

The Sources of Russia's Great-Power Status

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Abstract

This article examines the conditions that led to Russia's emergence as a great power in the pre-imperial period of the 9th-17th centuries. Particular attention is paid to the effect, on the internal structure and foreign policy of the Grand Principality of Moscow, of its two centuries of dependence on the empire of Genghis Khan and his heirs. Having gained full independence at the end of the 15th century, Muscovy began its rapid expansion to the east. After Byzantium's collapse and Moscow's refusal to form a union with the Catholic Church, Moscow gradually became Orthodoxy's exclusive stronghold in Christendom. This strengthened Moscow's Eurocentric orientation, but also facilitated rivalry with the states of Western Christianity. Even before Peter the Great proclaimed Russia an empire, Muscovy had developed certain features of a great power, including the ability to control vast areas with an ethnically and confessionally heterogeneous population; a consciousness of its difference from Others and thus of a special mission; political independence and regional hegemony; and the ability to simultaneously confront multiple powerful opponents.

Keywords: great power, Russia, civilization-state, identity, Eurasia, Mongol Empire, territorial expansion, ethnic heterogeneity, Russian Orthodoxy.

Russia's crucial role in any 21st-century international order demands an account not only of objective trends and factors, but of how Russia's society and political elite see themselves, the world, and their country's past and future. The conceptual triad of sovereignty, great power, and empire is generally seen as exceptionally important here. It is so deeply linked to historical experience and identity that it is essentially a constant.

Culturally-rooted constants not only influence society's self-perception, but also set political constraints (since their rejection provokes ontological insecurity and a crisis of values) and help to overcome social trauma through the correction of domestic and foreign policies (as demonstrated by Russia in its three decades since the USSR's collapse).

The stereotypical perception of Russians as constantly craving great-power status did not arise out of thin air. It deserves consideration in its historical, cultural, and civilizational context. Yet Russia's inclination to great power should be viewed not only as a problem, but also as a resource for survival and future development. Also, a 'great power' *en général* seems to be quite different from a 'great power' *à la russe*, and so this article begins with a brief overview of general approaches to the concept.

REVISITING DEFINITIONS

Highly competitive interstate interactions force states with sufficient potential to act as great powers. Per Leopold von Ranke (1915), the first to define the term 'great power,' says that only a state capable of competing for land, power, and domination, in (usually armed) confrontation with several comparable powers, can claim such a status. Frederick II's Prussia demonstrated these qualities during the Seven Years' War and was admired by Ranke as a model for an ordinary

state's transformation into a great power. This formal criterion of great-power status, complemented today with other indicators such as power and authority, is undoubtedly important. But it seems that two other aspects of Ranke's concept of great power are more significant. **First**, external challenges have a decisive effect on a state's choice of behavior and *consciousness of mission*. **Second**, great-power competition awakens *a national spirit that consolidates society for further struggle*.

Ranke's concept cannot be unconditionally applied to contemporary states and conflicts. But his contribution provides further impetus for the reconsideration of simplistic, economically-deterministic approaches that would deny great-power status to Russia (or any other state) if it fails to meet certain World Bank, IMF, or OECD indicators. (Their validity is a separate matter. Just last year, changes in the World Bank's calculation of GDP at purchasing power parity propelled Russia to fourth place in that measure (RIA, 2024). Continuing partial deglobalization will surely bring more such surprises.)

According to Iver Neumann (2008), discussion of great powers is largely reducible to the approaches of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Weber defines a great power as a state that consistently combines power and prestige. Although great-power status is relational, i.e., gained through recognition by other nations and communities, it can be achieved only by mobilizing internal material and immaterial resources. This requires political will and the ability to acknowledge one's own mission and cultural achievements. (Here Weber is following Ranke.)

Durkheim emphasizes the role of *national pride* stemming from a state's provision of fair development and social wellbeing. This vision is Francocentric and focused on the solidaristic intentions of the Third Republic. The emphasis and rigorous definition of moral superiority permit the disqualification of powers with clearly oppressive forms of government, and even Western countries that are insufficiently 'social'.

Neumann does not consider either approach fully satisfactory and suggests using an additional criterion called *gouvernementalité* (governmentality)—a neologism coined by Michel Foucault. Governmentality is not focused on ensuring sovereign domination;

instead, it prioritizes the community and the guarantee of a certain quality of life, but also specific forms of control over this community. Michel Foucault (1980) wrote about governmentality in three works of different genres, but still this is not enough to avoid multiple interpretations. Neumann actually sees governmentality, or effective means of indirect community governance, as one version of *good governance*, empowered by its democratic legitimacy. Neumann accordingly concludes that Russia is defective as a great power.

Thus, today, the search for an acceptable list of objective great-power criteria is as interesting as it is unresolvable. A sensible approach might combine objective resources; identity and other elements of the political imaginary; ability to exert a significant and long-term influence on the international system (or critical subsystems thereof); capacity to respond to nonstandard situations; and ability to exploit non-political factors' growing influence in international politics. Ultimately, it seems true that being a great power means acting like a great power (Domke, 1989), and thus that state leaders and major elite groups must have a will to this status based on perception of themselves and the macropolitical community. But there must also be resources sufficient to sustain the state if it is confronted by one or multiple other great powers.

PRE-PETRINE RUSSIA: GREAT-POWER STATUS AND CIVILIZATION-BUILDING

The latest version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (MFA, 2023) has completed an evolution that began in the 2000s (Zevelev, 2009) by introducing the notion of a civilization-state and reviving internal discussion about the possibilities and limitations of the civilizational approach.

However, the notion's use in such an important document, without a clear definition, has highlighted the depth of the current rift between Russia and the collective West. It has also triggered claims (especially in the West) that the Russian leadership's appeal to civilizational rhetoric is an opportunistic bid to legitimize the leadership's political course (Coker, 2019). Yet it may also be an attempt to spark a conceptual

discussion about the macropolitical community's identity. More importantly, by proclaiming itself a civilization-state, Russia essentially has acknowledged that it cannot become a classic nation-state. In any case, the definition of Russia as a civilization-state opens a new window of opportunity for social scientists, especially IR specialists interested in cultural tradition's effect on Russia's state-building and foreign policy.

Russia's great-power nature and civilizational uniqueness largely overlap in their genesis, but differ from a 'classical' civilization featuring homogeneity, unity, a completed cultural synthesis, and the ability to absorb even very strong external influences.

The clearest example of such a classical civilization is spatially static China: thousands of years before the notion of a nation appeared in Europe, China had become conscious of its own uniqueness, its central position in the world, and its cultural unity despite ethnic diversity—a unity that endured even during the Spring and Autumn period, the Warring States period, and other periods of temporary state disintegration. China absorbed religious and ethical systems (Buddhism) and ideologies (Marxism) of external origin, adapting them to its sociocultural context.

Russia is a completely different case: for centuries, it has been marked by: ethnic heterogeneity; frequently imbalanced and incomplete models of cultural synthesis and coexistence; spatial dynamism and flexible borders; intermittent or one-time external influences of various cultures and civilizations; oscillating claims of equality or superiority to the *Other*; and a sense of backwardness and the need to catch up and win recognition.

Such starting conditions would typically be enough to thwart the establishment of a civilization or empire.¹ But if a collapse does not occur—or if it befalls only a specific permutation of the state, not the

¹ Paul Kennedy (1987) believes that many of the above factors—plus remoteness from major trade routes, a severe climate, and cultural, technological, and economic lagging behind the West—should have made Muscovy/Russia's time as a major imperial power short-lived. In his view, Russia's territorial expansion in the 16th-17th centuries was sustained mainly by military-technological borrowings from the West, thanks to which Muscovy joined the club of "gunpowder powers." This advantage was effective only in relation to those states, peoples or tribal groups that did not enjoy it. The main pillar of the Russian state's stability—and the reason for its constant lagging behind the West—was strong autocracy.

heterogeneous civilizational community at large—then something will eventually emerge in this spatio-temporal locus that will eventually assert itself as a classical civilization. The success of such a historical experiment in Russia was largely secured by its behavioral instincts as a great power, and their conceptualization in spiritual and secular literary canons.

It would be wrong to look for these instincts' full expression in the Old Russian state with Kiev as its center. Yet some can be found in the most important chronicles, which reflect an understanding of the imperative to protect and internally organize Russia's vast, resource-rich, mainly open space. Russian land was considered the common property of the princely family, an interpretation that continued even after Russia's disintegration (rather analogously to China's consciousness of its supra-state unity even during internal strife). Contemporary literati believed that the Rurikids' duty was to protect the Russian land and Orthodoxy that sustained self-awareness and identity. Orthodoxy, as well as spiritual culture and literary canons based on it, served as an all-Russian identity marker and as a platform for social integration and communities' self-preservation during the disunion of Russian principalities.

However, Orthodoxy in Old Rus was a powerful source not only of original cultural growth, but also (especially at first) of an important and enduring connection with Byzantium; its prevailing ideas, values, and institutional practices (particularly in foreign relations). Through Byzantium, Russia absorbed the heritage of the Roman Empire, European antiquity, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet Christianity in Old Rus existed under special conditions, as its spread initially depended on the secular authorities' support. The Great Schism of 1054, the culmination of the long divergence between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, heightened Russia's awareness of its spiritual and cultural differences with the Catholic world, but did not break their contact. Tolerance towards Western Christians and non-Christians remained a basic principle. Internal interaction with *Others* proceeded through cultural synthesis and integration (beginning with the adoption of Orthodoxy) and through cultural symbiosis (with

cultural and confessional differences preserved). This approach is fundamentally important, as it will subsequently be developed in imperial practices of asymmetric and multi-track integration. It will reemerge, albeit transformed and secularized, in modern Russia, permitting state unity's preservation at lower cost.

After baptism in 988, Rus became part of the Christian spiritual and political ecumene. Soon the grand princes of Kiev began to claim a key role in Eastern European geopolitics, given their position astride trade routes and their active use of the military, and also to pursue recognition of their equality to the leading states of both Eastern and Western Europe, through dynastic politics. The figure of Vladimir II Monomakh is a symbol and culmination of this policy: matrilineal kinship with the Byzantine imperial Monomakh dynasty, first marriage to the daughter of the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, second marriage to a Greek, and third marriage to the daughter of the Polovtsian khan. The establishment of family ties with the Polovtsian rulers was another recognition of the realities of uneasy coexistence with the Great Steppe, and a prototype of the multivector geopolitics that would later be associated with Russia's Eurasian essence.

The interaction of the Great Steppe with Old Rus—or at least the part of Rus that maintained dynastic and state continuity, avoiding Polish-Lithuanian conquest—transformed both, leading to Russia's civilizational uniqueness.

This article discusses civilizational issues very briefly, just as an extended commentary on the early history of Russia's great-power status. But it should be emphasized that while the nature, climate, and geography of Northern Eurasia set the conditions for civilizational synthesis, its historical details were determined for at least 1,500 years by the movement of nomads from East to West and by the specific means of conquest and control practiced by the Huns, Turks, and Mongols. Emphasizing the differences between the Russian and nomadic empires, James Billington notes: “unlike all the others who dominated the steppe, the Russians succeeded not just in conquering but in civilizing the entire region, from the Pripet Marshes and the Carpathian Mountains in the west to the Gobi Desert and the

Himalayas in the east” (Billington, 1970, p. 4). At the same time—and this is rightly emphasized by Eurasianist thinkers from Nikolai Trubetzkoy to Lev Gumilev—the scale and completeness of the synthesis were made possible by the Russians’ use and adaptation of the nomadic powers’ experiences.

Even before the Battle of the Kalka River (1223), Russia’s interaction with nomadic peoples was quite diverse, ranging from armed clashes to integration and even complete assimilation. But it was the Mongol invasion (which swept through the Russian principalities, but allowed North-Eastern Rus to retain its state institutions and Orthodoxy for two centuries of humiliating and burdensome dependence), and then Russia’s expansion back eastward all the way to the Pacific, that caused a critical mutation. Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy’s (1925) well-known line about “the relocation of the Khan’s headquarters to Moscow” is, of course, an exaggeration. Nevertheless, Russia would not have become a great power, empire, or superpower (in the 20th century) without the Mongol Yoke.

Subjugation to the Golden Horde was a prerequisite for some of the institutional practices, customs, survival strategies, and political behavior that eventually ensured Moscow’s rise. But Russian concepts about *Self*, *the world*, and *Self in the world* were still formulated and reevaluated within the fold of Orthodox culture, alongside the continued (though less intense) borrowing of certain ideas from Byzantium and—after the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445)—from Western Europe. In fact, there were many things to reevaluate. Even the mere inclusion of North-Eastern Rus into the Mongol Empire’s financial, postal, and transportation systems opened unthinkable geopolitical prospects for the principalities, and the princes’ regular trips to the Khan’s headquarters made them the first to grasp the scale of these prospects and their lands’ very modest place even within the Golden Horde. This expansion of the northeastern Russian elites’ horizons can be compared to the effect of the Crusades on Western European states. But adapting to the constantly changing political situation in Karakorum and then Sarai, and studying the political, military, and diplomatic tactics used to rule the continent, was a school

(Gumilev, 2015) for the rulers of small Russian principalities, and the princes of Moscow happened to be the most diligent pupils.

Taken as a whole, the policy of the Moscow princes from Daniil Alexandrovich (1271-1303) to Ivan III (1462-1505) looks like a fairly consistent strategy of maneuvering, resource accumulation, and territorial expansion, which ultimately led to independence from the Horde. Yet liberation from the Yoke was not considered a practical goal for much longer than one century; the Moscow princes' planning horizons were initially limited to outplaying Tver, other northeastern Russian rivals, Lithuania, and the Khans themselves (who sought to prevent any vassal's excessive strengthening) (Gorsky, 2000). Thus, while still a vassal, Moscow established stable *regional hegemony*, acquiring another skill needed for building a great power.

Russian Orthodoxy played a significant role in the rise of Moscow and the intensification of civilizational synthesis. Until the Patriarchate's abolition by Peter the Great in accordance with his *symphonia* (συμφωνία), Russian Orthodoxy had a relatively high degree of autonomy. The Russian metropolitan see (under the Patriarch of Constantinople) was a powerful source of Russian unity when political reunification seemed remote. Its seat (transferred from Kiev to Vladimir in 1299, and then to Moscow in 1325) was a critically important sign of spiritual and political primacy, symbolically even more important than a *yarlyk* from the Khan authorizing a ruler (Kartashev, 1959). Orthodox hierarchs and ascetics, who enjoyed considerable privileges in the Golden Horde, began to discuss the possibility and need of ending non-Orthodox domination much earlier than secular northeastern Russian rulers did. But this was not conceptualized in terms of ethnicity; to the contrary, Russian Orthodoxy willingly accepted Tatars, including their nobility.

Aside from sermons, the Orthodox Church materially supported Moscow as liberator from the Yoke and center of a new state. In the middle of the 14th century, monastic colonization saw the foundation of more than 150 monasteries on and beyond the fringes of the Principality of Moscow. Some of these played a defensive role (e.g., the Holy Trinity Monastery founded by Sergius of Radonezh), but

were even more important as cultural and economic centers in lands that often had no cities. In the north, Ural foothills, and the middle Volga, monasteries played a crucial role in converting the multiethnic autochthonous population. The missionary efforts of Stefan of Perm (1340-1396) created the conditions for Muscovy's subsequent incorporation of the vast Kama River basin and the northern Urals. Monasteries in the Novgorod Republic and other Russian principalities formed around themselves areas of spiritual and political loyalty to Moscow (Smolich, 1997; Tynyanova, 2010).

While agreeing with Timofei Bordachev (2023, p. 84) that “relations with the Horde were most important for the foreign policy culture of Russia in a critical historical period of its formation,” I would rather disagree that the Yoke's role in Russia's internal transformations has actually been underestimated. It is difficult to separate foreign policy from internal factors during Moscow's rise. But it is clear that aspects of government-society relations—including the *tyaglo* system of taxation, property's conditional nature and political power's decisive role in its (re)distribution, and the priority given to the military (including for the purpose of liberation from the Yoke)—had effects that cannot be ranked below those of foreign policy culture.

These did not become obvious right away. Moscow initially achieved regional hegemony in North-Eastern Rus at a time when territorial control was loose, messy, and decentralized (Krom, 2018). The state's integrity was eventually underpinned by Moscow's consolidation and domination of the systems of power and ownership, which certainly differentiates Russia's great-power nature from the Western European standards of *Großmacht*.

Muscovy's defeat and incorporation of the Golden Horde's successor-states (except the Crimean Khanate) were inherently important, and also led to increased ethnic and religious diversity, triggering the reactivation of various mechanisms for molding the political-cultural reality that could be equally termed a great power or a civilization. These mechanisms include synthesis, symbiosis, and assimilation. But while the conquest of the Volga khanates was necessary mainly for security, continued movement “to meet the sun”

was an attempt to fill the power vacuum at a historically rapid pace (Lieven, 2002), driven economically by the pursuit of “soft things” such as valuable furs (Martin, 1986). The wandering frontier effect was most manifest at that time.

Renowned geographer Vladimir Kagansky (2013) describes this phenomenon as follows:

For many centuries, the dominant features in Russia’s cultural development were territorial gains and the constant expansion of external frontiers. In certain periods, each new generation lived in a territorially different country: a new capital, a new imperial residence, or a new border after a large area’s incorporation (more often) or loss (less often). Almost all territories were borderlands in one sense or another: a conquered foreign land, a regained homeland, developed “vacant” land, retained internal defensive lines, or a newly-erected or guarded state border. Borders swept across the entire expanse of Russia. Such fluidity in Russia’s status and physical space shaped its culture and created special zones with a special way of life.

Some time ago, when asked where Russia ends, Russian President Vladimir Putin said “nowhere,” though immediately adding that this was a joke. But this remark essentially reflects Muscovy/Russia’s desire to sail into the wild blue yonder, since the grand princes, tsars, and emperors for centuries did not know exactly where their state ended (at least in the North and the East). By the time that Moscow took over most of Genghis Khan’s empire, it had already developed important imperial features: a fundamental openness, intentional boundlessness, the desire to match the universal (Kaspe, 2007).

From 1452, when Tatar Prince Kasim began serving Grand Prince Vasily II of Moscow and was granted a town-kingdom in the Meshchersky area (Rakhimzyanov, 2009), up to explorers’ arrival at the Pacific Ocean, deep transformations took place in Muscovy’s territorial and ethnodemographic composition (which was partly counterbalanced by the growth of the ethnic Russian population in the annexed lands in the West and North-West). This may as well be viewed as the creation of a civilization. It would have been fair to call the new state a Russian-Horde or Russian-Tatar state, but

this is not what its rulers sought. Moscow's secular rulers' internal and international legitimacy was justified primarily by a vision of the Orthodox ecumene and Moscow's spatiotemporal position in it. Liberation from the infidels' yoke seemed to be only the first step. The next involved the more difficult choice of recognizing or not recognizing the union adopted at the Council of Florence.

Given Moscow's immediate international tasks, rejection of the union was not necessarily the obvious choice, but internal politics and the Byzantine Empire's collapse mandated it. Russian Orthodoxy's autocephaly was *de facto* proclaimed in 1448 through rejection of the union. In the century after the 1453 fall of Constantinople, Russian thought was dominated not by the idea of inheriting the power of the Horde khans (which actually happened) but by the idea of taking on the Second Rome's status as Orthodoxy's one and only spiritual stronghold, backed by state power. This was a daring redefinition of state mission, which no longer involved liberation from foreign domination, and which was not limited to the gathering of Russian lands (now viewed as the Moscow-based Rurikids' *ancestral lands*), but which sought an exceptional position in Christendom. Theological arguments, and dynastic ties to the Rurikids, Monomakhs, and Palaeologi (the last Byzantine dynasty) would not be sufficient justification for this. *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir*—a text greatly exceeding Elder Philotheos's missives in its importance for Moscow's international activity—genealogically traces the princes of Moscow to Prusus, the mythical brother of Octavian Augustus (Dmitrieva, 1955).

The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir gave Ivan IV decisive arguments for adopting the imperial title (tsar). It significantly strengthened Moscow's Eurocentric orientation, placing it in rivalry with, but also a position to demand recognition from, any Western Christian state. This can be considered the first step towards conception of the imperial idea. (Paradoxically, the term 'Holy Russian Empire' was first used abroad by Andrey Kurbsky in a work denouncing Ivan the Terrible (Dmitriev, 2008).) However, the future empire's expansion was mainly directed eastward, which would play a greater role than

Orthodoxy in distinguishing Muscovy's civilizational community from the states of Europe.

Moscow's claims to equality with the leading European powers had to be reinforced by mobilizing enough resources to induce the recognition (or feigned recognition) of this status. The painful defeat in the Livonian War—Russia's largest armed clash with the West until the beginning of the 17th century²—increased consciousness of the *Us-Them* ontological distinction and of the natural inevitability of Russia's differences from Europe and competition with it. They also demonstrated Russia's ability to simultaneously confront multiple powerful adversaries.

The Time of Troubles essentially led to the collapse of the previous statehood, but the civilizational community survived this upheaval and it generated inner forces capable of ending the chaos. Yet Muscovy's great-power aspirations were damaged so badly that they seemed to be ruined completely. 17th-century Russian political thought responded in a traditionalist yet innovative manner to the Time of Troubles and subsequent turbulent events (primarily the Schism of the Russian Church, wars with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the incorporation of Little Russia, pre-Petrine attempts at partial Westernization, and the reaching of eastward expansion's geographical and geopolitical limits).

Russia's former adversaries in the Livonian War, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden, exploited Muscovite instability to launch an intervention that threatened the state's independence and the civilizational community's foundations and customs. This dramatically increased hostility towards Western influence and triggered, for the first time, an explicit 'besieged fortress' syndrome. Moreover, the Western threat was seen as jeopardizing true faith and ethnic identity (Tomsinov, 2003). Yet literary and political texts such as *A New Tale of the Glorious Russian Kingdom and the*

² Per the historiographical tradition, originating with Nikolai Karamzin, according to which all military clashes in the Baltic region and northwestern part of Muscovy, from 1558 to 1583, are considered to be different stages of a single military-political conflict. Significant arguments for instead deconstructing the Livonian War have been proposed by Alexander Filyushkin (2018).

Great State of Moscow, Ivan Timofeev's *Annals*, or Ivan Khvorostinin's *Tales of the Days and Tsars and Bishops of Moscow*, written in the first third of the 17th century, and *The Tale of Avraamy Palitsyn* reveal a clear understanding of internal factors as the main cause of catastrophic upheavals, which like the Mongol invasion were interpreted as "divine retribution" for the (in)action of many, especially within the political elite. Here the center/periphery antagonism was first articulated.

Mikhail Romanov's election as tsar by the Zemsky Sobor (Assembly) in 1613 was a crucial step in the country's reconciliation and also an act of political restoration. The Assembly, which could have founded a new state close to Andrey Kurbsky's ideals, instead restored the divine authority of tsars that had been bequeathed by Ivan the Terrible. There is no evidence of any attempts to force the new tsar to accept restrictions on his power, as there had been in 1606, when Tsar Vasily Shuisky sealed an oath to that effect by kissing the Cross, or in 1730, when Empress Anna Iovannovna signed (and then almost immediately violated) the *Conditions* for accession to the throne. Not only Mikhail, but all his descendents were elected, as his dynasty was seen as the closest to the broken Rurikid line. The Assembly thus revived a foreign policy of Russian equality to the Holy Roman Empire and superiority over any state without a divinely-anointed ruler (namely the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth).

After the Truce of Deulino (1618), the new Romanov dynasty focused mainly inward, but the pan-European Thirty Years' War allowed it to take advantage of its adversaries' distraction. Russia was a peripheral actor in the Thirty Years' War, but the experience of maneuvering between the European great powers, while restoring its own resources, was highly valuable. International circumstances, attempts to overcome the geopolitical consequences of the Time of Troubles, and renewed claims to leadership in the Orthodox world made the Muscovite state, or at least its elites, more open to external influences. Contacts were particularly intensive with representatives of the Orthodox world, most of whom were under the Ottoman or Polish-Lithuanian rule.

The consolidation of Russia's key role in Orthodoxy was a secondary motive for the reforms of Patriarch Nikon that led to

schism. It was particularly important to unify liturgical practices with those of the lands that were falling out of Warsaw's control after the Khmelnytsky Uprising. The passage of these lands to Moscow was also important for the development of historical and political narratives, especially the reinterpretation (in the Kiev Pechersk Lavra's *Synopsis* of the 1670s) of the religious and regained dynastic community of Great and Little Russia, reimagined as the unity of the "Slavic-Russian" people (Miller, 2024).

The 17th century was a period of borders' greatest fluidity. In the east, they moved in only one direction, until reaching the natural limit (the Great Ocean) or the geopolitical frontier (where the Cossack explorers met with the Eight Banners of the Qing Empire). In the west, borders moved like a pendulum. Russia's ethnic structure, and mechanisms of integration and control, were becoming increasingly diverse. In this, Russia increasingly resembled an imperial polity. Peter the Great did not really establish the empire, but rather symbolically aligned it as much as possible with the understanding of empire then prevailing in Europe. But the sociocultural split caused by his westernization would crucially influence Russia's fate.

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The experience of the Russian Empire and its significance for modern Russia require a separate study. This article deals with the empire's background, which was summed up quite fairly, although not exhaustively, by Robert Kaplan: "Russians should have had nothing to be ashamed of, for they could only be what they were: a people that had wrestled an empire from an impossible continental landscape" (Kaplan, 2012, p. 104). In the meantime, starting from the pre-Petrine era, I will try to draw several conclusions and assumptions related to Russia's immediate domestic and foreign policy tasks.

Modern Russia's border most closely resembles that of the mid-17th century, and its geopolitical challenges, those which it faced in the 20-30 years after the Time of Troubles (which saw the Smolensk War of 1632-1634, not very successful for Moscow). More analogies can be drawn, but this is not what really matters. Statehood's revival

after its early-17th-century collapse was enabled by the will and joint efforts of extremely heterogeneous social and ethnic forces. But they had already built a cohesive community that did not collapse along with the state. There are good reasons to call this community civilizational, or (per geography) *North Eurasian*, or (given its two largest constituent ethnic groups, then and now) *Russian-Tatar*. This community underwent serious transformation during the imperial and Soviet periods, but it did not disappear in 1991, and ultimately played more or less the same role for Russia's statehood as it did in the second decade of the 17th century.

Discussion of Russian civilization should be continued with more detail than is necessitated by current political tasks. This article has focused on the origins of Russia's great-power status, which undoubtedly are directly associated with the formation of a civilizational community.

By the time young Ivan V and Peter the Great ascended the throne, the Tsardom of Muscovy already had most of the characteristics and capabilities of a great power, but was not fully integrated into either the European or Islamic system of international relations. It was integrated into the system of forest-steppe Northern Eurasia, but almost all of that was outright incorporated by Russia by the end of the 17th century. Being the territorially largest state aside from the Spanish colonial empire, Muscovy was a 'great power in and of itself' (*Großmacht an sich*). After Peter the Great's victory in the Northern War, Russia took Sweden's place in the European system of international relations. In the Islamic system of international relations, Russia's position near the northern borders of Persia and the Ottoman Empire was a constant source of external pressure on them.

At the beginning of Peter the Great's reign, Russia as a great power exhibited: the ability to control vast ethnically and confessionally heterogeneous areas using diverse integration mechanisms; the formation and gradual evolution of ideas about the connection between territory and the monarchic central power; religious distinction of the *Self* from the *Other* and definition of the state's special mission on this basis; and the ability to achieve independence and regional hegemony,

and simultaneously confront multiple powerful adversaries militarily. Defining the Muscovite state's mission, as something balancing between the realms of Caesar and God, not only dramatically boosted its rulers' international ambitions, but also required the mobilization of resources to back those ambitions. Fierce opposition by powerful states to the west, which became an existential threat at the beginning of the 17th century, helped (in Leopold von Ranke's terminology) to awaken the national spirit and tap the civilizational community's internal potential. Peter the Great was able to again mobilize this potential when transforming Russia into an empire.

Without dwelling in detail on the metamorphoses of Russia's great-power status in the 18th-20th centuries, it is notable that the great-power mission was repeatedly reinterpreted and was radically transformed in 1917. Great-power tools were constantly honed and perfected, but the very image of Russia as a great power eventually became a social and civilizational value, relatively independent from the specific missions defined and redefined by the political elites.

After the collapse of Soviet statehood and in the absence of a state mission—which the triad of market economy, electoral democracy, and nation-state could not become (Offe, 1991)—the endurance of the country's image as a great power became crucial. The U-turn in domestic and foreign policy, executed by Vladimir Putin over his quarter-century of *de facto* rule, was largely prompted by much of Russian society's incomprehension and rejection of their country's slide into the category of middle powers,³ by their opposition to external partners' constant claims in the 1990s that Russia's international standing had declined dramatically. This is not a manifestation of 'Versailles syndrome'; the majority of the Russian political community did not see the USSR's collapse as a military-political defeat, partly because of the narratives of Boris Yeltsin, his close associates, and some of the expert-analytical community. It was assumed that, having cast

³ Apart from certain elements of the rhetoric of Andrei Kozyrev and some officials on Gaidar's team, none of the Russian political elites of the 1990s came up with substantive arguments to justify Russia's transition into a second-tier power. Later, at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, leading liberal reformers tried, with little success, to float the idea that Russia was a "liberal empire."

off the fourteen Soviet republics, communist ideology, and the Soviet Union's superpower mission, democratic Russia was 'returning' to the 'civilized world' as an equal.

When it turned out that no one was going to grant such a status to post-Soviet Russia, and that admission would come at a high price, people were at a loss. They did not support revanchism (as there were and still are not any significant political forces that would wish to restore the USSR), but they did want justice and equality, which the new Russia seemed to have deserved by voluntarily dropping territorial claims and losing a significant part of the population (including 25 million ethnic Russians) that had lived in the Soviet Union. For more than 15 years, the Russian government tried to convince key external partners to come to a mutual understanding and respect its interests. When it became clear that this also was not working, Moscow adopted tougher means of ensuring respect, but still without territorial claims. In particular, Moscow punished the Saakashvili regime by defeating it and recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but without incorporating them into Russia.

This turn in Russia's foreign policy is comparable to the abrupt change that occurred when the princes of Moscow, who for generations had traveled to the Horde to receive *yarlyks* authorizing their rule, suddenly felt confident enough to mount armed resistance and start passing the title hereditarily. The West was too distracted, by the pursuit of as many immediate unilateral advantages as possible, to notice when Moscow gave up begging it for a great-power *yarlyk*. Moreover, if great-power status depends at least partly on external actors' perception, then Moscow not only turned to a completely different group of actors, but actually played a crucial role in consolidating this group.

The Kremlin's new approach essentially had a dual effect. The West saw that Putin's Russia was capable of creating long-term problems for the global hegemon (and this 'negative' perception was itself recognition of Russia as a great power). And the deepening confrontation between Russia and the West opens a window of opportunity for the states of the World Majority.

Modern Russia's great-power status has many problems. For most of the time since the USSR's collapse, Russia has manifested a great-power instinct under conditions of a "mission deficit." Even the Special Military Operation (SMO) has covered this deficit only partially, mostly with medium-term tasks. Needless to say, important changes have occurred in Russia, enabling it to withstand enormous external pressure and the hardships of almost three years of combat. Potential internal vulnerabilities have so far been successfully suppressed. Nevertheless, there remains a need to choose a model of internal integration and to identify the ideational and institutional factors that can ensure the cohesion of the macropolitical community (whose composition is partially changing in the course of the SMO).

Modern Russia is not going to become a nation-state. (A model that can no longer be seen as inevitably overcoming and destroying empire.) In a country with imperial experience, the political community's great-power identity will integrate and process this experience, not reject it. Empire here is an integral part of a great power's historical trajectory, and is the basis upon which to look for alternatives, including a civilization-state.

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