002b, 2014b, 2015a, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2017b, 2017d.

75. Putin 2017e, 2017f.

76. Putin 2016d, 2016f.

77. Putin 2000c, 2000d, 2015b, 2016d.

as a great power in foreign policy terms only pairing it up with a rising power (e.g., India).⁷⁸ Yet in those few instances (17 times in the analyzed sample) when he ascribes this status to Russia alone, he clearly speaks to the domestic audience. This usually happens when Putin attends relatively low-profile events, such as youth contests and forums,⁷⁹ award ceremonies for veterans and other distinguished persons,⁸⁰ and the meetings of the government.⁸¹ When he called Russia a great power in his inauguration speech (2004), he also spoke to the domestic audience and used the concept in the historical context, insisting that greatness had to be “backed up by the new deeds of today’s generations.”⁸² Another time, when he addressed his electorate before his first presidential term, Putin used the concept to contrast it with Russian realities, riddled with poverty and social injustice.⁸³ In his understating, Russia had always been a great power, but, at that point in time, it was a great power “in potentiality.”⁸⁴

Occasionally, Putin rejected the label “great power” when someone attached it to Russia, or did not repeat it in his replies. In the interview for *Le Figaro*, he protested openly, emphasizing that Russia had too many internal problems to concern itself with global tasks.⁸⁵ Yet he still insinuated that Russia remained a *velikaya derzhava* on some other level, just not at the level of great power management. In 2007, Putin suggested (in the international context) that the present-day Russia, just like the Russian Empire in the early 1900s, would be much better off if it “did not pose as a great power.”⁸⁶ In 2014 and 2015, Putin insisted that Russia did not want to be a superpower (*sverkhderzhava* or *superderzhava*), because it was not fond of imposing its own ways upon other countries and had enough space to reclaim in its own hinterlands. Yet Putin also made clear that he criticized hegemonic ambitions, and that Russia was not going to give up the role of *velikaya derzhava*—that is, one among several equals (the message, however, remained implicit).⁸⁷

78. Putin 2014c, 2017g.

79. Putin 2003c, 2013b, 2017a.

80. Putin 2005b, 2005c, 2007e, 2014d, 2015c.

81. Putin 2000e, 2012a.

82. Putin 2004b.

83. Putin 2000f.

84. Putin 2000f.

85. Putin 2000b.

86. Putin 2007f.

87. Putin 2014a, 2015d; also see Putin 2003d.

In other words, Russia also appeals rhetorically to the institution of great power management in its Western understanding and has no difficulty in recognizing other powerful states as the members of one club. Yet it usually abstains from self-ascribing the role of a great power in the international context. Meanwhile, it strongly insists on being a *velikaya derzhava* when speaking to the domestic audience, using the concept and the image associated with it as a powerful ideological and mobilizational tool.

1.4 CONCEPTUAL ENTANGLEMENT

Why do these two concepts that are supposed to be direct equivalents in English and Russian for signifying a major actor in international relations who shapes one of its primary institutions—great power management—have such different semantic fields (see Figure 1)?⁸⁸ My answer to this is relatively simple: *velikaya derzhava* is not exactly equivalent to “great power,” or, more specifically, these two concepts have become conceptually entangled through (1) translation, and (2) their further discursive interaction in the political field.⁸⁹ Einar Wigen defines conceptual entanglement as “the process that sets up conventionalized *translation equivalents* between languages.”⁹⁰ Importantly, this process usually does not entail an invention of a new word or a direct borrowing and localization of a foreign word. It is indeed about finding *equivalents*, which, naturally, have their own linguistic histories and are never completely equivalent, due to the varying semantic structures of cultures and languages.⁹¹ Thus, conceptual entanglement gives agency to individual translators, statesmen, and intellectuals, who can *interpret* a certain conceptual framework and reformulate it in local, culturally grounded terms. It also provides a certain conceptual leeway for diplomats

88. By a “semantic field” I mean a closely connected group of words and connotations united by an overarching concept that (1) delimits the group and (2) shapes the contextual meaning of its lexemes. For a more detailed discussion of semantic fields, see, e.g., Andersen 1997, 350–70.

89. Given that the institution of great power management has its roots in the European political discourse of the eighteenth century (Scott 2001) and was formalized (and later legalized [Koskenniemi 2004]) in the nineteenth century, when the main language of diplomacy was French, the original counterpart of *velikaya derzhava* was the French concept *une grande puissance*, not the English “great power.” Yet, since in this chapter I mostly refer to the modern usage, the Russian-English opposition seems appropriate.

90. Wigen 2018, 42.

91. Cf. footnote 18 in this chapter.

great power			velikaya derzhava		
resources	norms	recognition	resources	norms	recognition
relational superiority	int. order & peace	external	non-relative history	continuity	domestic
military	responsibility	club	culture	counter-hegemonic	diplomatic
economic	consensus	special rights	creativity	repository of values	equality (of the few)
demographic			potential		
territorial			nuclear weapons		

Figure 1. Great power vs. *velikaya derzhava*. A comparison of semantic fields.

and policymakers when they engage in interstate contacts and communicate with their domestic audiences.⁹²

Thus, *velikaya derzhava* is both the same as and different from “great power.” It is the same because it is not some isolated, idiosyncratic concept—it is a direct translation of “great power” and it acquires meaning only in international context, even when it is used domestically. Yet *velikaya derzhava* is also not the same as “great power,” because it has its own history and conceptual baggage—it does not share all the key semantic characteristics with “great power” in its Western meaning. Meanwhile, *velikaya derzhava* remains tightly related to and dependent on its Western equivalent, since Russia seeks inclusion and strives to remain understood. So it balances within the leeway provided through conceptual entanglement, capitalizing on some inherent semantics of *velikaya derzhava* (e.g., its compatibility with nonrelational assessment of inner political qualities, its mobilizational power, and its ad hoc creativity manifested in tackling world problems), but also demonstrates its sound understanding of what it takes to be a Western great power. For instance, Russian politicians and diplomats are always careful with the recognition aspect of greatpowerhood. They rarely openly self-ascribe this status in international and institutional contexts, while often using the concept in relation to other great and rising powers. They do not invite and frequently sever comparisons, as they realize those might end not in Russia’s favor. They plead allegiance to the existing international institutions (especially the UN), which globally validate Russia’s great power status. In the meantime, Russia can freely talk to its domestic audience about being a *velikaya derzhava* even when (or especially when!) the times are dire, relying

92. Wigen 2018, 36.

on the concept's mobilizational power and historical entrenchment. Thus, even when much of the world is opposing Russia's international actions (as happened when it attacked Ukraine in 2022), the domestic ideology of Russia being a *velikaya derzhava* may appeal even more strongly to its population at home.

To what extent the choice of semantic nuances is strategic, or even conscious, is certainly up for debate, but since languages play a fundamental role in shaping our lifeworlds,⁹³ I would assume that *velikaya derzhava's* conceptual history and semantic field cannot be a mere toolkit for occasional situational usage, even for those political professionals who are perfectly fluent in languages other than Russian. First, the semantic specifics of the native concept, while not completely determining, may always kick in as a default mode of meaning making. Second, it is the native concept that remains responsible for domestic resonance, and hence, its semantic field cannot be ignored by any political professional who wishes to remain popular, even if she perfectly understands all interlingual variations.

To sum up, *velikaya derzhava* is the product of both (1) the evolution of Russia's domestic political discourse, and (2) Russia's international and interlingual relations with its neighbors. Most importantly, it has been affected by a conceptual entanglement with the European society of states that turned greatpowerhood into an international institution. I prioritize the "European" political discourse as the main reference point for Russia's political imagination because it indeed remained Russia's dominant Significant Other for several centuries.⁹⁴ At the same time, I do this with reservations. First, there are enough differences in every European language and local context when it comes to political concepts. Yet there are also enough similarities in how these concepts evolved in separate European discourses, as well as the discourses of their immediate neighbors, including Russia (hence the idea of the European society of states).⁹⁵ Thus, I choose to risk a simplification to be able to present a synthetic picture of conceptual evolution with a millennial timespan. Second, due to the country's sheer size and geography, the Russian discourse was also affected by the polities to the east and to the south of Russia.⁹⁶ I accept this point and try to also account for

93. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously argued, "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" and "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either" (2001, 68, emphasis original).

94. Neumann 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Morozov 2015.

95. Scott 2001.

96. Neumann and Wigen 2018; Ivakhnenko 1999; Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012; Shlapentokh 2013.

both the Steppe (i.e., eastern) and the Byzantine (i.e., southern) political traditions while tracing the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* (see especially chapters 2 and 3). Still, my main object of analysis remains the Russian political discourse, while the European discourse serves as the main external reference point. I argue that those two discourses developed on colinear tracks and underwent the most consequential and long-lasting conceptual entanglement that both enabled Russia to have its voice heard in the Eurocentric political environment, and limited its discursive options to achieve recognition.

1.5 ARGUMENT OUTLINE

There were many similarities in how the understandings of political greatness evolved in Russia and in Europe. Time lags and certain local specifics notwithstanding, one could say that the Russian and European discourses developed on colinear tracks, sometimes converging, but sometimes drifting apart from each other (see chapter 4). In my reconstruction, the historical repertoire of discursive manifestations of political greatness and superiority includes four separate, but genealogically related, modes⁹⁷ that were competing with and replacing each other, taking turns to claim discursive hegemony: *absolute*, *theatrical*, *civilizational*, and *international socialist* (I explain the content of each mode a bit further down). Their competition was both intra- and international, meaning that, at any given time, within one national discourse, there could (and often did) exist other modes (either in hibernation, or on the margin),⁹⁸ apart from the one that successfully exercised hegemony. At the same time, different international actors (in my case,

97. My understanding of “mode” is similar to Dunn and Neumann’s “position”; i.e., it is an assemblage of similar and related discursive representations that form a distinguishable whole (2016, 5). However, I prefer the term “mode” because it is semantically more detached from concrete and organized groups of actors, and draws attention to the *manner* of reasoning, i.e., the habit or choice to *connect* individual representations in a certain way, rather than to the semantic content of individual representations.

98. In this context, the difference between hibernation and margin is similar to the classical Marxist distinction between a class “in itself,” i.e., similarly positioned economic subjects sharing common grievances, and a class “for itself,” i.e., similarly positioned economic subjects aware of their unity and common interests (Munro 2013). In other words, a *hibernating mode* entails the existence of disconnected or politically inactive representations that potentially resonate and could form a distinguishable whole, while a *marginalized mode* presupposes the existence of an organized and self-reflexive position that is being suppressed by the agents of discursive hegemony.

Russia and its Western neighbors) could represent different hegemonic modes of political greatness, or even experience discursive uncertainty, when their hegemonic mode was being undermined and hollowed by a competing position, *either internally or externally*. Whether the two discourses were internally stable or challenged, if they differed significantly in terms of their dominating modes, this created dissensus on the international level, and the participating actors entered a phase of discursive contestation, even when they allegedly utilized equivalent concepts and pursued similar goals.

In a simplified way, the four modes of greatness mentioned above can be classified along two axes, representing their attitude toward the international status quo and their main validation mechanism: (1) conservative vs. revolutionary, and (2) auratic vs. materialist.⁹⁹ When classified, the four modes fit neatly into a two-by-two matrix presented in Figure 2.

While the separation seems neat, each of those modes is an open system and none is hermetically sealed from the others. Hence, they are all prone to spillovers and interpenetrations. This makes discursive evolution possible and, in fact, inevitable over long periods of time—every mode carries the seed of its own disruption. For the same reason, however, adjacent modes are always related. So long as every discursive contender has to make sense of the existing practical consequences of the previously hegemonic system of meaning, the new mode is never revolutionary enough to reach the point of complete detachment from the ways and notions of its predecessor. Below I explain the meaning of all four modes and reconstruct the sequence of their emergence, dominance, and decline in the Russian (and partially European) political discourse.

1.5.1 *Absolute greatness*

In Russia (but also, presumably, in the part of Europe to the west of Russia), the most ancient recorded way to make sense of political greatness was by conceiving it in *absolute* terms (see chapter 2). That is, political power was usually rendered great or *majestic* through its direct connection to divine

99. Here I use Walter Benjamin's understanding of aura which comprises the "unique manifestation of distance," or the obviously ceremonial nature of a phenomenon or an event (2019 141). Even though all modern and premodern regimes of power depend on ceremonial manifestations that generate consent or belief (Agamben 2011), I treat *absolute* and *theatrical* types of political greatness as particularly dependent on ceremonies, as well as distance, "however close it may be" (Benjamin 2019, 173). I label the other two types materialist, because of their explicit reliance on either relative assessment and comparison or dialectical materialist ontology.

main validation mechanism

<i>attitude towards status quo</i>		auratic	materialist
	conservative	<i>absolute greatness</i>	<i>civilizational greatness</i>
	revolutionary	<i>theatrical greatness</i>	<i>international socialist greatness</i>

Figure 2. Four genealogical modes of greatness in Russia and its predecessor polities.

authority. Even though every concrete instantiation of this quality depended on a combination of earthly rituals and human-made symbols, the latter merely represented something that was believed to exist independently of human sense and perception. Postulating direct connection between the deity and the sovereign as a concrete instantiation of the divine political authority on earth, absolute greatness is, simultaneously, *auratic* and *conservative*.

It is auratic because it contains elements of a cult and presupposes an unbreachable distance between the sovereign and the people (but also between different sovereigns). It is based on an unconditional acclamation (internal and external) of the sovereign's moral preponderance and political grandeur. Consequently, absolute greatness does not lend itself easily to measurement, comparison, and systemic recognition. It usually derives its legitimacy from the history and quality of a given domestic regime founded on the idea of divine enthronement. Absolute greatness is also distinctly conservative, since it essentializes political regimes and aims to protect them from possible transformations that could put their divine pedigree into question. Often, it functions as a legitimizing political ideology and may be adopted in the face of external strategic challenges. The prime example of its concrete application is the communication of Russia's most ruthless tsar (and a successful military commander), Ivan IV (1547–1584),¹⁰⁰ with his

¹⁰⁰. Here and below I include the time of rule in the brackets, when I first mention monarchs and state leaders.

western neighbors: Johan III of Sweden, Stephen Báthory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Elizabeth I of England (see chapter 2).

1.5.2 *Theatrical greatness*

While Russia was proactively trying to join the already shaping European society of states in the second half of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, it also changed its dominant mode of manifesting political greatness to something more fitting for the age—*theatrical greatness*. Within that mode, political greatness loses its essentialist character and universalist foundation. It is primarily activated through assertive action and convincing performance, often adorned with glorification and pomp. Instead of staying linked to some internal and imperceptible quality, greatness becomes a property of the discourse itself, as well as of the given political moment, while its validation largely relies on persuasion through spectacle and action. In Russia, such political style reached its peak in the eighteenth century, when panegyric literature and sermons excessively praised Russian monarchs as sacral creators and guardians of Russia's national glory and grandeur that were supported by military victories (see chapter 3, especially sections 3.8–3.15). In Europe, the early example of claiming theatrical greatness was Sweden's intervention into the Thirty Years' War in 1630.¹⁰¹

Theatrical greatness remains *auratic*, but also becomes *revolutionary*. While it continues to rely on appearance and perceptive distance, it rejects the essentialism that attributed to political regimes both stable transhistorical qualities and a direct connection to the divine. Thus, the sky is no longer the limit, so to say—what matters for changing one's status is a convincing performance of power and glory that may remain relatively independent of one's political history and domestic regime. The Russian monarchs of the eighteenth century utilized the discourse of theatrical greatness extensively, both to justify their radical domestic reforms, and to improve their international standing.

1.5.3 *Civilizational greatness*

Meanwhile, in Europe, political greatness was reinterpreted yet again. Absolute and theatrical versions of political glorification were synthesized into a

101. Ringmar 2007.

civilizational narrative, which was universalist, but not essentialist (see chapter 4, especially sections 4.1–4.3). While it postulated the existence of the family of mankind developing in one common direction, the position of each individual polity on that axis was to be established through a rigorous civilizational analysis and comparison. At the same time, the resulting status of every polity was not set in stone and could potentially change, if the polity were to prove its civilizational worth by scoring high on an imprecise list of underspecified factors, such as culture, wealth, population, military and technological advancement, political history, and so on. Such understanding of universal development conditioned the emergence of great power management. Political greatness was then conceived as a fruit of individual states' political histories. At the same time, those histories were still considered as parts or stages in the development of one global whole, and great powers assumed the role of the main driving forces of human progress. This process was further facilitated by the transformation of international law, where the principles of natural law were replaced with positive international law, which was based on state practices and legitimized colonization (see chapter 4, section 4.1).

Civilizational greatness *loses the auratic component*, but regains its *conservative* ethos. Rigorous comparative undertakings in politics, enabled by the emergence of statistics,¹⁰² corrupted the aura of power, replacing it with the all-pervading gaze of the status quo-oriented “gentle civilizers.”¹⁰³ Concurrently, this mode of greatness also facilitated the establishment of a legal hierarchy of states, in which Russia's position was assessed as, at best, ambivalent. Nevertheless, having managed to secure a seat at the table, Russia eagerly joined the European great powers in embracing and promoting the civilizational narrative that legitimized great power management and the Congress System.

Yet, when others, or even Russia itself, applied the narrative to Russia, it often did not play in Russia's favor. While its political elites and a few major hubs of industry and culture were, by then, thoroughly Europeanized (read: civilized), Russia at large did not resemble a European nation, due to a number of political practices it inherited from the Steppe tradition,¹⁰⁴ to poverty and misery of the most part of its population,¹⁰⁵ as well as to its hypercentral-

102. Scott 2001, 8.

103. Koskenniemi 2004.

104. Neumann and Wigen 2018.

105. Etkind 2011, 2–3.

ized, unaccountable, and nonrepresentative autocratic regime.¹⁰⁶ The picture was further darkened by multiple travelogues about Russia, often exorbitantly orientalist, that were published in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁷ Having internalized the civilizational narrative within its political discourse, Russia continued to experience constant problems with recognition. As a result, internationally, it chose to tackle the emerging dissensus by falling back on the alternative modes of political greatness: for example, absolute greatness, which especially came to the fore during the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815).

However, at home, the influence of the civilizational mode remained supreme. Consequently, Russia came up with a discursive construct that *domesticated* greatness. In doing so, it relied heavily on the preexisting mobilizational power and conceptual baggage of *velikaya derzhava*. In other words, what applied to the international system in the European version of the civilizational narrative was projected on Russia's own political history and domestic regime. The ruling elites presented Russia discursively as a *velikaya derzhava* in potentiality, which was supposedly predetermined by the centuries of uninterrupted political practice. Yet, even though Russia was in the process of becoming great, it was not truly there yet—according to the then current consensus about the nature of political greatness, the country badly needed to modernize. Toward that end, Russia applied the civilizational narrative self-referentially. To be a proper great power and to legitimately engage in colonization, Russia first needed to colonize itself. So, instead of being a foreign policy issue, the story of *velikaya derzhava* turned into a powerful domestic ideology and a regime-entrenching factor that refashioned in foreign policy terms what in fact was a domestically oriented modernization program (see chapter 5, sections 5.11–5.12).

1.5.4 International socialist greatness

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the *civilizational* narrative of political greatness faced a powerful discursive contender. Seventy years later, following a successful social revolution in Russia (1917), the new mode temporarily replaced the civilizational narrative in the Russian political mainstream (although it never managed to leave the margins in Europe). It was *interna-*

106. Troshchinsky 1868.

107. E.g., Chappe d'Auteroche 1768; de Custine 1843, etc. For an overview of Western European accounts of Eastern Europe, see Wolff 1994.

tional socialist greatness, inspired by Marxist internationalism, which radically reimagined the existing international hierarchies and categorizations in political-economic terms. What matters for Marxists is not so much to which nation each person or group belongs, but what place they occupy in the economic class structure. Those who own the means of production (e.g., factories and capital) that enable them to extract surplus value and further increase their assets, belong to the capitalist class (or the *bourgeoisie*), regardless of their citizenship. Those who own nothing but their own labor, and hence become subjects of capitalist exploitation, belong to the working class (or the *proletariat*). Despite the fact that Marxists perceive national borders as real and consequential, both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are, first and foremost, *cosmopolitan* economic classes—hence the *internationalism* of the Marxist thought. Thus, the concept of “great power management” has no independent sense in the Marxist vocabulary, since international affairs are actually managed by the capitalist classes of the Western states, while the state executives are mere committees aiding the settlement of common capitalist affairs.¹⁰⁸

As sovereign units, great powers are byproducts of the accumulation and redistribution of capital, while all imperial policies are, in fact, economic—that is, very *materialist* in nature. At the end of the day, within the capitalist socioeconomic formation, everything is about capital and resources, but this basic pursuit is disguised by the ideology of national or civilizational greatness. On their own, however, great powers have no role to play in promoting the communist cause, and hence, they are regressive, rather than progressive entities. Yet, the progressivist spirit of Marxist internationalism, in which it resonates with the civilizational discourse, makes it susceptible to a different kind of greatness. This greatness is derived from Marxists’ historical determinism—namely, their utter certainty about the endpoint of human progress (communist classless society). Such greatness operates not on the level of international relations, but on the level of relations between classes and, eventually, History.¹⁰⁹

108. This is not to say that state bureaucracies were completely irrelevant for Marxist analysis. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, for instance, Marx demonstrates (2009) how state bureaucracy acquires its own autonomy balancing between the interests of different classes to protect its own interests. The outgrowth, resulting in autonomy, and hence self-interest of state bureaucracy was also the main charge that Leon Trotsky brought (1937) against Stalin in his late contemplations about the trajectory of the USSR.

109. Leon Trotsky, one of the masterminds of the Russian Revolution, renders this aspiration for a different kind of greatness most aptly. In the second part of *Literature and Revolu-*

In addition to its pronounced *materialism*, Marxist internationalism is also explicitly *revolutionary*. A quintessential example of critical theory, it allied with the underdogs of the international system and was centered on their enlightenment and mobilization for the cause of an international workers' revolution. Thus, national greatness, delegitimized as a notion, was replaced by a transformative future-oriented mission bestowed on the global proletariat to create an international classless society.¹¹⁰ However, as mentioned above, every mode carries the seed of its own disruption. In the case of international socialist greatness, it was rooted in the ambivalent Marxist treatment of nations that soon enough (already in the 1930s) became a gateway for the elements of the civilizational mode to penetrate the Marxist narrative and to bring along the ideas about great powers and great power management into the very core of the Soviet ideology.

Joseph Stalin (1924–1953) made the decisive move to relegitimize great power management, and every subsequent Soviet leader had to somehow grapple with the inherited discursive tension. Nikita Khrushchev (1958–1964) tried to revive the original Leninist principles of Marxist internationalism, but was soon removed from office. In contrast, Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) prioritized the Soviet Union's role as a conventional great power. And even though international socialist greatness formally maintained its discursive hegemony throughout Brezhnev's lengthy tenure, it was effectively undermined and corrupted from inside. Large sections of the Soviet political elite, especially those in the KGB and the military (from whom the current Russian *siloviki* largely inherit), de facto switched back to the civilizational mode—and specifically *Russian great power chauvinism* (*russskiy velikoderzhavny shovinism*) as its concrete instantiation.¹¹¹ By the time when Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–1991) finally launched a moderately open discussion about the ideological content and economic policies of the Soviet regime, intro-

tion, he described how a German emperor once called social democrats *vaterlandslose Gesellen* (i.e., “subjects without a fatherland”), accusing them of being insusceptible to the redolence of national greatness. “Let it be so!” responded Trotsky, “They may be lacking that official fatherland represented by a chancellor, a prison guard, and a pastor. Yet, these subjects without a fatherland are truly blessed, as they will inherit the world” (1991, 198). It is difficult to miss Trotsky's allusion to religious rhetoric here. Despite the materialist substance of their ideology, Russian Marxists often resorted to figures of speech inspired by religious discourse (Etkind 2011, 208); i.e., they were, quite perceptively, employing rhetorical tropes that were typical for the absolute mode of greatness. Thereby, they increased the resonance of their writings and speeches with the masses.

110. Duncan 2002, 49–54.

111. Zubok 2008, 435.

ducing *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, the conditions of possibility for a major implosion within the Soviet discourse were already in place. Catalyzed by Gorbachev's frequent appeals to universal values, global challenges and threats, as well as one common family of humanity, Marxist internationalism was completely uprooted, together with its critical analytical predisposition and revolutionary spirit.

1.5.5 *The contemporary condition*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia reached another discursive fork in the road. Symptomatically, at this historical moment, the first thing the new Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), uttered when he was invited to speak at the US Congress in 1992 was that he was “a president of a country with millennial history [and] a citizen of a great power (*velikoy derzhavy*), which has made its choice in favor of liberty and democracy.”¹¹² In the provided consecutive interpretation, *velikaya derzhava* was mistakenly translated into English as a “great country,” while the predominant focus remained on the final clause, featuring “liberty” and “democracy.” Such must have been the assumption: the new Russia was so economically weak and unstable that it could not possibly measure up to the great power status. It did not tick all the features on the civilizational list and was undergoing a fundamental transformation.

However, Yeltsin's choice of words, especially in the opening sentence that was preceded and followed by three and a half minutes of standing ovation, certainly was not random. The discursive rupture Russia had experienced in the preceding years forced its political elites to search for alternative, yet reliable, identity anchors. While liberty and democracy were part of the story, the most fundamental and resonant tropes were to be borrowed from the available image bank of a country that (1) had not once elected its government through a free and fair process,¹¹³ (2) could hardly afford the ethnic nationalist solution, and (3) had no tradition of civic nationalism.

Velikaya derzhava was, in fact, a very logical choice: it gave the citizens a sense of historical continuity, a feeling of pride that somewhat compensated for the miserable realities of the 1990s, it possessed a powerful mobilizational potential that had also been activated in the 1930s and 1940s (i.e.,

¹¹² Yeltsin 1992.

¹¹³ Yeltsin also emphasized this in the first sentence of his speech, presenting himself as the very first popularly elected Russian leader in the last one thousand years.

within the lifespan of a sizable portion of Russian population). Importantly, it possessed discursive characteristics that did not necessarily require external validation—it could accommodate relative weakness and underdevelopment, as it had many times before, when Russia capitalized on the concept’s absolute features (see chapter 2, sections 2.5 and 2.6). Last but not least, by the 1980s, *velikaya derzhava* had *already become* one of the most important identity anchors for the Soviet bureaucratic elites. Most of those people unproblematically coupled it with the official hegemony of international socialist greatness (see chapter 6, especially 6.4), and later, themselves safely transitioned into the political elite of contemporary Russia, bringing their identities along.¹¹⁴

In other words, it should not be surprising that Yeltsin chose to include the concept in the very first (scripted) sentence of his Congress speech, which introduced the new Russia to the global audience. It also makes sense why Putin later amplified this discourse to an even higher degree. Having done so, however, Russia not only officially reestablished the civilizational mode of greatness as its new discursive hegemony, but also destined itself to a set of challenges that were very similar to the ones it struggled to resolve before, especially in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Yet again it internalized a discursive framework that was *conservative* and *materialist* at the same time. That is, it amplifies the voice of those major actors who pay their respects to the international political status quo, but it also includes a rigid international hierarchy, built and maintained through rigorous relational assessment of material, ideational, cultural, and political factors. In such circumstances, Russia can only count on partial recognition that would never satisfy its restless urge to remain (1) markedly special and (2) completely equal as a great power at the same time.

As the developments of the past three decades have shown, Russia has been actively using the leeway provided by the conceptual entanglement of “great power” and *velikaya derzhava* to assuredly mobilize domestic support, but to also claim its international privileges in an intelligible way. This explains both the difference between the concepts’ semantic fields, and Russia’s unceasing attachment to its great power identity. At times, however, the conceptual stretch seems too much for the international audience. Importantly, sometimes it also seems too much for people at home. Hence the sociological fluctuations of preferences between “*velikaya derzhava* that is

114. Kryshantovskaya and White 2011.

respected and feared by other states” and “a country with high living standards, but, perhaps, not very powerful” as different versions of perfect Russia in the eye of the Russian public.¹¹⁵ Whether the public preference for *velikaya derzhava* will continue to degrade is an open question. Yet, the way the sociologists from Levada-Center formulate their “either-or” question indicates that the civilizational mode of political greatness is not going anywhere any time soon. In Figure 3, I visualize the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* as it proceeded in the Russian political mainstream.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I substantiate my argument in five distinct steps, each performed in a separate chapter. In chapter 2, I describe the first stage of the previously mentioned conceptual evolution. I look at the uses of the concept *velikaya derzhava*, as well as its separate components, from the eleventh century until the beginning of the seventeenth century. First, I reconstruct separate discursive lives of the two parts of this concept and show how they merged into one in the sixteenth century. The underlying idea is to show that discursive manifestations of political greatness in that period could be united under one label—*absolute greatness*—that is, existing in unverifiable form and independently of perception. I also touch upon the first Russian political ideologies that extensively utilized the idea of political greatness for mobilizational purposes and, for the first time, connected it with the Orthodox Christian ideals of submission and humility.

Chapter 3 covers the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the time when the absolute mode of greatness was challenged and later replaced by *theatrical greatness*. Working with seventeenth-century sources, I trace how greatness understood in terms of *majesty* got slowly reinterpreted as *glory*, and how this concept’s absolute foundation disappeared. I argue that this process developed alongside a growing trend toward sacralization of the Russian monarch, which, somewhat counterintuitively, culminated in the time of the most well-known Russian Europeanizer, Peter the Great (1682–1725). To illustrate how the transformation proceeded, I analyze two large groups of sources. First, I focus on Peter’s institutional reforms and specifically their

115. Levada-Center 2021. As of August 2021, the share of people who prefer to see their country as *velikaya derzhava* has reached its historic minimum of 32 percent.

Timeline of hegemonic modes in Russia's great power discourse

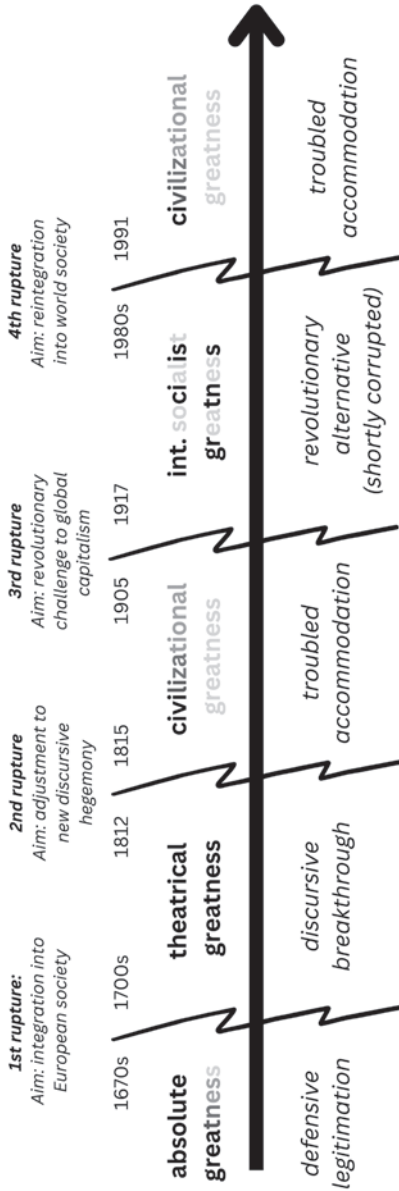


Figure 3. A timeline of hegemonic modes in the evolution of great power discourse in Russia and its predecessor polities.

*Gray scale represents the strength of discursive hegemony from very strong (in black text) to challenged (light gray text) or corrupted (interchanging black and gray text). Challenged hegemony implies that Russia, while accepting the general discursive framework, increasingly appeals to the alternative modes afforded by the conceptual leeway of *velikaya derzhava*, trying to overcome the crisis of recognition. Corrupted hegemony implies that the formal hegemony of a discursive mode remains intact, while its semantics are no longer taken seriously. Fading represents chronological developments.

discursive backing. Second, I look at the time of another great tsarina, Catherine II (1762–1796), and define the dominant political style of her epoch. In the same chapter, I also bring the Russian political discourse into dialog with the more familiar and better-studied ideas about political greatness coming from the West (e.g., the European theorists of natural law and diplomatic correspondence).

In chapter 4, I analyze the discourse produced during the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), one of the crucial moments for the recognition of Russia's great power status. In this chapter, I show how theatrical manifestations of political greatness that Russia had relied on until that moment stopped working with the European audience. I argue that this mismatch could help explain the puzzling transformation that occurred to Napoleon's nemesis, Alexander I (1801–1825), during and in the immediate aftermath of the Congress. I suggest that, while trying to adjust to the new civilizational narrative reflected in the European consensus, Russia reinvented its greatness relying on alternative, nontheatrical discourses that had been lying dormant in its political image bank until then.

Chapter 5 covers the rest of the nineteenth century, as well as the decade preceding WWI. In it, I show how Russian statesmen and public intellectuals were struggling to adopt the story of world-historic progress and ended up domesticating this narrative, reinterpreting *velikaya derzhava* as an ever-becoming but perpetually underdeveloped political entity that masked in foreign policy terms what essentially was a domestic project. I focus on both the official discourse and literary debates that took place outside the policy circles.

In chapter 6, I discuss the rise and fall of the Soviet project and the international socialist mode that swiftly asserted hegemony in the Russian discourse, following the successful social revolution of 1917. I also demonstrate how it was corrupted by competing narratives related to national history and great power management very shortly after. I also show how it was effectively hollowed out, despite its formal discursive hegemony during the Cold War, and how the Soviet bureaucratic elites fell back on one of the conventional versions of great power management as their main discursive identity anchor.

Finally, in chapter 7, which concludes this book, I contemplate the consequences of the described conceptual entanglement, as well as the separate stages of *velikaya derzhava's* conceptual evolution for contemporary Russia. I

discuss possible future trajectories for both Russia and the West in addressing the present discursive conundrum. I also explore my argument's broader implications. One of the core problems of Russia's international politics over the last few centuries has been the problem of trying to speak authoritatively from the periphery (or semiperiphery). Even though in my book this issue is presented as a Russian problem, in fact, the problem is much more general, and it applies to other peripheral and semiperipheral actors, such as Turkey or China. What is more, it is as much a discursive problem as it is an economic or a sociopolitical one.

1.7 ANALYSIS

When it comes to my analytical choices, I proceed as follows. First, I treat *velikaya derzhava* as a concept, not a (compound) word. As Reinhart Koselleck has it, "each concept is associated with a word, but not every word is a social and political concept."¹¹⁶ Together with Koselleck, I maintain that political and social concepts, such as *velikaya derzhava*, "possess a substantial claim to generality and always have many meanings—in historical science, occasionally in modalities other than words."¹¹⁷ Hence, on the one hand, concepts can never be defined unequivocally. On the other hand, they encapsulate "the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context within which and for which a word [associated with the concept] is used."¹¹⁸ Second, while reconstructing a conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava*, I am trying to see whether the semantic and contextual substance of this concept remained the same through time and space, and if it did not, then I ask myself how it changed and through which processes. Third, I accept Einar Wigen's basic premise that "international relations are also inter-lingual relations."¹¹⁹ To that end, I add an interlingual dimension to my analysis by looking at how Russian concepts related to political greatness interacted with foreign concepts attached to similar designata and how the meaning transfer proceeded. The greatest attention devoted to this exchange coincides with the time when Russia was trying to join European society and

116. Koselleck 2004, 84.

117. Koselleck 2004, 84–85.

118. Koselleck 2004, 85.

119. Wigen 2015, 427.

sought recognition of its great power status—that is, in the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

The choice of sources is conditioned by the discursive specifics of the periods in question. I mostly follow the debate about Russia's political greatness (and later—great power status) to where it unfolds during each historical period. The starting point is the very early known uses of the concept *derzhava* that occurred in the eleventh century. For the eleventh through sixteenth centuries, the most relevant and pretty much the only widely available discourse is religious literature. For the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I look at the sources that still belonged to the realm of religious writing, but were already slightly changing their genre, addressing a wider audience. Their exact purpose and style vary greatly and include anything from doctrinal documents of the Old Believers (Russian schismatics) to political pamphlets of the Time of Troubles (the lengthy interregnum in early modern Russia that lasted from 1598 until 1613). I also analyze some recognized discursive monuments¹²⁰ of the time, such as Ivan IV's diplomatic correspondence. As my data for the eighteenth century, I use the writings of Petrine ideologues, diplomatic correspondence, and polemic essays, as well as the works of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian historians. In the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, my focus is mostly twofold. On the one hand, I engage with the debates among Russian public intellectuals, paying specific attention to Westernizers and Slavophiles. On the other hand, I read and interpret memoirs and other writings of the Russian political actors. For the twentieth century, I look at the Soviet cultural output (e.g., Stalinist cinema) and also address a number of secondary sources published by renowned historians of the Cold War. I also provide a more detailed justification for my data selection in each individual chapter.

Due to my main focus on the evolution of Russian political concepts, I pay more attention to the Russian sources, reconstructing the European side of the story in a cursory way, mostly relying on secondary literature and the moments of Europe's interaction with Russia. On the Russian side, however, I try to present a fully fledged conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* from its very early uses.

120. Unless the literal meaning of the word “monument” is obvious from the context, hereinafter, I mostly refer to discursive monuments—i.e., important and consequential texts.

My analysis is mostly inspired by three interrelated schools of thought: the German school of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*),¹²¹ the Cambridge school of intellectual history,¹²² and the critical history of modernity through the genealogical method coming from France.¹²³ All their nuances notwithstanding, these schools of thought share a set of fundamental assumptions about social continuity and change that I subscribe to as well. First, they all disagree with a vision of history as a progressive path toward modernity—that is, as a gradual emergence, development, and perfection of modern ideas and institutions, culminating in their contemporary most flawless shape. This intellectual position presumes that history is not a constant progression from chaos to order or from primitiveness to harmonious complexity, but that it is rather a sequence of alternating orders each having its own unique semantic structures and appropriate rules of conduct. Second, they all insist that ideas and concepts *in use* are instances of political action—that is, they perform productive work related to the stabilization of contextual meaning or alteration thereof. This proposition implies that language is not a mere reflection of reality, but rather a site of productive contestation where actors define, redefine, and challenge social concepts in their (actors' and concepts') contextual milieus, thereby reproducing or changing semantic structures of given orders. Third, since languages (and discourses more broadly) are both instrumental for and constitutive of their speakers' social realities, the appropriate way to create awareness of their fluidity is through a diachronic exposition of changing meanings attached to political concepts, practices, and institutions. Thus, by tracing conceptual evolutions, the representatives of all three schools (1) denaturalize social realities that are usually taken for granted by social actors; and (2) investigate social change by looking at how the key political concepts change their meaning.

As mentioned above, this book is not a work of history. Rather it is a synthesizing social science work, inspired by the critical history of modernity. It is what Michel Foucault called a “history of the present.” Hence, I do not claim expert authority on the question of Russia’s social and political development in the bygone centuries. Instead, I reconstruct a genealogy of the present-day discourse. This discourse, as I will demonstrate, came into being through digestion, reinterpretation, and amalgamation of the previously existing discursive modes. What I am trying to do is to immerse into those

121. Koselleck 2004.

122. Skinner 1969; Palonen 2003.

123. Foucault 1977; Garland 2014.

preexisting positions and to understand their internal logic—that is, to analyze them emically. Rejecting the commonly held opinion that concepts preserve an unchanged meaning through time, I look at how they operate from within each discursive locality. I am trying to understand what meaning those concepts acquire while at work in an argument, accompanied by their discursive surroundings.