

# What Does Russia Mean When It Talks Greatness?

Written by Anatoly Reshetnikov

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ANATOLY RESHETNIKOV, MAY 20 2018

On 18 March 2018, Vladimir Putin was predictably elected to become the Russian president for the fourth time. Immediately after, a throng of political foretellers hastened to speak their minds on the fate of Russia's domestic regime and the country's prospective position in the international system. The range of given predictions, however, was utterly unspectacular. Almost every observer repeated, nearly word for word, one and the same set of ideas. Internationally, Russia's conflict with the West will intensify and the Cold War rhetoric will replace the language of cooperation (Troianovski and Bodner, 2018; Zygar, 2018; DW, 2018). At home, the regime will continue slowly stagnating and will be combating dissatisfaction and dissent by intensifying repressions (Kolesnikov, 2018; Wood, 2018; Snyder, 2018; Blank, 2018). What is more, as most experts assure, Russia will continue "to pursue 'Great Power' ambitions" (Wood, 2018; cf. Zygar, 2018). Interestingly, Russia is expected to do so despite economic challenges and rapidly deteriorating international recognition, as if prosperity and international respect had nothing to do with "greatpowerhood", as we know it today.

Both recently and historically, Russia has indeed been talking a lot about being a Great Power. Yet, no one asked Russia, what it actually meant by saying this. It was always presumed that by "greatpowerhood" Russia meant what it means elsewhere. Russia's appeals to greatness have always been assumed to be self-evident and were automatically embedded into the dominant Western frame of reference. Of course, there is no agreement on a universal set of criteria for "greatpowerhood". Furthermore, not everyone agrees that such categories should be used at all in the post-Cold War context. Yet, staggering economic inequality among different countries, a certain imbalance in the composition of international institutions (e.g. permanent seats in the UNSC), and special rights related to foreign intervention, effectively claimed by some more powerful international actors, point in the direction that *de facto*, if not *de jure*, "greatpowerhood" may still be a thing.

### What is a Great Power in a Eurocentric World?

It is safe to argue that from within the dominant Eurocentric framework, "greatpowerhood" 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 (for application of this line of reasoning to Russia, see: Adelman, 2016 and Fortescue, 2017). The second context is *globalised norms*. Great Powers are believed to be "responsible for maintaining international peace and order," which are founded on a shared understanding of normative universals (UNSC, 1980: 9). At least, this is how permanent UNSC members justify their veto right (Ibid). The third context is *recognition*. Great Power status cannot be purely self-ascribed. A state may brag endlessly about being a Great Power, but the key thing here is systemic recognition. And that is what states pursuing Great Power status are allegedly aiming to achieve (for the analysis of Russia's recognition games, see: Ramani, 2017; Rahman-Jones, 2017). It is the same three contexts that are being utilized by and reproduced through academic IR literature (Levy, 2004; Waltz, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2001; Bull, 2002).

Consequently, those three contexts are automatically projected on every instance when Russia talks about being a Great Power. As a result, Russia is frequently denied recognition, criticised for violating global norms, or measured according to some criteria (economic, military, demographic, etc.) and usually deemed unfit. Hence, the strange tension in the Western assessments of Russia's international standing. According to most observers (Neumann,

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2008; Baev, 2008; Thorun, 2009; Mankoff, 2009), Russia has always been and is still trying to pursue Great Power status, but, by most indicators, save for military capabilities, it is rather moving and will continue to move the opposite way. All due to Putin's insistent efforts. The Russian population, on the other hand, consistently believes that Putin's main achievement is precisely the restoration of Russia's Great Power status (Levada, 2018). So, what is going on here? Why do Russian leaders appear to be so delusional and irrational in the Western eye? And why is it the case that what looks as a digression from the standards of greatness is, in fact, perceived as a reaffirmation of greatness in the minds of Russians themselves?

To answer those questions, I suggest taking seriously Einar Wigen's proposition that "to the extent that polities interact across linguistic boundaries, international relations are also inter-lingual relations" (2015: 427). Instead of blindly projecting one's linguistic worldview on other actors, one should try to understand faithfully what the other really means. The problem is that the concepts and categories that Russia is operating with seem semantically equivalent to Western concepts and categories. There are political parties in Russia, which are not really parties, as they are known in the West. There are elections, which are not really the same kind of elections as happen elsewhere. Similarly, the Great Power status that Russia allegedly pursues may appear to be an altogether different beast, if compared to its Western equivalent. To grasp a possible variation in meaning, I propose to look into the workings of a Russian concept *velikaya derzhava*, i.e. 'Great Power', without presuming its direct likeness to its western counterpart.

## Russia Talking Greatness

*Velikaya derzhava* is an unambiguous, yet still curious, translation of 'Great Power'. It is unambiguous because there is no other closely synonymous translation of 'Great Power' into Russian. It is curious because *velikaya derzhava* seems to be a tautology. In modern Russian, *derzhava* is not just any state or power, like it is the case in Ukrainian. This word can only be used in relation to a state that is believed to be truly strong and independent, i.e. a great or a rising Power. Hence, *velikaya derzhava* should, in fact, be tautologically translated as 'Great Great Power'. This probably indicates that, when the concept first appeared, *derzhava* still meant simply 'state' or 'power', and the addition of the characteristic 'great' to it was meant to signal a special privileged status, as well as special responsibilities, of that state in the international system (just like French *une grande puissance* and English 'Great Power'). Since then, however, *derzhava* and *velikaya derzhava* became virtually synonymous. In the process, the former acquired a flavour of pomp and exaltation usually attributed to Great Powers, while the latter loosened somewhat its link to a very specific international institution of Great Power management that had its roots in the 18th and the 19th centuries. Consequently, today, when Russia talks about being a *velikaya derzhava*, this rhetoric exhibits a few interesting features that, according to my analysis of the bulk of Putin's speeches published on the official Kremlin website, as well as a few related sources, appear to be structural and enduring.

First, Putin and others refuse decisively to discuss Russia's Great Power status in relative terms. Despite his conventional habit to flash numbers to demonstrate his confident grip on political and economic processes, all comparisons usually stall when it comes to Russia's great power status. In most cases Putin talks about Russia's greatness in prophetic (i.e. Russia must truly be/become a great power, or it will perish) or historic (i.e. Russia deserved a Great Power status because of its history) terms (Putin, 2000a, 2003a, 2004a). An irritation with the measurement of Russia's greatness and its comparison to other states is also typical for some other Russian high officials (e.g. Lavrov, 2016a).

Second, when talking about its Great Power status, Russia always has an ambivalent take on globalised norms. It does insist on the supremacy of international law and the unconditional value of global peace and security, but also, it always emphasizes that those norms are currently in deep crisis, because of the Western powers' irresponsible and hypocritical actions (Putin, 2003b, 2007a, 2008a, 2014a, 2016a, 2017a). A crisis requires emergency measures that are always associated with suspending the rules. And when Russia breaks the rules, thereby challenging the hegemonic normative consensus instead of helping to consolidate it as a Great Power club member, it is immediately labelled a revisionist power and a weak state (Borger, 2014).

Third, when Russia is called a Great Power in the international context, this is usually done either by foreign

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journalists and politicians (Putin, 2004b, 2004c, 2005a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008b, 2013a) or by domestic actors that have no connection to the ruling elite (Putin, 2006, 2007d). Putin himself *almost never* calls Russia a Great Power when he speaks about foreign policy (save for very few isolated instances when he refers to several rising powers placing Russia in their ranks). While he does use the concept *velikaya derzhava* quite often, he usually attributes it to other Great Powers (mostly the US, but also France, India and China) (Putin, 2000b, 2000c, 2002a, 2002b, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e). In most cases, when he refers to Russia alone by calling it *velikaya derzhava*, he does it during low profile events, where he clearly speaks to the domestic audience (Putin, 2000e, 2003c, 2005b, 2005c, 2007e, 2012, 2013b, 2014c, 2015c, 2017f, etc.). Moreover, he specifically rejected this label several times when foreign journalists called Russia a Great Power (Putin, 2000d, 2007f).

In other words, Russian officials do understand how to use the vernacular and perfectly realize that it makes no sense to call Russia a Great Power in foreign policy context, for it would be meaningless without recognition and would attract scrutiny Russia is unprepared to withstand. The only instances when Russia's Great Power status is insisted upon internationally are related to Russia's dissatisfaction with measuring its material and normative resources and the crisis of globalized norms that only can be resolved through decisive acts and 'creative' (i.e. purely *ad hoc*) great power politics that Russia is prepared to deliver (Lavrov, 2016b). In addition, Russia insists religiously on being a *velikaya derzhava* when facing its domestic audience.

## Conclusion

With this in mind, the tension I described earlier is becoming less puzzling. It seems, when Russia and the West are talking about "greatpowerhood" today, they talk different languages, not only literally, but also conceptually. For Russia, talking about its political greatness can mean two things: it is either (1) a domestic mobilizational ideology masked in foreign policy terms, or (2) an opportunistic international strategy to maintain partial recognition and the benefits it provides. The specific shape of this discourse, that deemphasizes relationality, carries a tinge of dissatisfaction, and has an uneasy relationship with international recognition, is also not random. Russia is fully aware of the fact that, if it were to adopt the language of greatness as it operates in the Eurocentric framework, it would be forced to admit its deficiency on a number of issues. At the same time, it is unprepared to replace this language with something radically new and go into isolation, as it did in 1917, either because Russia's elites and population have been thoroughly and completely Europeanized, as Viacheslav Morozov has argued (2015), or because of utilitarian reasons. What is more, the great power identity, even though its meaning is differently understood within the country, seems to be a consensual point across the whole of Russia's domestic political spectrum, which makes the elites rely on it all the time.

Consequently, Russia talks about "greatpowerhood" in this exact way, again, for two possible reasons. It may, in fact, have internalised the Eurocentric worldview, which would mean that, to catch up with the core, Russia must invest 'great' efforts, i.e. to wriggle free of its material and ideational inferiority by leaping forward in a "greatpowerly" manner. In this case, Russia's Great Power discourse is a kind of domestic modernization program. Alternatively, Russia may realize that it can still get some of the benefits that the Great Power status can provide by flashing some and trying to renegotiate the other components of what counts as political greatness in the contemporary international system, while, at the same time, ensuring consensus at home. In this case, Russia's Great Power discourse is an opportunistic strategy to appear more powerful than Russia really is (by Western standards) and hopefully alter Eurocentric ideas about greatness.

Either way, when Russia talks about being a Great Power, this has little to do with expansionism. Yet, also, it has nothing to do with affirming the status quo, as it was the case for Great Powers of the 18th and 19th centuries. In other words, Russia is not cherishing ideas about world domination, but it is also not satisfied with how things are today. It emphatically refuses to accept a second-class status, but it knows that, to achieve the desired heights, it would need to renegotiate the global normative consensus, which gave Russia its leverage to begin with. This is not an easy task.

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## About the author:

**Anatoly Reshetnikov** is a PhD candidate and a Visiting Professor at the Department of International Relations in Central European University (Budapest, Hungary). His research interests include identity politics, conceptual history, linguistic approaches to social analysis, contemporary Russian politics, the concept of responsibility in international relations, and the new institutionalised techniques of political control and resistance, such as political trolling. His most recent publications include an article about Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine and a forum response to 2016 Forecast by the Russian Institute of World Economy and International Relations.