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# Russia as a great power: Status inconsistency and the two Chechen wars

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ABSTRACT

The article examines Russia as a great power from the point of view of status inconsistency theory. Applications of the theory to Russia have focused on the status accorded to Russia in diplomatic representation and membership of key international organizations, which suggests that Russia is a 'status overachiever' in that it has an international status that is greater than its actual capabilities would warrant. However, this article focuses on Russian perceptions of the country's status internationally, especially as reflected in the actual experience of membership in international organizations (OSCE, Council of Europe) and relations with the EU in the context of the two Chechen wars. The article demonstrates that, at least according to Russian assessments, Russia is accorded lower status in these organizations than the great power status which most Russians believe should be theirs. While concluding that status inconsistency is a useful tool for explaining Russian foreign policy behavior, the article notes that differing assessments of what Russia's level of status recognition is pose challenges for status inconsistency theory.



## 1. Introduction

Russia's status as a great power in world politics arguably has not been stable (Haukkala, 2008; Neumann, 2008a,b). Different wars and domestic political situations have changed Russia's status as a recognized great power by others in the outside world. But independent of the actual views of others, as Thomas Ambrosio has put it, 'Russia seeks to be respected as a great power because of deep seated beliefs about its own identity and its place in the world' (Ambrosio, 2005a, p. viii). It will be argued that such greatpowerness (velikoderzhavnost) plays an important part in Russian foreign policy. At different historical times it has had different effects, sometimes pulling Russia closer to Europe and the Western world and sometimes pushing Russia away from them. Greatpowerness has also had effects on Russian domestic political decision-making. In this article the effect of greatpowerness on Russian relations with the Western world will be examined through the two Chechen wars and in the framework of status inconsistency theory.

The fall of the Soviet Union is an unprecedented case of the loss of status ranking. Huge Empires have come and gone in the past, but in other cases the decline of Empires has been a long, drawn out process. While internal divisions and loss of authority by the ruler have played a part in the end of the Mongol, Roman, and Ottoman empires, their eventual demise was also brought about by military defeats, leaving little or no vestige of the former imperial power behind. In modern times, perhaps only the disintegration of the great overseas Empires of Spain and Great Britain can be compared with the end of the Soviet Union in that gradual internal decline was accompanied by rebellion in the peripheries of Empire. In the case of Britain, a state which still had some claims to great power status was left after the end of Empire, but even this differed from the case of Russia in that the Empire was not lost all at once, the heartland was left intact and thriving, and the formal

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hegemony of the imperial power over its former colonies was recognized in the role of the monarch and the Commonwealth. By the time its empire was dismantled, Great Britain was one of the major powers in a multipolar world, whereas the Soviet Union stood as the sole rival to US global hegemony in the bipolar Cold War world. The sudden loss of this status by one superpower, while the other increased its status, was a humiliating experience for Russia. Russian foreign policy has been studied from many angles, and the factor of humiliation connected to the fall of the Soviet Union has been referred to many times and cited in much research. However, the effect of the *loss of status* which led to the feeling of humiliation has been less studied.

This article will start by looking at how status and status inconsistency has been dealt with in academic literature. It will then proceed to look at how, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation clearly regarded Russia as the rightful heir to the USSR. The Chechen wars are then looked at in the light of this situation. The wars in Chechnya in part represented an attempt by Russia to achieve status consistency. The two Chechen wars each, however, had different outcomes in terms of status, and not always the ones that were intended. The starting point of this argument is that the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the loss of Russian status from the point of view of the West, but in the eyes of Russia in the *longue duree* of Russian history, Russian status has remained consistent. The actions taken in regard to Chechnya are viewed as a case of maintaining status consistency by proving through actions the ability of Russia to act as a great power.

Status is one important part of being a great power. Status is the factor that is acquired through recognition by others. Various scholars have attempted to provide objective definitions of a 'Great Power', but even if a country meets these objective criteria and feels itself to be a great power, this is no guarantee that this status is recognized by other countries or that the country enjoys great power status in world politics. Vogly, Corbetta, Grant and Baird have suggested that status attribution matters in three different ways: a country that is a great power is expected to be visible and important in major issues and conflicts in international politics; a great power is more involved in international politics than others; and claims to great power status are valued domestically to the extent that such claims can become critical to holding office (Volgy et al., 2011, p.10).

Volgy et al. (2011, pp.10–12) have also made a difference between status-consistent and status-inconsistent powers. They then divide the status inconsistent powers into two: underachievers and overachievers. Their definition (*op. cit.* p.11) of status-consistent powers views the great powers as having additional capacity to engage in a wide variety of pursuits ranging from cooperative to coercive ones. The status-consistent power may undertake costly measures with the expectation that they will be successful and run a lower risk of failure externally and negative consequences domestically. The status-inconsistent power's approach to international politics is different from the approach of a status-consistent power. This is an important distinction and plays a role when examining Russia's status in world politics.

The status-inconsistent underachievers are great powers that have capabilities and desire to act as major powers, but still do not have full recognition by others. The underachievers are likely to seek a more visible role for themselves in world politics but run a risk that their efforts are undermined by lack of legitimacy and respect. The overachievers are states that do enjoy great power recognition but lack the critical material means associated with major powers. The expectation is that the approach of overachievers is more constructive in international affairs. They are afraid of losing the status they have and therefore act more on the basis of smaller but safer gains than taking high-risk action (Volgy et al., 2011; pp. 11–12). In examining Russia, this article introduces a new category – a country that believes itself to be a great power, but does not have all of the capabilities of a great power according to certain definitions, and which only enjoys limited recognition as a great power internationally.

Small and victorious wars have always been a way of maintaining or establishing a certain status. Count Plehve's famous remark that Russia needed a 'short, victorious war' in 1904 is the best known case of status motives playing a major role in triggering warfare, but such motives are not unique to Russia. Bismarck's short and victorious war with Denmark over Schleswig and Holstein in 1864 was important in establishing Prussia as a major power in European affairs, while Napoleon III's involvement in the Crimean War in 1853–1855 has been explained by his being 'eager for a military victory to solidify support for his regime' (Merriman, 2004, p. 753). Likewise, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in May 1982 'seeking to reverse a decline in its popularity at home', but with the perverse outcome that a British victory 'encouraged a burst of patriotism, boosting the Prime Minister's [Margaret Thatcher] standing at home' (Merriman, 2004, p. 1295). In the case of the Falkland Islands one can also argue that if Argentina had been victorious, that would have boosted its international status too. With its victory Great Britain revived its flagging international great power status.

In these examples, it was the domestic popularity of the government that gained the greatest boost from successful wars. But France, Great Britain, and especially Prussia were also able to act with more confidence and influence in international affairs, at least for a while after these wars. In the case of Chechnya, however, the effect of this strategy was not the recognition of Russia as an undisputed great power by the Western world, but in fact almost the opposite. In domestic discourse, however, the first Chechen war reinforced feelings of Russian greatpowerness, the self-perception that Russia was, is, and will be a great power. Even if the Russian military was not that successful in the warfare, Russia's failings combined with Western criticism reinforced the domestic arguments about the need to show others that Russia was a great power. This was also given as a reason for the second war in its early stages. Through the reinforced feeling of greatpowerness, Russia started to play a more assertive role in world politics. It was important that one way or another Russia as a great power would be part of and play a role in different international crises. Russia tried to execute this in the Kosovo case but failed (see Regina Heller in this Special Issue). The second and more successful case, clearly indicating a reversal of the trend of trying to secure alignment with the US, first and foremost was the war in Iraq, as Ambrosio has shown (Ambrosio, 2005b, p.1202).