

Evolution of Great Power Discourse in Russia: Since the Beginning of Russian Statehood until the Time of Troubles

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ABSTRACT: Following an empirical observation that the great power narrative in Russian history often concurred with modernizing leaps and large-scale reforms, and invariably won over other alternatives present in the ideological debates preceding the transformation (be it European liberalism or international socialist revolution), I hypothesize that in the 2000-s Russia's great power rhetoric, traditionally understood as geopolitical aspirations and *realpolitik*, was rather a consolidating ideology than a policy question. A brief analysis of the contemporary political discourse allows me to demonstrate that, indeed, in the 2000-s and also today the great power rhetoric functions similarly to how ideologies usually function, if understood in the Geertzian way. From here follow the key questions: *why was it the great power narrative that always managed to ensure social consolidation and compliance, while other narratives constantly failed? What did it mean for Russia to be a great power historically, and what does it mean today?* To answer these questions, I analyze the evolution of the great power discourse in Russian history from pre-modern times until today. This paper presents the results of the first stage of my investigation, which focused on pre-modern and early modern Russia.

I begin my inquiry by tracing the evolution of both the term 'great power' (*velikaya derzhava*), and the idea of the necessary greatness of the Russian state needed for its preservation and survival. From this analysis, I discover that initially the vision of Russia being a great power emerged as a conservative response to modernity and, instead of being associated with the international recognition of such status, it was closely tied to the idea of universal orthodox empire and to the understanding of the nature of political power as such. Somewhat counterintuitively, I also find out that in the pre-modern and early modern periods the idea of Russia being a great state, or a polity superior to its neighbors, enjoyed the widest discursive presence in the moments of the utmost political and social decline – the beginning of 'Mongol-Tartar yoke' and the Time of Troubles.

KEY WORDS: great power, Russia, identity, ideology, discourse analysis