Received: 30 September 2014
UDC: 327(470+571) / DOI: 10.11643/issn.2217-995X151SPN56

I Remember When Russia Was a Great Power*

IVER B. NEUMANN**
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

> To "decline to the level of a second class power […and] become an Asiatic state […] would be a major catastrophe for Russia."[1]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Russia is stuck in a prison of its own making. The name of that prison is great power identity. Time and again since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have heard Russians state that Russia has to be a great power, or it will be nothing. In this lecture, I will simply lay out to you how this claim has been made consistently by Russians now for half a millennium.[2] When people shout about their status, one immediately knows that that status is insecure, for people who are secure in their status do not have to shout about it. As John Mearsheimer put the point in a criticism of the US invasion of Iraq, which he felt to be superfluous: If you're the biggest guy on the block, why stand on the rooftop and shout about it? So, we have to ask, why is Russia shouting? The reason that emerges from the story I tell here is, I think, is a simple one. The Russian state is weak. In order to get things done at home, it has to shout, and in order to get recognition abroad, it has to shout. But why, we may then ask, does not Russia stop shouting, stop spending so much on the defence budgets, and start addressing the underlying problem, namely its weak social and economic power base? That, I think, is a question everybody who has observed Russia over some time has asked themselves. The answer that emerges from the story I will tell is, once again, a simple one, and time and again, it has been acknowledged by Russians themselves. Russia struggles to catch up with the political and economic dynamism to their west. Western powers keep coming up with new models for how to get society to do what the state wants them to do in more efficient and effective ways. In order to catch up, Russia has to learn. But a learner is not a great power – a great power is a power from which *others* learn, and not one that is itself basically a learner. So, Russia has been stuck with an historical choice: it

1 Russian Foreign Minister, Aleksandr P. Izvol'sky, quoted in Lieven 1983, 6.

2 In Neumann and Pouliot (2010), we speculate whether this social form may not even be dated back to the first Russian state formation, the Rus' Khaganate, which emerged in competition with the local great power of the day, namely the Khazars. As noted in other previous work (Neumann 2011), the setting for status seeking for the Khaganate's successor polity, Kievan Rus', was also one where you either had to be on top, or you were nothing. This lecture leans on these two works, and even more heavily on Neumann 2008 a and b and Neumann 2014.

** Keynote speech at the academic event of the Belgrade Security Forum, 30 September 2014.*
*** I.B.Neumann@lse.ac.uk*

could be great, or it could learn. There have been times when Russia has spent exorbitant amounts on energy on learning. The reigns of Peter the Great and Stalin stand out, and are celebrated by the Russian state, for then learning went straight into building greatness. The other historical period that stands out is 1985 to 2000. That period is now presented to Russians by the state as a disaster, since learning did not build greatness, but threatened to take it away. I will end the lecture with a short reflection on today's situation, but first, the story.

In 1486, a noble knight by the name of Nikolai Poppel arrived in Moscow, carrying a letter from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III.[3] The Holy Roman Empire came to know Muscovy as a polity separate from the Polish-Lithuanian state. Upon Poppel's return to the Empire, he started to spread the word about the Russian state and about the riches and power of its ruler. Here is the official Soviet diplomatic history's version of what ensued:

> In 1489, Poppel returned to Moscow, now already as the official agent of the Emperor of the Holy Roman empire. In a secret audience he suggested to Ivan III that he should petition the Emperor to confer upon him the title of king. From the point of view of Western European political thought, this would be the only means of legalising a new state and to introduce it into the common system of European states – and at the same time place it in a certain state of dependence of the empire. But in Moscow, another point of view held sway. Ivan III answered Poppel with dignity: 'By God's grace, we are the ruler of our land from the beginning, from the first of our ancestors, it has been given us by God, and as it was for our ancestors, so it is for us.'[4]

Ivan III insisted on signing his written answer to the emperor with the title 'Great ruler of all of Rus' by God's grace', and for the next three generations, there ensued a tug-of-war between Russian and Western courts regarding titles. Already in 1508, Ivan's son Vasiliy sent a letter to the Emperor asking for an alliance in his war against Lithuania. In 1514 the Emperor, somewhat belatedly, sent his envoy Georg Schnitzenpaumer back with an encouraging letter in German. Writing about this letter, Karamzin (volume 7, chapter two) notes that 'instead of the word tsar, he wrote Kaiser'. 'Kaiser' may be translated back into Russian as '*Imperator*', and so the letter was taken by the Russian court to mean that the Emperor acknowledged Vasiliy as a fellow Emperor. In Maximilian's letter of 4 August 1514, however, where he confirmed an alliance against the Lithuanian king Sigismund, there was no mention of the Russian king being a 'Kaiser'. Russia was not satisfied in its quest for recognition as an empire. Of course, further West, Kings also struggled to establish themselves on a far with the Holy Roman Emperor. To pick but one example, under Henry VIII, England launched a campaign to be seen as an empire. The Russian trajectory differs from the others in two key ways, however. First, the shift from seeing the King's body to seeing the territory of his state as the locus of government that we may already see in England in the 16th century (empire, not emperor) was willfully held

3 Karamzin, vol. 6, fifth chapter.

4 Zorin 1959, 262.

back. Secondly, in Europe, shifted away from being accepted as an empire in the direction of being accepted as a sovereign state. Empires there were, but the logic of recognition rotated around the term sovereignty, ot around terms like emperor or empire. Again, there was no such development in Russia, which continued to play the old game long after others had embarked on a new one.

Contacts were also hampered by cultural practices. For example, Herberstein noted that non-orthodox Christians were considered unclean, which meant that rank-and-file Muscovites had a reason to stay away from them, and that the aristocrats that did meet with them and then followed the European custom of shaking hands, ritually washed themselves after the encounter. As late as the 1660s, when a number of European diplomats, soldiers and merchants had been invited to the realm, a key observer talked about their separate quarters as "the diseased parts of the state and the body politic", and it was only during this decade that ambassadors were allowed to walk the streets of Moscow alone.[5] Poe stresses that 'Nonetheless, the Russian authorities realized that diplomacy and mercantile relations with European powers were necessary accoutrements of great power status'.[6] From the very beginning, then, it was a bone of contention between Russian and European rulers where in the hierarchy Russia should fit in, with Russia in principle aiming for a top position. For the next two hundred years, which is the gestation period for the European states system, Russia was a peripheral presence. Its resources were not plentiful enough to make it a presence on the Continent, so there was no rationalist case for great power status here. Constructivists would highlight that the principle on which legitimacy and recognition was sought, divine kingly sovereignty over territory, was the same, and draw attention to the doubt that ensued on both sides about whether the other party could be considered properly Christian. I would highlight how Russia's despotic regime marked it as "barbarous". Either way, although Russia made a principled bid for great power status, as seen from Europe, Russia was not a ranking power by any criterion used at the time or indeed later. There were however, cultural and organizational borrowings during this period, and these were speeded up and diversified under tsar Alexei (1645–1676), but it was only during the reign of his son Peter that Russia undertook a self-conscious European socialisation process. After a short lag – when the War of Spanish Succession ended by the drawing up of with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Russia was not among the signatory powers – Peter launched a campaign for Russian great powerhood.

Anisimov usefully sketches out a tripartite journey for Russia into international society: "The first step that Russia took into the Westphalian world of international relations was its participation in the First Northern War (1655–60), a step determined by the decision of 1654 on the subjugation of the Ukraine. The next step was taken in 1686 by the Eternal Peace with the Rech Pospolita [that is, Poland-Lithuania]."[7] This is not only due to the way both parties now largely proceeded to draw up this treaty according to the general

5 Krizhanich quoted in Poe 2000, 83.

6 Poe 2000, 41.

7 Anisimov 1993, 23.

Drawing on rationalist arguments, historians universally stress the role of the Great Northern War (1701-1721) in establishing Russia as a central player in international society. It was the war that broke out on the eve of the new century which really brought Russia in.[8] Paul Kennedy holds that Russia and Prussia added themselves to France, the Habsburg Empire and Britain at the end of the Great Northern War.[9] In 1721, "an exhausted, isolated Sweden finally had to admit to the loss of most of its Baltic provinces in the 1721 Peace of Nystad. It had now fallen to the second order of the powers, while Russia was in the first". Paul Dukes holds that Russia "joined Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century" and that Poltava was "the cause of Russia's wider recognition throughout Europe".[10] The official Soviet diplomatic history makes no specific comment on this, but it nods indirectly in the direction by noting that, as Peter laid the plans for his Northern campaign. "The international situation in Europe seemed to be favorable for the realization of these plans. Western Europe's strongest powers – France, England, Austria and the Netherlands – were busy preparing for the War of the Spanish Succession and were not able to meddle in the struggle around the Baltics".[11] Anisinov argues that "The end of the Great Northern War in 1721 registered not only the collapse of Sweden as a great world power but the appearance in its place of a new empire, the Russian."[12]

It is clear that Peter's reign marked a tremendous upsurge in Russia's standing. Russian Vice-Chancellor Peter Shafirovwas keenly aware of the limits beyond which Western recognition did not stretch:

> We know very well that the greater part of our neighbours view very unfavourably the good position in which it has pleased God to place us; that they would be delighted should an occasion present itself to imprison us once more in our earlier obscurity and that if they seek our alliance it is rather through fear and hate than through feelings of friendship.[13]

Crucially, as seen by this key Russian statesman, Russia had the material power but lacked social mores required to be fully recognized. Shafirov should turn out to be the first in a long series of Russians who saw things this way. Shafirov's view was, furthermore, typical for his day, and it bears out very well the limitations of material resources as a measure of great powerhood. standard of the day, but also because Russia at this time also succeeded in its long struggle to form an alliance with key powers (with the Empire, Venice, Brandenburg and Poland-Lithuania against the Porte). The third step, Anisimov

8 New century indeed: 'Time itself was made to recognize the grandiose ideas for change that the Tsar had developed during the Great Embassy, as the calendar was adapted for the year to begin on 1 January rather than 1 September and to be numbered from the birth of Christ rather than the supposed creation of the world' (Dukes 1990, 69).

9 Kennedy 1988, 96.

10 Dukes 1990, 112, 72.

11 Zorin 1959, 337.

12 Anisinov 1993, 25.

13 Shafirov to a French colleague in 1721, here quoted in Dukes 1990, 77.

argues, was taken hot on the heels of Peter's Grand Embassy 1697–1698, when he grasped the potential of alliance with states that his predecessors had considered untouchable for religious reasons for war against Sweden, Poland-Lithuania and the Porte. His first attempt at playing the alliance game failed, however, and the ensuing war that was waged on the Porte was called to a halt at the Congress of Carlowitz (1698–1699) without Russia being present.

These three steps all concern Russia's maneuvering in the direction of a more central role within what by century's end had become the Baltic sub-system of international society. These steps were, however, not followed up by increased recognition from the major polities making up the embryonic international society. An early example of Russia being recognised as a factor in a European disposition, but not being recognised as having a *droit de régard*, we have in Louis XIV's campaign to put Jan Sobieski on the throne of Poland-Lithuania. Poland, and particularly its Ukrainian part, was a key conduit between international society and Muscovy, as witnessed by the (characteristically lagging) translation of administrative literature. In the late 1670s, Russian overtures to Poland and Austria for help against the Porte failed, and in 1681, Russia has to sign the humiliating treaty of Bakhchisarai. Already at this time, however, Russia could muster an Army of perhaps as many as 200,000, six times as many as half a century earlier.[14] These forces were trained with the help of manuals translated from Western languages, by officers imported from the West. Translations were first undertake on the second half of the seventeenth century. Military manuals were among the first to be translated.

During the sixty years following the Great Northern War, Russia became gradually more successful in being recognized as a worth-while ally, a power entitled to participation in peace settlements and a power mentioned in treaties as a guarantor of the peace. Russia attended its first Peace Congress at Soissons 1728–1730.[15] In 1732, Russia concluded an alliance with Prussia and Austria, codified in the Berlin Treaty. In the War of the Polish Succession, Russia, by dint among other things of having fielded an army about 30,000 men strong, was definitely a player. Russia was conspicuously absent from the peace settlement, however.[16] But come the Seven Years War (1756–1763, known in the US as the French and Indian Wars). Russia was a key player in the basic change in alliance patterns that precipitated the war. On the rationalist criterion of objective resources and systems-wide reach, this is when Russia became a great power: "By the Seven Years War the Russian army was the largest in Europe, the establishment aimed for at its commencement consisting of 162,430 men in field regiments, 74,548 garrison troops, 27,758 men in the *landmilitsiia*, 12,937 members of the corps of engineering and artillery, and 44,000 irregulars."[17] The Seven Years War seems to be an important breaking point also in the sense that Russia seemingly restrained its military campaign short of crushing Prussia in order to keep that

14 Dukes 1990, 47.

15 Bagger 1993, 52.

16 Craig and George 1990, 24.

17 Dukes 1990, 129.

state in a shape where it could play a continuing important part in the working of the balance of Europe. Russia, in other words, had entered into the management of the states system to the extent of downplaying immediate interests for what was held to be more long-term ones. Note that the Seven Years War is also the period when the term Great Powers emerges. I have found no indication that the shift from talking of powers of the first rank to talking about great powers is related to the tentative entry of Russia into the category, however.

By century's end, Russia was a fully fledged participant in the formation of alliances. For example, in 1780, Russia was a member of the League of Armed Neutrality, which also counted Denmark and Portugal. Twenty years later, a successor was formed, now consisting of Russia, Denmark, Sweden and Prussia. In 1800, the new Russian emperor Paul ordered the College of Foreign Affairs to draw up a comprehensive analysis of Russia's current standing and future prospects in terms of foreign policy. In the report, the College characterized Russia as "the world's leading power", a "Hercules" *etc*.[18]

At Vienna, in 1815, Russia's role as great power was nonetheless institutionalized. At this time, for the specific purposes of managing the system of states, being the military arbiter of Europe proved sufficient. Only five powers were given the right to have ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary, and Russia was amongst them. I note, however, that Russia experienced trouble with maintaining its great-power credentials throughout what Eric Hobsbawm calls the 'long 19th century' (1789–1917), and that this may be accounted for by the factor of governance. As Paul Schroeder points out:

> The common view that Russia enjoyed an enormous and growing power and prestige in Europe until the Crimean War broke the bubble is a great exaggeration. After 1815, Russia never was the arbiter of Europe or exercised the dominant influence in Germany that Catherine II or Paul I had enjoyed for a time, and the young Alexander I had aspired to.[19]

The point here is that, underlying not only the growing gap in relative resources but also the gap in principle of legitimacy was a difference in governance. At the heart of Russia's troubles as a great power was its unwillingness and inability to change from a rationality of direct rule to a rationality of indirect governmentality. Again, consider Lincoln's argument that

> If Russia was to meet the challenge posed by the rapidly industrializing West, she, in turn, had to find some way to achieve greater administrative efficiency and instill into her middle- and upper-level officials a measure of support for change. Russia's bureaucrats had to become responsive to the needs of the nation they served, and some means had to be found to enable those few who were well informed about complex social and economic issues to gain input

18 Bagger 1993, 60.

19 Schroeder 1986, 10.

into the tsarist policy-making process.[20]

Lincoln's book is painstakingly tracing how this process unfolded in the middle of the 19th century, to culminate in the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and sweeping judicial reforms directly and explicitly inspired by European models.[21] It is of key interest, however, that Russia's autocratic order put a clear limit to how such moves could be taken. If all power should in theory emanate from the Tsar, bureaucracy had to maintain the principle of direct control from above. Russia's politicians could, therefore, not act independently. Neither was there any way in which they could function as aggregators of societal interests apart from the tsar, and so any economic strengthening of the emerging middle class could not find any direct political expressions. "As a result, just when the new social and economic groups that comprised the middle class were eroding the power of absolutism in the West, it was strengthened in Russia".[22]

There is broad consensus in the historical literature about the logic and importance of this process. In terms of state-society relations, the problem was that Russia simply did not have the social agents necessary to mediate between the state and the population at large, which meant that a necessary precondition for indirect rule was lacking. Given the absence of self/government amongst the subjects, if the state decided to ease direct rule, there was an immediate danger that anarchy would ensue. Therefore, moves to indirect rule, which necessarily would entail the easing of direct rule, were precluded.

Within Russia itself, there were key people who fully grasped the problem. Consider, for example, Grand Duke Constantine Nikolaevich's lament that "we cannot deceive ourselves any longer […] we are both weaker and poorer than the first-class powers, and furthermore poorer not only in material but also in mental resources, especially in matters of administration."[23] What the Grand Duke did not note, however, was that having someone like himself on top was exactly one of the things that made it impossible for tsarist Russia to match the administrative systems of the 'first-class powers'.

All that seemed to change with the Soviet revolution. That story is well known, especially here in Belgrade, so let me recall what Stalin said in his celebrated metal speech from 1931: Russia has always been the potential pray for surrounding powers, it has to be strong to withstand them. Sure enough, after the Second World War, the debate that we have touched on time and again in this lecture, between the few who wanted to build a strong society and the many who wanted to build a few state, surfaced again, in a new guise, this time between the so-called tankists and economists like Evsei Liberman and Eugen Varga. The tankists won. The Soviet Union armed itself to death. Gorbachev made the rather curt observation "it is impossible to live this way" and abolished the Communist Party.

20 Lincoln 1982, 6.

21 Cf. esp. Lincoln 1982, 200.

22 Lincoln 1982, 7.

23 Quoted in Lieven 1983, 21.

Since the state was a party-penetrated state, with its spine gone, the state collapsed. The only organized force left to take over was the intelligence community. Let us see how they formulated the problem upon taking over in 2000. When Vladimir Putin addressed the nation at the millennium, he said that:

> Soviet power did not let the country develop a flourishing society which could be developing dynamically, with free people. First and foremost, the ideological approach to the economy made our country lag increasingly behind (*otstavanie*) the developed states. It is bitter to admit that for almost seven decades we travelled down a blind alley, which took us away from the main track of civilization […] The experience of the 1990s vividly shows that the genuine and efficient revival of our Fatherland cannot be brought about on Russian soil simply by dint of abstract models and schemata extracted from foreign textbooks. The mechanical copying of the experiences of other states will not bring progress. […] Russia will not soon, if ever, be a replica of, say, the US or Great Britain, where liberal values have deep-seated traditions. For us, the state, with its institutions and structures, always played an exclusively important role in the life of the country and its people. For the Russian (*rossiyanin*), a strong state is not an anomaly, not something with which he has to struggle, but, on the contrary, a source of and a guarantee for order, as well as the initiator and main moving force of any change. Contemporary Russian society does not mistake a strong and effective state for a totalitarian one.[24]

This is not good political analysis. Russia's standing as a Great Power must be in serious doubt. Russia's nuclear arsenal and what a Realist would judge to be its sphere of influence count in its favour. So does the size of its armed forces, but the weight of this factor evaporates if we correlate for quality of personnel and equipment. Neither does Russia have an ability to project military power fairly far. It also falls short of most other material criteria such as technological innovation, not to mention size of population and of gross national budget.

Russia only has two assets of great powerhood, nuclear weapons and a sphere of influence. Nuclear weapons are not a fine-grained foreign policy instrument, but more of a marker of status and an insurance against attack. The sphere of influence becomes all-important for the upkeep of the Russian claim to greatness.

This is where Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014 became such bad news for Russia, for Georgian and Ukrainian developments threatened the one active asset left of Russian great powerhood, namely the Russian sphere of interest. Furthermore, the immediate threat – change in political regime towards a Western model, and consolidation of the polity around that regime – was the direct result of the attraction of the Western model, the very same model that threatens Russian powerhood. With Soviet and Russian power not directly present, the young generations in both Georgia and Ukraine turned west.

The coming closer of the West was not the only threat to Russia as seen from the Kremlin,

24 http://www.government.gov.rus/government/minister/article-vvp1.html, Accessed 14 February 2001. For an analysis, see Neumann 2005.

though. What little there has been of opposition to Putin since he took over, has been of a nationalist kind. The weakening of the Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine was not only a geopolitical threat. It was also a threat to Putin's legitimacy, for the very legitimacy principle in Russia is rooted in the leader being strong. Russian leaders shout their orders. Putin is seen instructing his ministers and others on the daily TV news programme *Vremya* (yes, these days there really is only one) every night. He is shown flying with cranes, wrestling opponents to the ground bare-chestedly, diving and 'finding' antiques in the Black Sea. A Russian leader has to be great, in the sense of 'strong, no push-over', and one of the ways of doing that is to stand tall and take what one wants. The Crimea take-over is very popular in Russia. It is hardly popular anywhere else. So, we may add what Russia has done in Ukraine over the late months to the long series of occasions in Russian history where Moscow has given priority to being great, instead of looking after its base for possible greatness.

Since Putin's second term, sorely needed economic reforms have been kept at bay. Putin floats on the income from his his fossil fuels exports, and on the popularity of his forward great power-policy in Ukraine. This is dangerous stuff. The Ukrainian policy bring economic problems of their own in the shape of sanctions. More importantly, when oil prices fall, Putin has cooked down his options for staying great to one: show the flag abroad. To most Russians, this is convincing stuff. To most other people, it is completely history-less. With no attention spent on social and economic reforms, the only way the Russian state will get things done at home is by shouting, and the further they will lag behind other states, not only Western ones, but increasingly also China, where more room is available for social and economic entrepreneurship.

I remember when Russia was a great power. A period of world history is called the Cold War, after the epic and global clash of the Soviet Union and the United States. Places like Belgrade and my home town Oslo were close to the European fault line of this conflict, which stretched north via the Fulda Gap dividing Germany and ended up on the Soviet – Norwegian border in the high north. Now, the fault line between Russia and everybody else is somewhere around Yalty, Bakhchisarai and Donetsk. That, ladies and gentlemen, is what we call dethronisation of a great power.

References

Anisimov, Evgeniy Viktorovich. 1993. "The Imperial Heritage of Peter the Great in the Foreign Policy of His Early Successors." In *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, edited by Hugh Ragsdale, 21–35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bagger, Hans. 1993. "The Role of the Baltic in Russian Foreign Policy." In *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, edited by Hugh Ragsdale, 36–72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dukes, Paul. 1990. *The Making of Russian Absolutism 1613–1801*, second edition. London: Longman.

Karamzin, N. M. *Istoriya gosudarstva Rossiiskogo* http://www.magister.msk.ru:8085/library/history/history1.htm.

Kennedy, Paul. 1988. *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Lieven, D.C.B. 1983. *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. Houndmills: Macmillan.

Lincoln, W. Bruce. 1982. *In the Vanguard of Reform: Russia's Enlightened Bureaucrats, 1825–1861.* DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.

Neumann, Iver B. 2005. "Russia as a Great Power." *In Russia as a Great Power: Dimensions of Security Under Putin*, edited by Jakob Hedenskog, Vilhelm Konnander, Bertil Nygren, Ingmar Oldberg, and Christer Pursiainen, 13–28. London: Routledge.

Neumann, Iver B. 2008a. "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1492–1815" *Russia's European Choice,* edited by Ted Hopf, 11–34. New York: Palgrave.

Neumann, Iver B. 2008b. "Russia as a Great Power, 1815-2007." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11(2): 128–151.

Neumann, Iver B. 2011. "Entry into International Society Reconceptualised: The Case of Russia" *Review of International Studies* 37(2): 463–484.

Neumann, Iver B. 2014. "Status is Cultural: Durkheimian Poles and Weberian Russians Seek Great-Power Status." In *Status and World Order*, edited by T.V. Paul, Deborah Larson, and William Wohlforth, 85–114 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Neumann, Iver B., and Vincent Pouliot. 2011. "Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in

Russian-Western Relations over the Past Millennium." *Security Studies* 20 (1): 105–137.

Poe, Marshall T. 2000. *'A People Born to Slavery': Russia in Early European Ethnography, 1476-1748*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Schroeder, Paul W. 1986. "The 19th-Century International System: Changes in the Structure." *World Politics* 34 (1): 1–26.

Zorin, V.A. et al, eds. 1959. *Istoriya diplomatii*, second edition. Moscow: Gospolitizdat.