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## ‘Greatpowerness’ as the key element of Russian self-consciousness under erosion



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## ABSTRACT

The article analyzes changes in attitudes to and interpretations of Russian ‘greatpowerness’ (*velikoderzhavnost’*) between the years of 2000 and 2014, that is to say during President Putin’s period of rule. The concept of Russia as the great power was changing during this time in two respects: first, there was an increasing reticence of self-assessments; second, we observe prioritization of protecting the country’s own, mostly regional, interests as opposed to expansion which would be characteristic of a great power. Moreover, this period clearly demonstrates contradictions and dangers, engendered in the process of losing self-perception as that of the great power. The readiness of Russian political elite to part bit by bit with the status of the great power and to go to the status of a regional power is combined (as the events around Ukraine have shown) with unwillingness to sustain the new status of the country with the help of the capabilities of a soft power. Lack of these, as well as of the skills in their use, and finally, a desire to raise the rating of trust in the government with the help of “a small victorious war” have formed the basis for the aggressive upsurge towards Ukraine. In the absence of serious hard and soft capabilities, the splashes of aggressiveness in Russian foreign policy and of anti-Western sentiments in domestic political life are unlikely to have any lasting effect. They are able, however, to generate extremely negative long-term consequences for the country.

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The expression ‘greatpowerness’ (*velikoderzhavnost’*) denotes one of the most important components of Russian self-consciousness: a belief that Russia is or has to be a great power. This belief profoundly affects the feeling of national identity, the political attitudes of Russian citizens, and the content of the Russian government’s political decisions. The serious changes of its content and emotional intensity, occurring from time to time, are usually connected with significant changes in the overall political situation of the country. For instance, the idea lost its attractiveness to Russian mass consciousness roughly in the mid-1910s (Russian defeat in war with Japan and upheavals of the first Russian revolution of 1905) and up to the mid-1920s (the consequences of WWI, second and third Russian revolutions of 1917 and the civil war). This was accompanied by massive territorial losses. A mighty tidal wave of greatpowerness followed, which ended in the mid-1950s and was marked by an equally powerful strive for territorial and political expansion.

This article, concentrating on the period between 2000 and 2014, presents an analysis of official views and utterly aggregated public opinions, that is, positions reflecting society as a whole, without taking into account the fact that views of different social groups may vary. The main sources providing official views were: Foreign Policy Concepts (FPC) and National Security Concepts (NSC), published in 1997–2013; The Concept of the Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation (RF) until 2020, published in 2008 ([CLTSED 2020](#)); The National Security Strategy of the RF until 2020,

published in 2009 (NSS 2020), The Military Doctrine of the RF 2010 (MD, 2010), and V. Putin's and D. Medvedev's speeches and articles. The views of the public were taken from the databases of Levada-Center, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM), the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM), and the World Values Survey project (WVS).

The paper consists of three parts: the first part is devoted to theoretical aspects of the concept of a great power, namely to its four main structural components (status, power capabilities, set of images and set of roles)<sup>1</sup>; the second deals with the dynamics of Russia's self-perception at the official level, and the third part – with the dynamics of Russia's self-perception in the public opinion of the country.

## 1. Structural components of the concept of a “great power”

In its most general form, the concept of a great power adopted by Russian/Soviet and post-Soviet political culture is largely consistent with the interpretation of the term proposed by Max Weber in the 1920s, which has since been broadly accepted. For Weber “the great powers, usually ascribe to themselves and usurp an interest in political and economic processes over ... the whole surface of the planet” and “are held to have a responsibility of their own for the way in which power and prestige are distributed between their own and foreign polities” (Weber, 1946, pp. 161, 172).<sup>2</sup>

This definition is well suited for theoretical reasoning, but for an empirical analysis it is too general and thus has to be operationalized. For the purpose of this study, we argue that the concept of a great power consists of a set of four interconnected structural components: *the status of a country, its power capabilities, its set of images and its set of roles*.

Let us now specify the semantic contours of these four components, which will be used to analyze the dynamics of Russia's self-perception in the international system.

### 1.1. Status

“Status” denotes the position of a country on an international “honor/prestige” scale. The concern is not with prestige in general, but with a specific sort of “honor/prestige” which Weber once called “power-oriented prestige” (Weber, 1946, p. 160) and which nowadays – taking into consideration the growing importance and popularity of the concept of a soft power – would rather be called “power- and influence-oriented prestige”. The status of a great power refers to a country's position at the top of the scale.

The dependency of a country on its resources, its sets of images and roles, is discussed in almost all works dedicated to the problem of status in international relations. The influence of status on the other three components of the concept of a great power gets much less attention. Meanwhile, such influence – especially in the case of great powers – exists and adds self-contained political significance to the status in both the eyes of the elite and public at large (Linton, 1936; Sabrin, 1968, p. 546; Turner, 1968, p. 555; Weber, 1946, p. 180).

In addition, the great power status provides its citizens with positive individual and collective self-esteem and, therefore, is an important factor in shaping and affecting national identity (Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990; Mercer, 1995, p. 242; Westle, 2011, p. 1132) and unity. This last circumstance makes it extremely attractive for authorities as a tool of domestic policy.

### 1.2. Power resources/capabilities

Diversity in a country's power resources leads to different taxonomies. For this study, the most interesting grouping seems to be Nye's distinction between hard and soft power resources. This grouping allows us to better discern the “facial features” of the country and to clarify in which of the two foreign policy genres its potential is higher: suppression or attraction (Nye, 2008, p. 29, 2011, p. 19). The set of a country's hard power resources most often includes the elements outlined by Waltz (1979, p. 131): the size of its population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.

The soft power resources of a country are more intangible and may therefore be more numerous. Research studies and existing soft power indexes give an idea of the main groups of these resources: the quality of a country's political institutions (government fairness and accountability; public trust in government; low level of social inequality, and others); the quality of its economy (competitiveness, attractiveness of its goods and services, capability for innovation, low level of corruption and of shadow economy; good investment climate and so on); human development (health, education, reputation for competence); national character (for example, openness, friendliness); national morale; the extent of a country's cultural appeal (national heritage and contemporary culture; influence of the national language throughout the world); quality, reputation and attractiveness of a country's system of education; attractiveness of a country to live and to work in (structure of migration, low level of brain drain); a country's commitment to global issues (democracy, justice, poverty, environment, and others); the strength of a country's diplomatic network; the effectiveness of a country's leaders on the global stage, and other resources.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Their differences will be discussed later.

<sup>2</sup> Similar interpretations of the term ‘great power’ can be found in most English-language and Russian dictionaries and encyclopedias.

<sup>3</sup> Composed according to the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index ([http://www.gfkamerica.com/practice\\_areas/roper\\_pam/nbi\\_index/](http://www.gfkamerica.com/practice_areas/roper_pam/nbi_index/)), McClory (2011), Morgenthau (1948, pp. 113–180), Nye (2008, 2011).

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