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I would like to address an issue that deals with my country and which can give a more clear-cut understanding of processes that are unfolding in present-day Russia. For the last few decades, the most salient feature of Russia has been uncertainty. What can this uncertainty evolve into; is it dangerous, or will it bring about new perspectives? Will Russia prosper, or will it sink into chaos? In fact, Russia has proven to be very controversial in the past five years, especially in its foreign policy. Nobody knows what to expect of it.

The uncertainty is still there: political processes are barely transparent, dialogue with public opinion is scarce, and is different from what the "old" democracies have to offer. I'll attempt to look for a clue to this situation in Russia's history. Vassily Klyuchevsky, a well-known Russian historian, has said, "The history of Russia is the history of colonization." I would like to show the reasons for, and the extent of, the spread of this colonization.

1. Map of Russian territories in the 12th century.

It's only in the south-west that Russia bordered on other countries. Its remaining borders were open, with nomadic tribes and uninhabited areas behind them. By then, the state of Kievan Rus was over 300 years old. It began as a vast territory stretching from the Black to the Baltic seas. People felt unified due to the fact that they spoke one and the same language, and because one dynasty ruled both the Novgorod Republic and the Duchy of Kiev. Two colonization processes started as early as the 10th century. The first one was undertaken by the Novgorod Republic which was exploring the territories to its north and north-east. The second was a massive migration process from the steppes belonging to the Kievan state to the heavily forested regions of north-eastern Russia. Both of those processes were a result of personal initiative of common people who were fleeing nomadic tribes. Others were driven eastward in search of fur of sables, foxes, and ermines. When an area became inhabited, authority was established. As a result, the original territories decayed. The decline of Kievan Rus started in the middle of the 12th century. After the Mongol invasion many south-western towns were deserted for good, while most of the north-eastern towns were quickly revived.

Map 2.

A century later, Russian lands were bordered on the empire of Genghis Khan and his successors. The only direction the colonization could take was north-east, to the Urals. 150 years later when the Mongolian Golden Horde disintegrated, these territories were explored by Russians. This triggered the so-called Wild Field colonization which lasted from the 16th to the 18th century. Because of its fertile soil, this is now Russia's main agricultural region. Initially, the process was started by individuals, too. People fled from the authorities, from serfdom and settled new territories. Those people were called Cossacks. Only then did the state gain foothold in those lands.

Map3

This is the modern map of the south of Russia. Voronezh was founded in 1585, Livny in 1586, Valuyki in 1590 and Stary Oskol in 1593. These cities were frontier fortresses. It was a difficult time for Russia which had been defeated in the Livonian war. The country was devastated, and the population reduced by at least one third. The Wild Field colonization continued, and the following cities were founded: Tambov in 1636, Borisoglebsk in 1646, Novy Oskol in 1647. Meanwhile, the colonization of Western Siberia was going on even though it, at first sight, looks only like its exploration. Yermak seized the capital of the Siberian Khanate. But again it was an individual initiative. His expedition was sponsored by the Stroganovs, a family of highly successful Russian

merchants, industrialists, landowners, and statesmen of the 16th-20th centuries who were eventually granted the status of nobility. Ivan the Terrible only learned about that war after it had been over.

A short period—less than a century—of the Siberian conquest followed. The fortress in Okhotsk was built in 1647. It was when the Russians made it to the Pacific Ocean where they confronted the colonization of Qing Empire of the Chinese. Russians were driving the Chinese eastwards all the way until 1917. Before the 1917 revolution, Russia colonized northern Manchuria. And there were other areas subject to Russian colonization in the Caucasus and Middle Asia.

To recap:

The colonization process started as an individual endeavor. The state followed individuals, and not the other way around.

Because of the permanent colonization processes, the country was poor in human resources. The most common Russian myth is about the country's huge population. But it has always been underpopulated. In the middle of the 18th century, the territory stretching from the Urals to the Pacific Ocean was managed by 140 people. When Peter I. in the western city of St. Petersburg asked for carpenters, each carpenter was bargained for individually. Napoleon's army was defeated in 1812 because its logistics didn't work for a sporadically populated and poor country as Russia was at that time.

As a result of Russia's lack of human resources, economical, political and cultural institutions were underdeveloped.

The government didn't realize that the human resources were scarce and exploited them irrationally. This was, for example, the case for the Livonian war led by Ivan the Terrible, the demographic catastrophes during the rule of Joseph Stalin, and especially WWII in which the USSR lost about 30,000,000 people.

We can thus observe a profound contradiction in Russian history. It's a clash between its colonization tendencies and its lack of human resources that would allow it to carry out its colonization plans. On the one hand, the government tied people down to the land and, on the other hand, it encouraged them to invade new territories. It's obvious that no legislature can harmonize both processes.

What is going on now? I think we face the necessity of a new colonization, or re-colonization; i.e. we need to colonize the once-colonized territories. I mean Eastern Siberia and the Far East. These are rich regions with a very under-developed infrastructure. Even in the central parts of Russia, the infrastructure is very poorly developed in comparison to Moscow. People are dissatisfied with Siberia and move to different regions with a better infrastructure. As a result, vast territories become depopulated. In many rural areas, population density is 10 times lower than it was in 1913. If this process is not stopped, Russia runs the risk of losing some of its territories. President Putin has accentuated the demographic crisis. Human resources in Russia are the least they have ever been. No considerable improvement is to be expected in the near future. The only way out for the nation would be to invest in its infrastructure, to facilitate migration, and to improve life standards in all parts of the country. This is a new and yet a traditional task for Russians. It's a challenge for ambitious people.

I see no other solution. A different deployment of its energy will be synonymous with the country's destitution, death, and removal from history altogether.

It's easy to realize what is going on in Russia. No matter who Russia's president is and what he says, the most important thing is to see whether there are investments in infrastructure or not. When analyzing the rhetoric of Russian politicians, this is the only thing to which to pay attention.