

“Great Projects” Politics in Russia History’s Hardly Victorious End

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Abstract: The article addresses the problem of political identity in contemporary Russia by engaging with and extending the temporal scope of the constructivist analysis conducted by constructivist Ted Hopf. It suggests that the “great projects” politics of contemporary Russia, which are linked to the specificity of the country’s political identity and seem to be similar to that of the late-Soviet period, can in fact be better understood when Hopf’s approach is complemented by the post-structuralist analysis of Sergei Prozorov. The former, while providing a valuable theoretical framework and linking the state’s identity to its status as a great power, cannot account for the digression that is revealed in the discourse analysis of contemporary “great projects” politics. The latter, while being able to interpret these oddities, is limited within the domestic realm and fails to address the idea of great power, which Hopf believes to be an integral part of Russian political discourse and which is possible to interpret, only if the analysis extends beyond national borders. The article incorporates Prozorov’s theoretical contribution into the framework of Hopf, thus merging the two approaches and making them applicable to the contemporary Russian condition, both domestically and within the field of international relations.

Keywords: end of history, great power, political identity, Russia’s revival, social constructivism

Today, an international relations scholar encounters the claim that “Russia is back to the world stage”¹ with increasing frequency. Indeed, the vision of Russia as a resurgent power is, no doubt, present in political discourse, “[i]rrespective of whether one refers to the recovery of Russia’s economy or its assertive foreign policy, the success of its sporting

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teams or the wealth of its oligarchy...”² On the international level, this vision is reflected in a number of works that address the problem of Russia’s revival. When in 2008 Edward Lucas published his *New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West*, the book enjoyed unprecedentedly wide popularity and received a considerable number of positive reviews.³ In Lucas’s view, Russia is reinventing herself as a milder version of the Soviet Union, and hence should be seen as a serious threat to the West.

Such a comparison could also be found earlier in the Steven Rosefielde’s *Russia in the 21st Century: The Prodigal Superpower*. The author emphasizes the similarity between contemporary Russian policies and those of the USSR, thus virtually equating the two and prophesying the comeback of history unless the Russian Federation manages to alter its path by taking the route of genuine Westernization.⁴

Moreover, during the last couple of years, some IR scholars yet again began using the term “empire” to refer to the contemporary Russian state.⁵ This once almost forgotten practice explicitly shows the concern that renowned scholars and policymakers have regarding Russia’s current status in the international arena and the prospects of its political development.

The domestic dimension of the above-mentioned revival is not only characterized by the seeming stability of Putin’s presidency (and his premiership), but is also reflected in the realization of various “great projects” that are either closely intertwined with the commemoration of Russia’s glorious history or aimed at modernization and economic growth. Excessive glorification of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, construction of huge cathedrals,⁶ canonization of state’s former rulers,⁷ accomplishment of expensive modernizing projects in business⁸ and social spheres,⁹ restoration of Soviet symbols and rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin—all of these policies, indeed, look similar (at least in scope) to the forceful urbanization and ideological propaganda of the Soviet empire. Yet, if the ideological undertone of the Soviet “great projects” was rather explicit, the current ones seem to be anything but ideologically coherent. This inconsistency is apparent most obviously every January 7th at midnight, when one hears the music of Soviet anthem on the radio¹⁰ and sees the President attending the Christmas service on all national channels at the same time.¹¹ Hence, before taking Lucas and Rosefielde’s side in declaring the comeback of history, perhaps, one should compare attentively the great power policies of the two ‘successive’ (I use this term in purely geographical sense) political bodies.

To accomplish the latter, I will certainly have to answer the question whether or not the comparison that Lucas and Rosefielde make is valid logically—i.e. whether or not the present realities have similar grounds to those of the past. However, before doing so, we must establish which theoretical tool is actually capable of analyzing these processes. In other words, we must see which theoretical approach could better account for what is happening in Russia today, and, having defined this, to explore how can the evidence of Russia’s comeback be interpreted within the international relations field.

It is certainly tempting to fit the fact of Russia’s revival into the realist paradigm, as it seems to be a mere correction of the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.¹² One could, together with John Mearsheimer, argue that the bipolarity of world politics was, paradoxically, ensuring peace and stability on the European continent, and that “the demise of the Cold War order [was] likely to increase the chances that war and major crises [would] occur.”¹³ Hence, states, being rational actors, who are aware of their external environment, try to ensure their safe survival and pursue strategies that more

effectively maintain the existing international balance.¹⁴ However, just as Mearsheimer would have difficulties with explaining the drastic reorientation of the Russian state in 1991, when “the fate of the Cold War ... was mainly in [its] hands”¹⁵ and it was more beneficial for it to maintain the balance, so he would also be unable to account for the fact that, despite this reorientation, Russian political elites never stopped seeing the country as a great power; since even during the hardest years of transition, Boris Yeltsin insisted that Russia “always was and remains a great world power.”¹⁶ Even today, when “[Russian] consumers still aren’t economically sovereign, its government isn’t democratically responsive to the electorate, and Russian society is blatantly unjust,”¹⁷ the country, for some reason, is characterized as “*a colossus with feet of clay*” [emphasis added].¹⁸ Why is it that after ten years of disintegration and economic decay, after sanguinary internal conflicts and political confusion within the ruling elite, Russia necessarily has to be seen not simply as a recovered state, but as a not yet fully recovered great power? It seems that simply remaining within the realist paradigm it is problematic to account for categories that depend more on self-perception and identification than on the objective historical circumstances. Hence, in order to explain the meaning of Russia’s great power politics, it is necessary to engage with IR approaches that are able to explain the construction of state’s identity.

Since the “great power” identity is dependent on international recognition and hierarchical identity structures,¹⁹ perhaps one can look for explanation within the realm of systemic constructivism. However, it is important to remember that as a rule, systemic constructivists—Alexander Wendt being a deserving representative—treat identification as “a continuum from negative to positive - from conceiving another as anathema to the self to conceiving it as an extension of the self.”²⁰ Consequently, such an approach can dangerously oversimplify the situation, excluding the possible existence of, say, a great power that is backward at the same time (the way Russia is frequently labeled today), or an enemy that has a similar ideology. What is more, those who believe in purely systemic construction of the great power status will face difficulties explaining why in the beginning of the 1990-s Russian leaders were happy to follow the West and were eagerly accepting the Western assistance—which appeared to be unexpectedly insufficient—and, at the same time, those leaders never agreed to accept the country’s secondary status. It is also unlikely that they will give a sound explanation of why Vladimir Putin was widely misunderstood by the population, when during his first rather successful years in Kremlin he started comparing Russia with tiny Portugal, emphasizing that the former had to work hard in order to reach the latter’s level of economic development.²¹ Therefore, one has to grant this a more careful investigation, as apparently the idea of the great power status is not rooted exclusively within the aspirations of a ruling elite or the international system as such. It seems to go deeper than this. In this light, the black box of the state has to be opened and the answer should be sought for on the level of popular discourse.

Precisely the latter was attempted by Ted Hopf in his book *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*. Hopf, attempting to be as inductive as possible, develops a theory of social identity and traces the implications of competing identities on Soviet and Russian foreign policy-making in the critical years of the country’s development. While analyzing social discourse, he singles out eight distinct identities “that were distributed most broadly and deeply across and within the most texts [that he chose to deal with]”²²—four for each period studied. Then, Hopf follows their interaction and tries to explain certain foreign policy moves through the corresponding domination of

this or another identity in a given case. In other words, through interpreting these domestic social identities he shows “how they made possible Soviet and Russian understandings of Others in world politics [and how the] constructivism [could] work all the way down, rather than having [to] stop at the level of interstate interactions.”²³

It becomes apparent in Hopf that both in 1955 and 1999 the idea of “great power” was essential for every identity that he believed to be distinct, and was indeed rooted on the level of popular discourse. During both historical periods there was a clear discursive demand for Russia’s great power status; the alternative of losing this status was altogether unthinkable for the population. Thus, Hopf showed that not only the decision-makers were, as Thomas Ambrosio put it, “obsessed”²⁴ with the great power status, but that such a vision was also embedded into the social discourse, and the *powers that be* could not help but comply with what was expected from them.

However, Hopf also understood that in spite of internal roots of the “great power” identity, as well as its partially self-ascribing nature, it is impossible to analyze it, focusing exclusively on the domestic level. A great power would never become one without any international recognition of its status. Therefore, he emphasizes its dual character by giving credit to the systemic and normative constructivisms in what concerns the great power recognition.

Since the recent revival is mostly described in great power terms, for its interpretation we will firstly need to project Hopf’s paradigm into the present day. Following in the footsteps of this author, we will look at the contemporary discourse and try to find occasions, when the idea of being a great power is present, the measures directed at making contemporary Russia a great state are justified, and international recognition is longed for. Thus, we will test the importance of great power status for Russian citizens today, and will explore how the previously mentioned status is understood—and what has to be done, in the opinion of the Russian people, in order to achieve it. Such an analysis seems necessary, as, firstly, the late-Yeltsinite Russia that Hopf looked at is, no doubt, different from the Russia that is being steered by Medvedev-Putin ruling tandem; and secondly, the comparison of identity features during these periods can only become valid when performed on the common base.

In today’s Russia, two main discursive areas that reflect the country’s aspirations to the great power status are historical politics and contemporary “great projects.” However, when one tries to account for the second dimension of the great power status (that of international recognition), it becomes evident that the discourse related to historical politics (the Great Patriotic War, Soviet symbols, Orthodoxy, and so on) cannot serve as a satisfying example for analysis, since it fails to escape the non-directional past orientation of historic narrative and is unhelpful for the determination of forthcoming political development. Despite the fact that the normative (or *moral*) component—so necessary for achieving the international recognition²⁵—is articulated in historical discourse quite explicitly, it appears to be meaningless, since, as we will see later, it does not have any legitimizing function, but simply refers to certain historic periods during which the country’s “great power” status was unquestionable. Therefore, we will address the discourse surrounding these projects. On the one hand, these projects are closely related to the great power identity, while on the other hand, they need to be justified through the vision of Russia’s future international role; due to their great scale and the enormous investments involved therein, pure domestic practicality would hardly become a sufficient cause for their implementation.

A Case of “Great Projects” Politics: The Okhta Center in St. Petersburg

One of the recent and most discursively well-covered projects was the attempted construction of the Okhta Center in St. Petersburg, a 396-meter-tall skyscraper intended to be the new headquarters for gas giant Gazprom.²⁶ Ratification of the project immediately caused unprecedented public discontent; among those who officially condemned the plan were the Russian Union of Architects,²⁷ the UNESCO World Heritage center,²⁸ the Russian Ministry of Culture²⁹ and various political parties.³⁰ They all believed that a glass skyscraper built close to the historic city-center could spoil the harmonious architectural ensemble of the Russian cultural capital. City officials, however, were determined to erect the tower. On repeated occasions, Gazprom’s administration, supported by the governor, had to defend its right in court to build the business center.³¹ After five years of heated confrontation between Gazprom and the city officials on the one side and the public of St. Petersburg in the person of cultural intelligentsia and political activists on the other, the problem is far from being resolved. The latter fact, however, appears to be particularly fruitful for a constructivist scholar, who tries to study Russian political identity, as the conflict has given rise to abundant discourse that includes opinions and justifications of both supporters and opponents of the project. Therefore, I will try to trace the “great power” identity in the texts of the interviews given by the project’s supporters.

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Without engaging with substantial empirical analysis, one could simply give the relevant discourse a look in order to see whether or not the demand for the great power status remains. For this, one could, following a preliminary investigation, “develo[p] analytical categories that [will] be used to construct a coding frame that is then applied to the textual data.”³² In other words, it is necessary to construct a “glossary” of classes and then, after more thorough research, to refer different words or phrases to one of these thematic categories (i.e., attempt to do what Hopf did in his research). An important condition for the choice of the classes is that they have to be indicative for the main theoretical underpinning mentioned earlier—i.e. the basic idea of a great power. A number of interviews referred to on the official website of the project³³ and on the news sites Fontanka.ru³⁴ and Vesti.ru³⁵ were selected as the sources for the analysis. This choice was conditioned by the fact that all the people, being important public figures (actors, directors, politicians and musicians), represent the popular discourse—which, as argued by Hopf, reflects the self-understanding of a society. This is particularly influential, and helps us better interpret the domestic and foreign policy actions and reactions of a given state.

To trace the great power identity, I will focus on the following thematic classes: *the role of St. Petersburg in the world; the project as a normal practice; the consequences of the project’s rejection; the consequences of the project’s acceptance & the new image of St. Petersburg.*

The most telling phrases that could fit into the first thematic class—*the role of St. Petersburg in the world*—can be found in an interview with Sergei Korneyev, vice president of the Russian Tourist Industry Union. He states that “the significance of St. Petersburg as a world cultural and political center steadily grows,”³⁶ then he also adds that “St. Petersburg is a unique phenomenon in world culture, it is far more important than the history of separate buildings.”³⁷ Film director Vladimir Bortko argues that “it is impossible to live in a five-million strong mega-polis, the largest city of the Baltic Sea region and one of the biggest cities in Europe as if it were a museum,”³⁸ therefore justifying the construction of Okhta Center. Other interviewees often compare St. Petersburg to London, Paris, and New York.³⁹ The Okhta Center is presented as a “project worthy of the city.”⁴⁰ The alternative vision of “a city with a provincial destiny”⁴¹ is mentioned only once and is treated as a very unfortunate thing that has to be corrected.

The *project* is justified as a *normal practice* that all great cities (such as New York, Paris and London) and great powers should employ.⁴² Yuri Aleksandrov, president of Russian Musical Theaters Association, draws a direct parallel:

When one looks at the famous Hearst Tower by Norman Foster in New York and also the creations of other talented architects, it is possible to call them whatever - a corn, a melon, a lamp. But first and foremost, these are the unique exemplars of the architectural thought, which people from all over the world come to visit. Likewise, they will come to St. Petersburg to visit the Okhta Center.⁴³

Sergei Korneyev shares Aleksandrov’s opinion and emphasizes:

Last year, London was recognized to be the most visited tourist center of the world. It overtook Paris. It is true, that the Tower of London remains the historic heart of the British capital. A lot of tourists visit this place, and none of them are troubled with the fact that there are a couple of skyscrapers around the fortress, including the famous buildings by Norman Foster.⁴⁴

The old vision of St. Petersburg as a northern counterpart of Amsterdam (which can no longer be seen as a truly important European capital) is not mentioned in the analyzed interviews. What is more, as any resident of St. Petersburg would confirm, it is now being addressed less often, if not altogether forgotten. Another traditional comparison with Venice is now presented as an opposition: “[The city] cannot live according to the laws of tiny Venice.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, the supporters also address the discourse of the past, inspiring authorities to “leave their mark in history, by building [their] own ‘St. Isaac’s’.”⁴⁶

The consequences of the project’s rejection: This category reveals the discursive demand by engaging with the logic of thinkable alternatives to the modernization of the city. The future without the Okhta Center is invariably pictured negatively. Actor Alexei Nilov points out that “In the worst case [the city] will turn into a beautiful ruin ... in the best case it will become a city-museum, a tourist Mecca, which will, unfortunately, be of a little avail for those who live in it.”⁴⁷ Andrei Konstantinov, a folk musician, predicts a gloomier path: “The life of a modern city cannot be like dead-water. Dead-water is a swamp.”⁴⁸ It is interesting, however, that in the supporters’ view, without distortion of the historic harmony the latter is seen as impossible to be preserved. The “cultural capital” identity of St. Petersburg is not compromised by the construction of the Okhta Center; the rejection of this project would signal a disaster that would lead to unavoidable cultural decay, be it “a swamp,” “a

beautiful ruin,” “a city-museum,” or even “a primitive society.”⁴⁹ A virtual obsession with moving ahead and espousing the *avant garde* is a customary component of the discourse. Such an obsession indicates that in the view of the project’s supporters, St. Petersburg will either become a globally important modernized city or will die off completely, having turned into a lifeless piece of memorabilia.

The consequences of the projects acceptance and the new image of St. Petersburg: Korneyev believes that “the construction of an architecturally unique business-center with new altitude dominance seems to be a logical phase in the city’s development.”⁵⁰ What is more, in Konstantinov’s words, “this project is not only a symbol of power, but also of a new thinking and energy that St. Petersburg has needed for quite a while.”⁵¹ Alexei Nilov also states that “the city cannot freeze in its development for centuries.”⁵² However, when one tries to find out what this will mean in practice, it comes down to a mere matter of economic benefits and an increase of investments. Dmitry Meskhiev, a Russian director, states that “Okhta Center means money to the city treasury and a big amount of workplaces.”⁵³ This, however, can justify neither the enormous height of the tower nor its central location. What is more, in Konstantinov’s words, the tower “will become the center of culture”⁵⁴ (i.e., it will be a cultural place in the cultural capital) and after its construction “St. Petersburg will in practice become the world cultural capital.”⁵⁵ Explicitly emphasizing the demand for the creation of a new city, the supporters cannot but address the need for preservation of what St. Petersburg, in their opinion, always was – they paradoxically argue that the preservation of the cultural heritage is simultaneously a step forward and the road to decay. Moreover, the vision of new St. Petersburg is never articulated. The supporters either yet again address its cultural status or employ axiologically indefinite rhetoric. In this light, the relevant teleology can only be formulated in terms of *eventually becoming* what the city always was. In contrast, *remaining* what it always was will necessarily lead to a catastrophe, which will make the life of the city stop. It seems, in the absence of any meaningful teleology, the only way of conceptualizing development is to shift this process into the past, so that it would have the realization of potentiality of the present as its final goal. Hence, it becomes apparent why purely remaining in its place is so disastrous—the present proper has now become the past, and the city ceases to live.

To summarize, the analysis undertaken demonstrates that the “great city” identity⁵⁶ can still be traced in popular discourse. The internationally significant status of the Russian northern capital is stressed by almost every interviewee. The alternative of failing to modernize is presented as a catastrophe that would make St. Petersburg’s development stop, and, therefore, is unthinkable for the advocates of the project. At the same time, while the first three thematic classes seem to support Hopf’s findings by explicitly showing the discursive demand for the great power status, the last two appear to give somewhat unexpected results. If this project seems to every supporter like a proper step for a great power to take, then why is it that the actual outcome would be a mere realization of the potentiality of the present? Furthermore, can there be a great power without any meaningful teleology or political project? Even if there can be, then it is certain that over the last hundred years this has not yet happened—all great powers have invariably had a particular political teleology that triggered their development and conditioned their international actions.

So how should one treat the previously cited digressions? Perhaps they could be discarded as occasional oddities, since in an interview setting, individuals can make mistakes and do not always think about longterm perspectives. Alternatively, they could be taken

seriously, as they may help to better understand the nature of power in Russia today and to answer the main question of this research: What is the meaning of “great projects” politics in contemporary Russia?

To accomplish this, one can address a deserving example of theoretical interpretation of the directionless politics in contemporary Russia, given by Sergei Prozorov. Drawing mainly on Giorgio Agamben and Alexandre Kojève, Prozorov analyzes late Soviet, Yeltsinite and contemporary periods of Russian history, looking at the “end of history” thesis from a different theoretical point of view.⁵⁷ For Prozorov, the end of history is not the victory of one teleological direction, but rather a suspension of any teleology. What is more, like Hopf, Prozorov traces the process on the level of popular discourse and devotes a lot of attention to societal self-understanding, thereby making his approach compatible to the one taken in this article. Another important feature of his analysis is that his theory actually accounts for the domestic manifestations of power, and thus, potentially, it is able to explain authorities’ striving toward the implementation of “great projects” in the context of the complete absence of any teleological normativity.

On the other hand, Prozorov limits his analysis to the domestic realm and does not address the idea of great power, which Hopf believes to be an integral part of Russian political discourse and which can be effectively interpreted only if the international system is also taken into account. Yet, merged together, these frameworks can potentially complement each other to answer the main research question. Further, I intend look at the frameworks more attentively, and will try to provide an answer to the research question, incorporating Prozorov’s findings into Hopf’s theoretical approach, while making predictions of my own regarding the prospects of Russia’s political development, given the nature of its contemporary political condition.

Social Constructivism and the Great Power Identity

For the purposes of this paper, I will avoid giving a definition of “great power.” I see no use in enumerating the factors that, added together, eventually constitute a great state. Different theoretical paradigms are likely to provide qualitatively different definitions depending on their understanding of power.⁵⁸ Instead, trying to conform with Hopf’s constructivist approach, I will first follow his logic of identity formation—without any detailed account for the realist understanding of this concept and without diminishing its importance—then focusing on the normative aspect of great power identity, as it is this part of identity puzzle that raised concerns during the case analysis.

In opposition to those who believe that a state’s identity can be constructed exclusively as a result of systemic interactions on the international level (e.g. Alexander Wendt), and also those, who treat states as rational actors that try to support the existing international balance for their own benefit (e.g. John Mearsheimer), Hopf effectively domesticizes his approach and claims that “every individual society has many identities, [each of which] has associated with it a collection of discursive practices.”⁵⁹ In his research, he opens up the black box of state and demonstrates how the domestic discourse can simultaneously enable and limit thinkable political practices of a given country (the USSR and the Russian Federation in Hopf’s case), thereby recovering the social origins of identity. He performs the latter by carrying his analysis through three important stages.

First, Hopf empirically reconstructs the “identity topography”⁶⁰ of the state in a given year—trying to free himself of any presupposed ideas about Soviet and Russian

identities, he goes through relevant social discourse, which had been chosen according to the author’s ideas of variety and representativeness,⁶¹ and creates an unsorted and not yet fully coherent list of textual evidences that could form multiple identities within a socium. However, he suspends the imposition of categories until the analysis goes far enough, and the identities naturally “settle into a particular set of meanings.”⁶² Only in this way, he argues, the “meanings remain what they mean and do not become what researcher needs to test a hypothesis.”⁶³ Secondly, he synthetically creates the discursive formations “that bring various identities together in a more coherent structure than pure induction can supply.”⁶⁴ That is, he categorizes the textual evidence in order to form a set of identities and to single out a number of those that were spread most broadly—and arguably could influence a society’s understanding of the Self and the Others. Finally, Hopf states that any decision-maker’s understanding of himself (only himself in the Soviet and Russian cases) is guided and limited by the specificities of a social cognitive structure he belongs to. Hence, the complicated structure of his social Self and the discursive representation of the external Others necessarily influences his understandings of other states and, therefore, his foreign policy-making.

Consequently, Hopf moves the process of identity-construction to the social level, claiming that international relations cannot be properly understood if one focuses on the international system *per se* without going deeper into the knowledge of Self and Others that appear to be dominant within any given society.

However, this is not to say that any identity can be created only at home. Rather, this implies that the border between the international and the domestic realms is not as solid as it seems. For instance, moving to an important subject to be expanded on below, the construction of the great power identity that is important for Hopf and plays a significant role in his conclusions is always twofold. On the one hand, the idea of it has to comply with the dominant domestic identities, as it did with almost every identity of 1955 and 1999⁶⁵ in the Russian case. In this context, it does not even matter when this conflicts with the international distribution of material (or other) capabilities and seeming hierarchical structures that, according to neorealist and systemic constructivist paradigms, have to be the only sources of the great power status. For example, it strikes an observer of Russian politics throughout the 1990s (when neither international hierarchy nor economic capacity indicated the greatness of Russia) that the country’s leaders never saw it as anything but a great power that had to be reckoned with. On the other hand, Hopf admits that “identities that are uniquely dependent on other states for validation, such as being a great power or having sovereign legitimacy, [may lie within] the realm of systemic constructivism”⁶⁶—that is, no state can become a great power without being recognized as one at the international level. Therefore, in order to interpret the great power politics employed by a state, one needs to account for both dimensions of the great power identity—domestic and international.

Hopf demonstrates convincingly that in the domestic realm the idea of great power is indeed essential for every identity that he believes to be distinct and does belong to the level of popular discourse. In order to illustrate this, he addresses a number of discursive examples that engage with the logic of thinkability and imaginability. Those examples show that both in 1955 and 1999 the alternative of losing the great power status, let alone the prospective of disintegration and decay (especially feasible in 1999), was simply unthinkable.

Iver Neumann was certainly correct when he stated that international recognition depended on two main factors: “on the one hand, [great powers] are simply greater in terms of relative resources ... and, on the other hand, they are prestigious due to some superior moral quality.”⁶⁷ In his 2008 article published in the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, he adds a third factor: *governance*, or the way states handle the relation between the one and the many. For instance, Neumann argues that during the last decade, formally democratic Russia—with considerable amount of relative resources—failed to achieve international recognition due to the tendency toward direct rule, considered by other great powers to be inappropriate.

Two final factors of great power recognition mentioned by Neumann refer to conformity with internationally accepted norms. Hopf surely understands that on the international level, a great power proper is a state that, first and foremost, complies with a “set of oughts and ought nots”⁶⁸ in its conduct *vis-à-vis* other countries and its own citizens. It is a state that is constrained and empowered by the existing normative framework. In 1955, the Soviet great power identity was “an example of an instrumental use of a norm.”⁶⁹ By supporting and sticking to the existing international norms, the Soviet Union promoted its image as a traditional great power. In 1999, the recognition of sovereignty, nonintervention, and territorial integrity as international norms “imposed a constraint on Russia’s thinkable reactions to other states’ treatment of the Russian diaspora, especially in the Baltic states.”⁷⁰ Thus, a state’s actions that function in accord with international norms are essential for preserving the great power identity.

This, of course, does not imply that by simply following the norms an actor becomes a great power; in the achievement of this status, many factors may come into play. Yet adherence to these norms is believed to be appropriate for a great power. This is also not to say that great powers immediately stop being great, when they violate internationally accepted norms. Although their status might be significantly challenged (consider, for example, American policies toward Iraq), one also has to consider the fact that compliance with the international standards is subject to a judgment made by a “standard committee”—which in turn consists of various, not always equally influential, great powers.

All in all, as demonstrated in Hopf’s analysis, the USSR and Russia tried to adhere to the idea of being a great power both domestically and on the international level. In this sense, the belief of being great was more important for the construction of the relevant identity than, say, objective distribution of capabilities, or actual relative position *vis-à-vis* other states in the international system (the factors that neorealists and systemic constructivists would pay attention to). Instead, this identity was presented as a complex phenomenon that obliterated the border between the domestic and the international.

As for the present day, a brief look at current empirical evidence shows that the idea of great power remains unchallenged, and that the discursive demand for this status is still present.⁷¹ At the same time, one cannot overlook the utter absence of any teleological normativity—the absence of norms a state must adhere to in order to become what a great power of today ought to be.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the global economic crisis, along with the continuation of the US’s aggressive actions worldwide, challenged what had become known as “Washington Consensus”⁷² and opened the way for a renegotiation and a redefinition of internationally accepted normative frameworks,⁷³ giving a chance to take an active part in this process to those who strove for the status of a great power. This

necessitates us to answer the question: What happens to great powers when the internationally accepted normative framework is in crisis? How, given the clear discursive demand for remaining a great power, do they articulate the idea of being one in the absence of clear norms to adhere to, and hence, without undoubted international recognition?

The problem of normative crises is twofold. It is important to understand both what can potentially happen to the great power discourse on the international level and what it will mean for societal self-understanding at home. Internationally, the crisis of norms is also the crisis of recognition. The pattern according to which the system itself is being constructed is in flux. Then, how would a great power perceive itself if the alternative of losing the status is simply unthinkable for the dominant discourse (as Hopf demonstrated in the Russian case), and if there is no such a thing as a great power without international recognition (recall the utter necessity of the status validation within the system)? The choice seems to be limited to two possibilities: it will either perceive itself as a guarantor of the existing (though, somewhat delegitimized) normative framework, or as an actor that prefers to adhere to a different normative framework, which would be an alternative model to the one undergoing systemic problems.

“What happens to great powers when the internationally accepted normative framework is in crisis?”

It is important to note that by “adhering to a different normative framework” I do not imply that a state simply disregards the rules of international conduct and comes up with something it believes to be normal. The process of normative change is a more complex, rarer event compared to the routine violation of commonly accepted norms. When this happens, it may conclude a whole period in the world political history; of course, Hopf, as well as a number of other scholars (e.g. Karin Fierke and Roland Bleiker),⁷⁴ believes that this process can only be launched through the evolution of the relevant discourse since the latter “provides both its own limits and also the practices capable of redefining those limits in interaction between society and the state.”⁷⁵

In his article “Political boundaries, Poetic Transgressions” Roland Bleiker convincingly demonstrates how poetic discourse, as one of the dissident practices, is able to reframe global politics. As Bleiker put it, “[poetry] seeks to undermine the linguistic and discursive foundations that have already normalized political practices ... [it] unfolds its power through a gradual and largely inaudible transversal transformation of values.”⁷⁶ Put simply, seemingly apolitical discourse can create a new language that becomes available for international actors to speak. The norms, having been created anew, can be picked up by political agents and, thus, projected to the realm of global politics, influencing international consensus and great power recognition. This vision is often used to explain the darting and rather unexpected demise of the Soviet regime in Eastern Europe. Mikhail Gorbachev, who never publicly advocated the disintegration of the USSR, picked up a new language of international communication, in which the old political order was no longer conceivable. It was the language that promoted economic prosperity, human rights and freedom of speech (*glasnost*), the language that could not embody the ideological bipolarity of global political

system and the arms race. Therefore, a different normative framework that a great power can adhere to is not an invention of the state itself—its emergence is always systemically conditioned and the moment of normative change is, at the same time, the moment for renegotiation of international normative consensus.

The great power identity can also be challenged at home. Despite the fact that it is rooted in social discourse, it cannot fulfill its true potential since it is still “uniquely dependent”⁷⁷ on the international system. Therefore, in the context of clear discursive demand for the great power status, any state undergoing the crisis of international recognition might need to compensate for the impossibility of proper manifestation of its international great power status by shifting the category of greatness to the domestic level. Arguably, this could be done either through the discursive rehabilitation of the great power’s past that would work as a reminder about the status, or, more importantly, through the pursuit of various domestic “great projects” that substitute the international ones and make the greatness visible.

The former discursive practice becomes an occasion of historical politics. Interestingly enough, it does not seem to require the choice of particular direction. Functioning as a mere compensation, having no distinct political goals to achieve in the long run, it can function well even in the complete absence of any teleology; since historical politics does not legitimize anything in the conventional sense of the word, it simply reminds us of various historical periods during which the great power status was unquestionable. Taking advantage of the irrationality of a subject, it can, for example, rehabilitate Josef Stalin and pity the victims of the Katyn Massacre, or build Orthodox churches and restore Soviet symbols, simultaneously.

As for “great projects” politics, their scale and the amount of funds invested normally exempt them from immediate domestic practicality. Instead, they might be justified discursively as “great deeds” worthy of a great power, thus linking the domestic and the international levels together. However, if the historical politics can function without legitimization in its traditional sense, and hence be devoid of teleological normativity, the justification of “great projects” politics must articulate the developmental direction to become the great power politics proper. It necessarily has to promote this or another way that the project is advancing the state forward. For instance, in the Soviet case, some “great projects” were purposefully aimed at urbanizing the country.⁷⁸ The ideals of modernity as well as the need for scientific and military preponderance for becoming a then-current great power, dictated the preferable teleology. Yet, the above-mentioned empirical case of the Okhta Center attempted construction digressed from this assumption. While reflecting the discursive demand for great power status, it did not bear signs of any teleological normativity. Since the teleology becomes evident mostly when one abstracts away from the purely domestic realm and tries to posit a state within a wider international system, it is, perhaps, useful to address the international political discourse in an attempt to find the trail of the normative language.

Vladimir Putin’s famous Munich Speech of 2007 could be taken as an instance of the Russian political discourse that obtained international significance.⁷⁹ However, when one reads the text of the speech attentively, one finds neither a manifestation of Russia’s loyalty to the existing normative framework (instead, it contains heavy criticism of the existing international system), nor an articulation of an

alternative to the existing order. As Gleb Pavlovsky wrote in the *Russian Journal*, Putin’s Munich speech, which could have been an attempt to introduce the “Moscow Consensus,” failed to promote any norms, as “it was not the language of values, it was not the language of new standards. Doctrinal weakness of the Munich speech is not in the radicalism of its rhetoric, but in the underdevelopment of the standards for politics of the new, post-American world.”⁸⁰ Then, how can this doctrinal weakness be interpreted?

If Russia is not satisfied with adhering to the Washington normative model, one could assume that it, in fact, belongs to (or wishes to create) an alternative model, as it is essential for any great power to receive international recognition in relation to the dominant normative framework. But what would this “new Russian model” be? Apparently, the Munich speech is not the right example to seek for its articulation. Why has this opportunity been missed out by the Russian political elites? One can, indeed, think that Putin could have articulated the “standards for ... the new, post-American world,”⁸¹ but for whatever reason preferred not to on this particular occasion. However, when a broader political discourse is addressed, it becomes obvious that the absence of teleology is something more complex than simply Putin’s unwillingness to articulate it. In his book *The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia*, Sergei Prozorov argues that the whole of Putin’s presidency could have been characterized by “the utter indifference to the contents of ideological maxims.”⁸² In this, Putinism differed from all other known forms of “authoritarianism of the left and the right, which limit[ed] themselves to the repertoire of some ideological orientations that [were] deployed against *others* in a Schmittean friend-enemy distinction.”⁸³ That is, the president was consciously refusing to formulate his teleo-ideological position, emphasizing his role as a “manager” who simply tried to fix the highly unstable and economically destitute condition of the 1990s. Therefore, the absence of teleological normativity should be understood in this case not as a mere unwillingness or a dull inability, but as a conscious strategy or a systemic constraint of the domestic regime.

Apparently, while looking at great power politics in contemporary Russia, one faces a situation in which the authorities extensively employ the “great projects” and historical politics at home in order to comply with the present discursive demand for the great power status while at the same time canceling all possible teleological means for the country’s political development. This becomes evident when one looks at the discourse related to Russia’s “great projects” as well as its international standing. On the other hand, according to Hopf, the idea of great power is a complex phenomenon and its articulation is only possible when one accounts for both domestic demand and international normativity. In the Russian case the second condition is clearly not fulfilled. How then is the articulation of this idea being performed, given the specificity of the situation? What is the meaning and nature of “great projects” politics in the contemporary Russian state? Unfortunately, Hopf’s theoretical framework, being simply projected to the realities of today, cannot give a satisfactory answer. Hence, his theory will need to be developed, accounting for the latter theoretical findings. In an attempt to understand the nature of this process, I will address the previously noted work by Prozorov, which offers a theoretical interpretation of the direction-less politics of contemporary Russia, while still being able to account for these projects domestically.

The Condition of Post-Communism and the Nature of “Great Projects” Politics

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama argued that with the disappearance of ideological confrontation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, history witnessed the triumph of liberal democratic ideology, and thus, effectively came to an end.⁸⁴ A mere “catch-up” that was to be performed by all other not yet fully democratic states was simply a matter of time. However, after a short period of self-satisfying confidence, “the economic crises, societal degradation and political instability of the 1990s quickly made the ‘end of history’ thesis the object of a rather crude ridicule.”⁸⁵ The fact of Russia’s revival, which was combined with the authoritarian tendencies in the style of its contemporary leadership, made some observers of Russian politics address the narratives of the past.⁸⁶ Few noticed that in this way they confirmed that “the historical process has actually come to an end and no new knowledge [was] possible...”⁸⁷

Prozorov, in his turn, tackles the problem of the Russian post-Communist condition from his own theoretical standpoint. Drawing mainly on Giorgio Agamben and Alexandre Kojève, the author claims that the ‘end of history’ is not a triumph of any teleological project (as argued by Fukuyama), but rather a suspension of the teleological dimension as such. By disengaging from the public sphere and making the whole system utterly inoperative, Russian society not only triggered the demise of the Soviet system, thereby resisting the most ambitious historical project, but also managed to undermine “every possibility of the recommencement of history during the 20 years of postcommunism.”⁸⁸ In other words, it was not the visible superiority of the liberal democratic way that *defeated* the ideological alternative, offered by the Soviet Union, but the general societal disengagement that undermined the system from within and which (like in Hopf) could be effectively traced on the level of the cultural discourse (rock poetry of Boris Grebenshikov in Prozorov’s case).⁸⁹ This disengagement is explained by Prozorov through Agamben’s reading of the Master-Slave paradox and his idea of “profane messianism,” “realized in the figure of the Workless Slave ... who, by ‘simply’ ceasing to work, breaks out of the struggle for recognition and thus breaks down the dialectical logic of Hegelian history as such.”⁹⁰

Prozorov finds the Russian word *bespredel* (беспредел) very apt for the purpose of describing the Russian post-Communist condition. The literal meaning of the term is “limitlessness.” However, “[o]riginally this term emerged as part of the criminal slang, in which it referred to the practices that violated the tacit rules of conduct in the hierarchical structure of Soviet underworld.”⁹¹ It is important to mention that it does not designate ‘illegality’ (as any acts within the underworld were already illegal). “[R]ather [it indicated] the disappearance of the very framework in which the legal and the illegal could be distinguished ... In the late-Soviet and post-Communist period *bespredel* became the favorite term to describe the socio-economic disorder and rampant criminality that characterized the later years of Perestroika and particularly the ‘market reforms’ of the Yeltsin presidency.”⁹² It becomes even more interesting when one realizes that “limitlessness” was actually limited within the solid borders of a nation state—i.e. it was localized—and yet the distinction between the legal and the illegal was an impossible one to make. In order to understand how the latter worked, I will address the Schmittian account of the functional political order with its two main founding principles, and then apply it to the realities of post-Communist Russia.

For Carl Schmitt, a political order can only work when it is founded on law (legitimacy) and is localized. Legitimacy in this case is grounded on the original act of land-taking

(*landnahme*) and grows out of the preexisting and pre-sovereign order. A sovereign political decision can be effectively made only when the law is applied to a limited political entity, which the sovereign takes the effective control of.⁹³ Put simply, the law for all is law for none—first, without the act of authoritative political decision (i.e. land-taking), the law, as a normative element, loses the anomic element of authority⁹⁴ and its relation to life, thereby turning into a “dead letter” (in Agamben’s words, “[w]ithout a concrete decision the law is dead”).⁹⁵ Secondly, the rule always has to be grounded in exception (or exclusion of the other), since the identity of the one, who is subject to the rule, can only be constructed in opposition to the one who is not. This principle gave birth to the Westphalian state system⁹⁶ and the phenomenon of a nation-state.

In the case of post-Soviet Russia, the state remained effectively localized. It did not try to extensively project its power across national borders by violating the principle of non-intervention, up until the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict; moreover, it fiercely protected its territorial integrity by all possible means, from Yeltsin’s bloody Chechen campaign to Putin’s advocacy of the doctrine of sovereign democracy.⁹⁷ It seemed the Russian elites were trying to “freeze” the post-Soviet territorial boundaries despite the fact that those limits actually were hardly historical, if not altogether artificial (e.g., in *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes that “the [Soviet] breakup occurred mechanically along the false Leninist borders, usurping from us entire Russian provinces”).⁹⁸ However, according to Schmitt, the condition of localization alone is not enough for a viable political order to function properly. There has to be an ordering authority that would impose legitimacy. Precisely the latter appeared to be impossible to accomplish in the condition of Yeltsinite *bespredel*.

In order to understand why it was impossible to legitimize the order, one has to look deeper into the process of sovereign legitimization. No sovereign state must ever “allow any residual authority other than its own.”⁹⁹ This means that any authority has to be absolute; it needs a pretension to universality. Figuratively speaking, it is a poor sovereign that never wants to conquer the world. Therefore, for an authority to be legitimate, not only does it have to be objectively able to impose an order, but it also needs a teleology. In other words, a sovereign state can control and shape the space of its “dwelling” only through advocating the truthfulness of the teleo-ideological direction of the state’s development, since the legitimization of any political order is only possible when a certain strategy is presented as a means of meeting the ends of the teleology. That is, a sovereign state must decide what the ultimate truth is and what ideological path the state is willing to accept.

In the Russian case, the sovereign state’s decision was not impossible, but was utterly inefficient. On the one hand, this happened due to the non-relation between the Russian society and the state. As Prozorov put it, “The exodus of the society from the space of value-based political antagonism left Russian politics to its own devices, so that it increasingly resembled a spectacle with an ever-diminishing audience ... the anti-communist revolution ... was manifestly not democratic, let alone liberal, but rather *perfectly nihilist*...” [emphasis original].¹⁰⁰ In the context of this nihilist revolution, any political decision was suspended as such, as due to the mutual exclusion of the state and society from their respective abodes, it failed to be meaningful, being de-semantized instead. On the other hand, Prozorov envisions Yeltsin not as a defender of “any specific form of order but [of] the very possibility of trying out various courses of political development that, however, could always be played back, suspended or reversed with no consequences for the country.”¹⁰¹

Therefore, the negation of the former socialist values and the suspension of all possible political projects led to a situation in which the positive content (as well as the ideological dimension) of the Yeltsinite regime was simply withdrawn from politics.¹⁰² In Prozorov's words, "[i]t is evident that the postcommunist *bespredel* is precisely a materialization of this constitutive void of the law as that which remains when the teleo-ideological normativity, by which power legitimizes itself, has been rendered inoperative."¹⁰³

The previously mentioned "materialization of ... void"¹⁰⁴ led to a situation in which the understanding of "normal" political order rapidly vanished from the political space. This is not to say that all political parties became colorless, rather this distinction appeared to be profoundly meaningless. For instance, during the Constitutional Crisis of 1993, the Communist Party fought for the salvation of parliamentarism, while the democrat Yeltsin advocated a more authoritarian constitution and used tanks to shoot at the Russian White House in the name of democratization.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, defeated and imprisoned leaders of the parliamentary opposition were not prosecuted, but were instead set free and were allowed to continue their political careers. In this historical (or, rather, post-historical) condition, everything became potentially normal, and hence, nothing could claim the rightfulness of its norm.

Remaining localized, Russia underwent complete cancellation of inner normative limits, and thus, reduced its political realm to Arendtian "public sphere."¹⁰⁶ The latter, still being limited by the city walls (national borders), was no longer limited by the commonly accepted norms. In the absence of normative limits (i.e. shared legitimacy, which in the context of *bespredel* never managed to emerge) the actors tend to act bravely, but wildly. It is an utterly unbalanced space, dangerous and unpredictable.¹⁰⁷ In the Russian political discourse this time is remembered as *likhie devyanostye* (лихие девяностые).¹⁰⁸ Loosely translated into English, this phrase would sound like "the dashing nineties." This description not only emphasizes the rather vigorous and inconsequential character of the country's development but also bears an explicitly negative connotation of the dangerous times.

While trying to understand Putin's response to the anomic inoperosity of the Yeltsin period, Prozorov concludes by saying that the transformation became possible through the re-appropriation of the space of *bespredel* "as the new abode of the postcommunist subject."¹⁰⁹ For this, Putin introduced a rather oxymoronic principle of the "dictatorship of law," which is interpreted by Prozorov through the Agambenian framework:

[D]ictatorship of law' ... supplements the 'proper' (legal) power of the law with its very opposite ('dictatorship') that reveals that the former has been rendered inoperative and requires the facilitating force of the latter to maintain the semblance of the existence of the law ... [it] exemplifies a 'commissarial type' of dictatorship, in which the application of the law is suspended to salvage the concrete order that the law inscribes.¹¹⁰

Thus, Putin tried to save the law by suspending its application, thereby introducing a generalized "state of exception" that could ensure the survival of the law in a state that is inoperative. But can the legitimacy be reclaimed through its merging with dictatorship? And, most importantly, to what extent does the Putin strategy change the nature of the previously described regime?

To answer the first question one must address Giorgio Agamben and mention the distinction he makes between legitimacy and authority, as well as the way in which they interact. In *State of Exception*, he writes:

The normative element [i.e. law] needs the anomic element [i.e. authority] in order to be applied, but, on the other hand, *auctoritas* can assert itself only in the validation or suspension of *potestas* ... As long as the two elements remain correlated yet conceptually, temporally, and subjectively distinct their dialectic - though founded on fiction - can nevertheless function in some way. But when they tend to coincide in a single person, when the state of exception ... becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms itself into a killing machine.¹¹¹

This, of course, does not mean that the generalized state of exception unavoidably brings death and tyrannical brutality; however, there is no mechanism within such a system that can prevent the latter from happening. Legitimacy and authority, being bound and blurred together, fail to resume the dialectic that necessarily has to be present and, consequently, both fail to acquire their meaning.

Prozorov’s answer to the second question is unambiguous:

Reconstituting what is already *destitute*, the contemporary regime remains as post-historical as Yeltsin’s in its evacuation of all historical tasks from the sphere of politics, yet, unlike the Yeltsin presidency, ventures to order the field of postcommunist *bespredel* through the proliferation of purely ritualistic manifestations of authority that maintain a semblance of order amid the generalized state of exception [emphasis original].¹¹²

This helps understand how, first, Putin managed to encounter and stabilize the situation of *bespredel*; and, second, how he, while doing so, failed to resume the historical process and did not acquire any distinguishable identity or meaningful political authority.

This order introduces an unusual situation of the rule of power that appears to be devoid of any ideological content. This power *as such* is colorless; it can take any side and, as long as there is nothing for it to achieve, it remains there for its own sake. To use Andrei Fursov’s fortunate neologism, one can call it *cratocracy*,¹¹³ which cannot be opposed, as there is nothing it can be put in opposition to. It seems that, remaining technically illegitimate in the absence of any historical project, *cratocracy* is left with formalized rituals that are devoid of any historical content. It acts like the Kojévian *snob*, who leads the life “according to totally formalized values—that is, values, completely empty of all ‘human’ content in the ‘historical sense’,”¹¹⁴ who “tirelessly reproduces [rituals] with no developmental or progressive effects whatsoever.”¹¹⁵ Then, what happens, when a state becomes the Kojévian *snob*? How can it effectively function within a broader international system?

It seems, when a political system is rendered inoperative, when power is left with no meaningful ideology and can only manifest itself through reproducing the rituals that do not advance it toward anything but simply allow it to stay in power, nothing makes the state cease to exist. Potentially, it can support the illusion of being a “real” political actor for however long, despite the fact that the conduct of politics proper is no longer possible. Having nothing to achieve in the long run, it can simply focus on the immediate practicality and pursue its own benefit by working out the problems as they arise. This, arguably, can be one interpretation of Prozorov’s account of the Russian foreign policy from 2008 onward. In his article “From Katechon to Intrigant: the Breakdown of the Post-Soviet Nomos,”¹¹⁶ Prozorov analyzes the 2008 Russian–Georgian conflict in the context of the post-Soviet spatial order. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s theory of baroque sovereignty, the author argues that contemporary Russian foreign policy complies with the role, which Benjamin called *Intriguer* (Intrigant). More precisely, the current realities suggest that

Russian policymakers, balancing between the roles of *tyrant* (who would accumulate power lacking any sort of restraint) and *martyr* (who would fall victim to the “disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity with which he is divinely invested and the humble estate of his humanity”¹¹⁷), employ the policy of ceaseless plotting and scheming.

So far, this works well for them because of two factors. On the one hand, instead of reintroducing ideology, the policymakers, being entirely aware of the nature of their political identity and of the utter impossibility of enacting their transcendence, can well resort to purely immanent governance that consists of short-term plots and conspiracies and that does not bear any signs of a meaningful long-term political project.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, in order to pursue this strategy, Russia as a relatively influential and important political actor can afford to make certain political moves that would be unthinkable for a less powerful state (e.g. to intervene in Georgia, if needed).

Prozorov is also right when he argues that the anomic condition, which appeared to be rather stable in being localized within the borders of a nation state, might eventually fail to maintain itself as an entity *in time and space*, while projected to a wider post-Soviet political realm, since it was precisely the localization that allowed it to exist as “an entity distinct from others.”¹¹⁹ The author compares this political body with the Agambenian camp, inside which the norms are suspended and everything becomes possible, and reminds us that the latter “only exists by virtue of a prior delimitation that transforms it into a zone of confinement, marked by a fundamental impossibility of flight. It is only due to these limits that the camp can function as the space of the horrifying experiment with the limitless.”¹²⁰

However, leaving the latter constraint aside, is it indeed the case that any state can follow the logic of *Intriguer* and function well without articulating its teleology? As was noted previously, a *cratocracy* cannot but perform formalized rituals that are devoid of any historical content and, consequently, become just occasions of cratocratic exhibitionism.¹²¹ Evidently, there are a variety of those rituals—that of a democratic ally, of an opponent to unipolarity etc. One would assume that a particularly important ritual for Russia is that of being a great power, given the ever-present discursive demand demonstrated by Hopf. Any Russian sovereign to remain in power cannot just follow the international routine without trying to act like the leader of a great power. But is it possible to conduct great power politics in a mere ritualistic manner?

It follows from Hopf that a great power necessarily has to articulate its teleological normativity, as in the absence of one it ceases to obtain the great power status on the international level, since the international recognition is its essential component. But the only possible manner of conduct for a state, which lives in the post-historical condition of post-Communism, is the directionless scheming presented by Prozorov in “From Katechon to Intrigant.” Therefore, Russia faces the need to be recognized as a great power domestically, but it is unable to pursue the great power politics proper, which requires a transcendental goal of its political development that Russia cannot possibly articulate, given the nature of its identity-less domestic regime. Then, how can this paradox be solved? Apparently, there is nothing left for it in this situation except for a mere simulation of the “great power” status. In an attempt to perform the latter Russian political elites simply have to shift the idea of greatness into the domestic realm and realize various “great projects” that create the illusion of the country’s great status to comply with the domestic demand.

By pursuing this policy, the Russian power structure engages in the domestic simulation of being a great power, thereby fulfilling the need of being perceived as one. Nevertheless, this illusion remains an illusion, and the discursive digressions discovered are its worthy confirmations. Perhaps they appear because of the fact that the ritual of great power politics seems to be an oxymoronic combination. The acute need for the articulation of Russia’s prospective international standing, given that the case-study of the great project (the Okhta Center) has been realized, conflicts with the ritualistic nature of its actual implementation. Therefore, this articulation is suspended, which makes it possible for an attentive observer to uncover the illusionary nature of its justification.

All in all, this work demonstrates that, while being extremely valuable apart, both theoretical frameworks, if merged together, can advance a researcher in their understanding of the specificities of post-Communist political identity and provide an answer to the main research question: What is the meaning of “great projects” politics in contemporary Russia?

Conclusion

This article has addressed the problem of Russia’s revival and the nature of its present political identity. It has demonstrated that the realist reading of the country’s comeback as a milder version of the USSR seems to be somewhat superficial and cannot account for certain features of its contemporary political standing. Hopf’s social constructivism shows that the “great power” status was, in fact, firmly embedded within the multiple identities of Russian society, and the option of losing this is altogether unthinkable for both policymakers and the population. This has helped to explain the ever-present discursive representation of Russia being a great power.

In an attempt to extend Hopf’s framework into the present day, I examined a real-life example. I decided to focus on one of the “great projects” that the Russian political elites have tried to implement today (the Okhta Center), as, given the necessary duality of the great power identity (i.e. its domestic roots and the need for systemic recognition), it could make the check account for both levels, thereby ensuring its theoretical validity. Despite the fact that the analysis confirmed the presence of the demand for the great power status, it also revealed the utter absence of any teleological normativity in the project’s justification. The latter detail raised questions about the nature of Russia’s great power politics, since for Hopf the great power identity, due to the need of a normative component, always had to be defined in teleological terms.

In order to explain this digression, I addressed the theory of Sergei Prozorov. He interpreted the Russian post-Communist condition as the Kojèvian “proper end of history,”¹²² which did not designate a triumph of any teleological project, but rather a suspension of the teleological dimension as such. The author argued that, having disengaged from the political sphere in the late 1980s, Russian society rendered the whole system inoperative and “left Russian politics to its own devices.”¹²³ This led to the cancellation of all historical tasks and meaningful political projects, and hence, to the suspension of the teleo-ideological dimension. This conditioned the impossibility of defining sovereign legitimacy and deprived Russia’s power of any political identity. As a result of this, during the 1990s the country found itself in a situation of *bespredel*, which implied the localization of the absence of legitimate order. Subsequently, President Putin introduced the principle of the “dictatorship of law” that, nevertheless, did not change the post-historical nature

of the regime, but led to the necessity of ordering the condition through purely ritualistic manifestations of authority. Putinite *cratocracy*, having no teleological goals to achieve and no ideological standpoints to be opposed by, maintained “a semblance of order amid the generalized state of exception.”¹²⁴ This “state of exception” became the rule.

In this condition, the ritualized actions of a state substitute the politics proper, thereby relegating its policies from those directed towards a transcendental goal to purely immanent governance, normally characterized by immediate practicality. Consequently, it becomes impossible for such an actor to pursue the great power politics in its traditional sense, since the latter always requires the articulation of teleological normativity. Therefore, a state, whose political identity bears a clear demand for the great power status (such as Russia, for instance), cannot but simulate this type of politics by resorting to the rehabilitation of various historical narratives and the implementation of domestic “great projects” that would work as a substitution for the “real” great deeds. However, this ritualized great power politics always fails to express teleology, and thus, uncovers its illusionary nature.

Thus, the present research provides an insight into the problem of identity-construction in the condition of post-Communism. The attempted theoretical integration helped overcome the limitations of both approaches, namely, Hopf’s inability to account for the absence of teleological normativity, when this type of politics is concerned, and Prozorov’s focus on the domestic realm as well as the absence of the idea of great power, which, is, indeed, an integral part of the Russian political discourse.

As for the *cratocratic* condition itself, it seems, at first sight, that, without any possibility of meaningful ideological opposition, it can remain in power for however long it wishes to. It would just support the illusion of being a ‘real’ political actor through the implementation of ritualized practices, and if some practices appear to be unfeasible, then it can simply construct its false identity along somewhat different lines. However, one also has to remember that the generalized state of exception is a very specific condition where there is no possible way to distinguish between right and wrong, legal or illegal, there are no embedded mechanisms that can establish a moral ground or prevent horrifying inhumanity. On the one hand, it gives the *cratocracy* a potentiality of slipping into a disaster. But at the same time, it opens up a way for the pure facticity of human action to prevail over whatever the regime would be able to come up with. When everything is potentially normal and, yet, nothing truly is, an activity can exhaust itself in the mere fact of its being performed, and hence, anything that happens can be equal in its performative strength (or weakness). Therefore, provided that the facticity of the action is manifested as its conceptual extremity at the same time, this action can potentially break away from the paradox of the anomic inoperocity.

The signs of resistance are already visible, if one looks closer at the realities on the ground. Interestingly enough, the less ideologically coherent the Russian opposition becomes, the more it matters and the stronger resonance it provokes. It seems, teleologically incompatible entities unite in the name of pure action, and in the absence of any explicitly political claims they struggle for the realization of the potentiality of the present (“Strategy 31” meetings being one example).¹²⁵ The opposition meets for the sake of the right to meet, thus positing the fact of their action as its ultimate goal. Yet, remaining somewhat political they fall victims of the ritualistic fight with extremism. When the apolitical discursive opposition is concerned, no doubt, one could address the studied case

of the Okhta Center and look at those who have (rather successfully) manifested their discontent. However, the analysis of modes resistance cannot be possibly covered within the limits of the present research; therefore, I will leave this for further investigation.

NOTES

1. Angela E. Stent, “Restoration and Revolution in Putin’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, 6 (August 2008): 1089.

2. Sergei Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): x.

3. See Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).

4. Steven Rosefielde, *Russia in the 21st Century: The Prodigal Superpower* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 2-3.

5. For example, Georgi Derluguian, “The Fourth Russian Empire?” PONARS Policy Memo No. 411 (December 2006); Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications,” *Washington Quarterly* 30, 2 (Spring 2007): 107-122; and Fiona Hill, *Energy Empire: Oil, Gas and Russia’s Revival* (London: Foreign Policy Center, 2004).

6. Aleksandr Morozov, “Has the Postsecular Age Begun?” *Religion, State & Society* 36, no. 1 (2008): 39.

7. In 2000, the last Russian emperor, Nicholas II, and his family were recognized as martyred saints by the Russian Orthodox Church.

8. For example, the construction of the Okhta Center in St. Petersburg.

9. For example, the President’s Committee for the Realization of the Projects of National Priority, “Prioritetnye Natsional’nye Proekty” (Projects of National Priority), available at <http://www.rost.ru/> (accessed December 2, 2010).

10. The current Russian national anthem uses the same music as the Soviet one did and it is played every midnight on state radio stations.

11. Interfax News Agency, “Medvedev posetil rozhdstvenskuyu sluzhbu v khrame Khrista Spasitelya” (Medvedev Attended the Christmas Service in the Church of Christ the Savior), *Interfax*, available at <http://www.interfax.ru/politics/news.asp?id=172285> (accessed March 23, 2011).

12. A detailed account of this failure was given in Michael Cox, ed., *Rethinking of Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia* (London: Pinter, 1998).

13. John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 52.

14. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001): 31.

15. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 52.

16. Boris Yeltsin’s 1992 speech quoted in Thomas Ambrosio, “The Geopolitics of Demographic Decay: HIV/AIDS and Russia’s Great Power Status,” *Post Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 1 (January-March 2006): 4.

17. Rosefielde, *Russia in the 21st Century: The Prodigal Superpower*, 2.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 & 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002): 290.

20. Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994): 386.

21. See Ladno.ru, “Putin i Portugaliya” (Putin and Portugal), available at <http://www.ladno.ru/opinion/2882.html> (accessed December 2, 2010).

22. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 41.

23. *Ibid.*, 261.

24. Ambrosio, “The Geopolitics of Demographic Decay: HIV/AIDS and Russia’s Great Power Status,” 3.

25. Iver Neumann, “Russia as a great power, 1815-2007,” *Journal of International Relations and*

Development 11 (2008): 131-132.

26. Okhta Center Official Website, "Obshchestvenno-delovoy rayon" (Social and Business District), available at http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/about/plan/social_business/ (accessed December 2, 2010).

27. Architectural News Agency, "Soyuz arkhitektorov Rossii vykazal protest protiv neboskryoba 'Gazprom-siti'" (The Russian Union of Architects Protests Against 'Gazprom-City' Skyscraper), Architectural News Agency, available at http://www.archi.ru/agency/news_current.html?nid=2904 (accessed December 2, 2010).

28. UNESCO World Heritage Committee, "Decisions Adopted at the 31st Session of the World Heritage Committee" (Christchurch, 2007): 116, available at <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2007/whc07-31com-24e.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2010).

29. Kommersant.ru, "Zaklyucheniye" (Final Report), Kommersant.ru, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?docid=1256204> (accessed December 2, 2010).

30. "Peterburgskiy sud rassmotrit isk o stroitelstve 'Okhta-tsentra'" (Court of St. Petersburg Will Examine the Suit Against the Okhta Center Construction), *RIA Novosti*, September 11, 2009, available at <http://www.rian.ru/society/20091109/192575131.html> (accessed December 2, 2010).

31. Although the interests of Gazprom and those of the Russian Government, no doubt, cannot be equated (as the Ukrainian gas crisis of 2008-2009 showed), their interdependence should not be underestimated as well. Energy has become an important foreign policy tool, and Russia manages to use it to reassert its dominant position fairly successfully both westward and in the East.

32. Cynthia Hardy, Bill Harley, and Nelson Phillips, "Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis: Two Solitudes?" *APSA Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 20.

33. Okhta Center Official Website, <http://www.ohta-center.ru> (accessed February 20, 2011).

34. Fontanka.ru - St. Petersburg News, "Okhta-Tsentr" (The Okhta Center), available at <http://www.fontanka.ru/gpcity/> (accessed February 20, 2011).

35. See Vesti.ru, <http://www.vesti.ru> (accessed February 20, 2011).

36. Sergei Korneyev, "Istoriya eshchyo ne dopisana" (The History is Not Yet Written), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=87> (accessed December 2, 2010).

37. Ibid.

38. Vesti.ru, "'Okhta-tsentr' raskolol Sankt-Peterburg" (The Okhta Center split St. Petersburg), available at <http://www.vesti.ru/videos?vid=247313> (accessed February 20, 2010).

39. Boris Mironov, "'Okhta-tsentr' v tryokh rakursakh" (The Okhta Center in Three Perspectives), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=65> (accessed December 2, 2010).

40. Dmitry Meskhiev, "Po stopam Petra Velikogo" (Following Peter the Great), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=97> (accessed December 2, 2010).

41. Yuri Alexandrov, "Pryzhok v vysotu" (A Jump into the Height), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=71> (accessed December 2, 2010).

42. Boris Eifman, "Bashnyu 'Gazproma' podderzhal ne radi pomoshchi vlastey" (I Supported the Gazprom Tower Not Because of the Help of the Government), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=75> (accessed December 2, 2010); Victor Lebedev, "'Okhta-tsentr' ukrasit depressivny rayon" (The Okhta Center Will Decorate a Depressing District), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=82> (accessed December 2, 2010); and Alexandrov, "Pryzhok v vysotu" (A Jump into the Height).

43. Alexandrov, "Pryzhok v vysotu" (A Jump into the Height).

44. Korneyev, "Istoriya eshchyo ne dopisana" (The History is Not Yet Written).

45. Viatcheslav Semenenko, "Peterburg ne mozhet zhit' po zakonom malenkoy Venetsii" (St. Petersburg Cannot Live According to the Laws of Tiny Venice), available at <http://www.fontanka.ru/2010/04/27/040/> (accessed December 2, 2010).

46. Meskhiev, "Po stopam Petra Velikogo" (Following Peter the Great).

47. Alexei Nilov, "Iz bolot - k nebesam" (From Swamp to Heaven), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=74> (accessed December 2, 2010)

48. Andrei Konstantinov, "Novatorskomu iskusstvu - sovremennye zaly" (Advanced Stages for Advanced Art), available at <http://www.ohta-center.ru/ru/comments/?id=83> (accessed December 2, 2010)

49. Ibid; Nilov, "Iz bolot - k nebesam" (From Swamp to Heaven); Eifman, "Bashnyu 'Gazproma'

podderzhal ne radi pomoshchi vlastey” (I Supported the ‘Gazprom’ Tower Not Because of the Help of the Government); and Alexandrov, “Pryzhok v vysotu” (A Jump into the Height).

50. Korneyev, “Istoriya eshchyo ne dopisana” (The History is Not Yet Written).

51. Konstantinov, “Novatorskomu iskusstvu - sovremennye zaly” (Advanced Stages for Advanced Art).

52. Nilov, “Iz bolot - k nebesam” (From Swamp to Heaven).

53. Meskhiev, “Po stopam Petra Velikogo” (Following Peter the Great).

54. Konstantinov, “Novatorskomu iskusstvu - sovremennye zaly” (Advanced Stages for Advanced Art).

55. Ibid.

56. Despite the fact that it is not the same as the “great power” identity of the Russian state, it has undoubted relation to the latter.

57. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, xi.

58. For example, see different definitions given in: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979); Arnold Toynbee, *The World After the Peace Conference* (Humphrey Milford and Oxford University Press, 1926); Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2004).

59. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 1.

60. Ibid, 20.

61. More precisely, Hopf tried to choose the textual data that, on the one hand, was not heavily censored and, on the other hand, was read by the vast majority of Russian and Soviet citizens as well as policymakers.

62. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 25.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid, 20.

65. Those years were chosen by Hopf as the most critical ones in the country’s political development, 1955 being the peak year of post-Stalinist struggle for power and 1999 being the final year of Yeltsinite epoch.

66. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 290.

67. Neumann, “Russia as a great power, 1815-2007,” 131.

68. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 282.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid, 283.

71. See, for example, descriptions of Saint-Petersburg’s role in the world in Korneyev, “Istoriya eshchyo ne dopisana” (The History is Not Yet Written).

72. John Williamson, “Did the Washington Consensus Fail?” (lecture, Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington, USA, November 6, 2002), available at <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?ResearchID=488> (accessed March 23, 2011).

73. Gleb Pavlovsky, “Konsensus ischet stolitsu” (Consensus Looks for the Capital), *Russian Journal*, March 26, 2010, available at <http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Konsensus-ischet-stolicu> (accessed December 2, 2010).

74. See Karin M. Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); and Roland Bleiker, “Political boundaries, poetic transgressions,” in Louise Amoore, ed., *The Global Resistance Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005).

75. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 283.

76. Bleiker, “Political boundaries, poetic transgressions,” 420.

77. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 290.

78. Ibid, 50-51.

79. Vladimir Putin, “Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” October 2, 2007, available at <http://wakeupfromyourslumber.com/node/646> (accessed December 2, 2010).

80. Pavlovsky, “Konsensus ischet stolitsu” (Consensus Looks for the Capital).

81. Ibid.

82. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 205.

83. Ibid, 204.

84. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).
85. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, x.
86. For example, Paul du Quenoy, "Putin as Mussolini Redux: Leadership Style in 21st Century Russia," (lecture, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, May 17, 2010).
87. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, x.
88. *Ibid.*, 248.
89. *Ibid.*, xii.
90. Alexander Astrov, "The janitor? Could be!" review of Prozorov's *The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia*, in *Radical Philosophy* (January/February 2010): 61.
91. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 148.
92. *Ibid.*
93. John P. McCormick, "Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany," *Political Theory* 22, no. 4 (1994): 621-2.
94. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 86.
95. Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception - Der Ausnahmezustand" (lecture, European Graduate School, Leuk-Stadt, Switzerland, August 2003).
96. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, ed. Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan (Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. "Westphalian State System."
97. The main points of the doctrine can be found in Derek Averre, "'Sovereign Democracy' and Russia's Relations with the European Union," *Demokratizatsiya* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 177-182.
98. Alexander Solzhenitsyn quoted in Igor Zevelev, *Russia and its New Diasporas* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001): 54.
99. Kees Van der Pijl, *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq* (London: Pluto Press, 2006): 6.
100. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 54.
101. Prozorov quoted in Astrov, "The janitor? Could be!," 61.
102. Even in his resignation speech on December 31, 1999, Yeltsin articulated his main mission (which, as he thought, he managed to accomplish during the 1990s) not as making something out of the new Russia, but as closing the way back to the past (Boris Yeltsin, "Resignation Speech," December 31, 1999, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU4Z0eGV4o> (accessed December 2, 2010)).
103. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 201.
104. *Ibid.*
105. See Rudolf Pikhoya, "Konstitutsionno-politicheskiy krizis Rossii 1993 g. Khronika sobytiy i kommentariy istorika" (1993 Constitutional and Political Crisis in Russia, Chronicle of the Events, Comments of a Historian), *Otechestvennaya Istoriya* no. 4 (2002): 5.
106. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Hannah Arendt," available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/#CitPubSph> (accessed March 24, 2011).
107. See Arendtian distinction between public and political spheres in Ancient Greece in Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in Jerome Kohn, ed., *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005): 93-153.
108. One of the Russian TV channels (NTV) showed a documentary named "Likhie Devyanostye," which covered the period of Russian history from 1991 until 1999.
109. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 199.
110. *Ibid.*, 202-203.
111. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 86.
112. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 203.
113. *Ibid.*, 207.
114. Alexandre Kojève quoted in Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 71.
115. *Ibid.*, 71.
116. Sergei Prozorov, "From Katechon to Intrigant: the Breakdown of the Post-Soviet Nomos," forthcoming.

117. Benjamin quoted in Prozorov, “From Katechon to Intrigant.”
118. Prozorov, “From Katechon to Intrigant.”
119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid.
122. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 11.
123. Ibid, 54.
124. Ibid, 203.
125. See “Russian Police Break Up ‘Article 31’ Protests,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/Russian_Police_Break_Up_Article_31_Protests/2000057.html (accessed December 2, 2010).