The empire's Siberian knots

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Siberia survives as a single name for a territory covering two-thirds of Russia. Yet it comprises well over a dozen regions, republics and territories. Look at how the borders of Siberia were defined, writes Mikhail Rozhanskiy, and you grasp the imperial nature of Russia's social space.

A burden and a mission

One of the most frequently cited books on the prospects for Russia’s development published since the turn of the millennium is The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold, by the historian Fiona Hill and economist Clifford G. Gaddy. [1] The book has provoked radically opposing responses in Russia. Some have read it as a convincing diagnosis of Russia’s fundamental problems, while others accused its authors of pursuing a geopolitical agenda. The book advances a simple and compelling thesis: that the factories and towns established in Siberia under the Soviet state-planned economy are unsustainable. Unless Russia radically reduces its “Siberian economy”, it will never climb out of the trap into which the country has driven itself and never join the ranks of developed nations.

It is beyond doubt that, during the Soviet period, northern Asia was developed on an unprecedented scale, because in a state-run economy any losses could be written off in the name of long-term (though not always clear) goals. The Soviet authorities elevated Mikhail Lomonosov’s famous saying - “Russia’s power will grow with Siberia” – to another level. The origins of this policy go back to the late sixteenth century, although it was pursued most consistently in the twentieth, after the Tsarist government built the Trans-Siberian Railway and in the wake of transformations introduced by the Soviet regime.

Nor is there anything new in the idea that sustaining the Siberian territories requires far more resources than Siberia itself can yield. The decision to support Cossack forays across the Ural mountains following Vasily Yermak’s 1582 victory over the Tatars was taken only after much deliberation. And during the course of late-nineteenth-century discussions of plans for the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the St Petersburg newspaper Grazhdanin (“The citizen”) argued that St. Petersburg’s Nevsky Prospekt alone was “worth five times more than all of Siberia”. Similarly, the concept of
“shrinking” Russia, popular among economists and geopolitical pundits after the 1990s collapse of the Soviet economy, relegated Siberia (with the exception of the gas-producing region of Tyumen) to the periphery, whose interests had to be disregarded for the sake of Russia’s economic development. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy essentially present a critique of the geo-economic illusions fostered by the political and economic omnipotence of the centre, while reasserting the view of Siberia as seen from that very centre, which does not regard Siberia as a place where people live but as a resource for the country’s economic development. The contradiction between the enormous scale of the geopolitical plans and economic projects on the one hand and the weak infrastructure and bad living conditions on the other constitutes a key contradiction in Russia’s development. Both the late nineteenth century opponents of building the Trans-Siberian Railway and the champions of “shrinking Russia” a hundred years later reacted to this contradiction but their responses were rooted in the same view of the territories beyond the Urals on which the authorities based their decisions, i.e. a view from the centre, cast towards the space in the east.

A 2013 book on the Siberian factor in Russia’s development by Valery Zubov and Vladislav Inozemtsev deserves at least as much attention as Hill and Gaddy’s The Siberian Curse. Valery Zubov, an economist and former governor of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, concludes his afterword to the book with the following succinct summary of his main thesis: “Siberia is not Russia’s problem but rather its opportunity.”

Like Hill and Gaddy, Zubov and Inozemtsev highlight the inconsistency of a centralizing geo-economic approach. Unlike the American authors though, they see the root of the problem not in the unsustainability of the Soviet state-planning legacy but rather in the fact that an over-centralized approach cannot play a constructive role in economic development: according to Zubov and Inozemtsev, contemporary modernization cannot be centralized. The authors’ choice of title, The Siberian Blessing, is a reaction to Hill and Gaddy’s “Siberian curse”. However, beyond that, the response only goes as far as outlining a general view of Siberia’s role in Russia’s development. That is to say, The Siberian Blessing is not polemical in substance, but rather proposes an alternative view based on an understanding of Siberian’s potential for Russia’s economy. As the authors develop their argument and expand it into a kind of programme of necessary steps, they use the term “Siberian mission”, which gives a much more accurate reflection of their view of the role that Siberia plays in Russia’s development than the “blessing” in their title. Siberia presents opportunities for, and is vitally interested in dragging the country out of, the cul-de-sac of over-centralized government. This is precisely the aim of the programme Zubov and Inozemtsev put forward. However, while proposing a solution for Russia, the authors of the Siberian Blessing do not ask the question as to how Siberia itself is to throw off the burden of over-centralization. And while I agree with Zubov and Inozemtsev’s main thesis – that Siberia represents an opportunity for Russia – I would, nevertheless, like to discuss the key obstacles to achieving this goal.

Russia as a colony of Siberia: Circular reinforcement

Siberia survives as a single name for a territory covering two-thirds of Russia. This vast and geographically very diverse area of northern Asia has retained a single toponym only by virtue of the speed (in historical terms) with which it was acquired by the Duchy of Muscovy. Depending on what we understand by Siberia, it comprises well over a dozen
regions, republics and territories on the administrative map of present-day Russia. I believe that the way the borders of Siberia have been defined allows us to diagnose Russia’s social space as imperial.

Only the southern and northern borders of Siberia – which constitute Russia’s national borders – are undisputed. The inconsistent definitions of Siberia’s borders in terms of physical, economic and administrative geography as well as the discrepancies between the way Siberia is defined in western and Russian reference books are linked to the contradictions inherent in its acquisition and might be even said to reflect the most profound contradictions in the development of Russia as a whole.

In his 1920 Harbin publication on Siberian studies, Innokentiy Serebrennikov notes: “The term Siberia is generally used to denote Russia’s northern Asian dominions”. [3] Drawing a distinction between an administrative and geographical approach, he went on to propose that “the areas that can be regarded as historical, indigenous Siberia include the provinces of Tobolsk, Tomsk, Yenisey and Irkutsk; the western Zabaykalie Territory may also be included here. These are the areas in which a Russian way of life has been firmly established. The rest of Siberia is still at the stage of being developed by the Russian nation, of whose great colonial skills there can be little doubt”. [4]

In other words, Siberia is an area in which a “Russian way of life” has been and is being established, i.e. a civilizational model that Russia has brought to the northern Asian lands. It is worth noting that even given its relative nature (“has been and is being established”), a vague “rest of Siberia” is excluded from this statement. What we see here is basically a mismatch between a state territory and a socio-cultural space. This mismatch still persists today, a hundred years later, despite huge state-organized economic endeavours in the Soviet era, despite urbanization (since the 1950s Siberia has been the most urbanized region of Russia), and great growth in terms of population as well as cultural, academic and educational centres.

Siberia is the northern part of Asia where European civilization arrived, with a Russian government and people who were sent or exiled to the other side of the Urals; yet, even though the Russian civilization is now dominant there, it has never become organic, nor has it taken firm root. “Everything about the Russian expansion was frail and vague. It was an amazing achievement but one encompassed by a chain of fragile links”, says Fernand Braudel in his essay on how Muscovy “invented Siberia” in the seventeenth century as a way of solving its own problems. [5] His assessment applies equally to the results of the four hundred years of Russian development of northern Asia.

The fact that “inventing Siberia” remains unfinished business is reflected in two issues linked to the vague definition of the region’s eastern and western borders. The first is the disparity between Siberia and the Far East, which, although it may seem immaterial, symbolic or even unnoticed outside of Russia, is a very real issue for those inhabiting the area between the Urals and the Pacific Ocean. It is very real not just in terms of its “territorial” identity but it is also crucial in analytical terms. Zubov and Inozemtsev specify that, in their analysis and proposals, they have consciously merged Siberia and the Far East. I believe this is a conceptual error. Whereas the territory, the history, future prospects and human habitation of the Far East are determined by the fact that it is Russia’s portal to the Pacific Ocean and south-eastern Asia, Siberia represents a
landlocked, continental region. The arrival of the Russian state in the territory that came
to be known as Siberia rendered the territory’s fate, and the fate of those living here,
dependent on reconciling European-style civilization with the landscape of northern Asia
and on ensuring the sustainability of human economic activity in the territory’s natural
environment.

The second reason why Siberia’s borders are difficult to define is the divergence between
geographical borders and those established by economic and administrative practice, for
example economic zones created in the Soviet era or federal districts set up by Vladimir
Putin’s administration in the course of “strengthening the power vertical”. This clearly
shows that in political terms the logic of extensive development has prevailed over the
logic of developing an economic life in this area while, in terms of policy outcomes, it
demonstrates that the interrelationship between economic activities and nature in this
area has been driven by external rather than local factors, that is, not by the natural and
cultural potential of the terrain.

The dispute over what should be regarded as Siberia reflects the key contradiction in
Russia’s development: the inorganic nature of its social space, whose historical roots are
determined by the fact that Russia includes this vast territory on the far side of the Urals.
The empire was not able to properly absorb the vast expanses it covered. Siberia was
being conquered in a fragmented way, without being really developed, as in the case of
the rest of Russia, which ended up being held hostage by the wealth of Siberia. The
income from Siberia’s natural resources helped the country overcome systemic crises
while it remained geared to an extensive economy. This has perpetuated the monopolistic
nature of economic and political power, which, in turn, has helped further entrench an
extensive approach to development.

An apt metaphor for the course of Russian history is that of a pendulum, in which the
Time of Troubles [1598-1613 – trans.] and the threat of the country’s disintegration is one
extreme, and total power exercised by the police, bureaucracy and oligarchy is the other.
The pendulum’s gigantic amplitude can be explained by the vastness of the territory,
which the powers-that-be constantly try to subjugate but which refuses to obey
weakening power. And so the origin of Russia’s geography, its scale and character, as
well as its forms of habitation – from Cossack settlements and free peasants’ hermitage
cells in the past to “urban-type settlements” constructed around natural resource sites
(i.e. as temporary dwellings) and mono-cities built around large construction sites and
factories – lies in despotism and the Time of Troubles. It was produced by people who fled
there (not necessarily as a result of persecution but fled nevertheless) or had been hurled
into these parts by the authorities. A poorly differentiated society plays a key role in this
interdependence between poorly defined power and the incomplete development of the
terrain.

While exploring the concept of social space, Pierre Bourdieu coined the term “circular
self-reinforcement” for this kind of interrelation between society and physical space. [6]
The term “social space” is useful in describing the interrelation between physical space
and geography on the one hand, and forms of social life on the other. The term can be
applied to Russia only very approximately and is of rather limited use in the Russian
context, where society determines nature in an unsystematic way, with no regard for the
need for mutual adaptation for the sake of preserving natural resources and ensuring the
steady pace of social development. In fact, this kind of relationship with nature is a powerful contributing factor to the destruction of social space, enhancing the risk of anomie and the chances that in moments of crises potential threats will be realized.

Russia has not produced a western-style society or government. The European way did not materialize: as power spread across a vast space it failed to produce a state that would have to rely on society and, in turn, could count on the society to support it. Unlike Russia, western society was formed in opposition to the absolutist state rather than to absolute power. Consequently, it is very difficult to rein in individualistic anarchy if antisocial individuals have a chance to leave, to flee from control, be it control by society or by the police. As a result, Muscovy, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union have all been periodically convulsed by radical revolutions. Vasily Klyuchevskiy pointed out that in Russia, this habit of dealing with serious problems by moving to another place and starting from scratch generated revolutionary spurts with an uncompromising attitude to the past. We might add that, as a result of these revolutionary spurts, the past tends to repeat itself, including with regard to over-centralized systems of power. Times of trouble and revolution are usually followed by yet another contraction of the country initiated from the centre, as the creative energy released by the empire’s “moment of weakness” or its collapse is partially suppressed and partially mobilized, and directed toward ambitious external goals. Institutions and instruments of hierarchical power serve as drivers of this process, setting in motion life “at the local level”.

Russia retains its diversity throughout this tug of war between alternating revolutionary spurts and centralizing attempts. Everyday life in this space does not become unified and life does not come down to a single common denominator. This is a goal that no single “power vertical” can achieve, no matter how hard it strives to do so. As a result, there remains a potential for seeking alternative ways of development, allowing the country to break out of crisis situations but, at the same time, this generates fresh “times of trouble” and thus represents a real threat of disintegration of the state. Moreover, the risk of sliding into “times of trouble” delays reforms in the economic, political and social space.

Internal colonization: A fresh iteration

The collapse of the USSR and the former Soviet republics’ “march to sovereignty” overshadowed the opposition between the centre and the local level, casting it as an interethnic conflict. [7] Perestroika could be described as a province-driven revolution – a revolution in terms of personnel changes in party leadership; the geography of first action with mass participation; the emergence of a new political elite at People’s Deputies congresses across the USSR and, last but not least, in terms of the emergence of a post-Soviet Russian leadership. [8] The new political and economic system of post-Soviet Russia resulted from a complex search for a new balance and culminated in the reassertion of the “power vertical” at the core of an over-centralized construction. [9]

Post-Soviet modernization, which was triggered by a crisis of the Soviet system and took place in accordance with a model of state capitalism, once more aimed to develop the country’s territory, thus shaping social space and establishing the skeleton of a new system. Nevertheless, this skeleton has still been built primarily on the basis of an over-centralized political, economic and cultural life, which has in turn shaped the extensive modernization of the country in the form of its renewed internal colonization.
Where economic goals are achieved by means of concentrating resources, modernization is characterized by subjugation and dependency rather than by initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, and by the practice of cultural distancing and exclusion rather than by partnerships. This process is known as “internal colonization”.

The concept of internal colonization was first applied to the territorial analysis of Russia by the geographer Boris Rodoman. [10] Alexander Etkind, meanwhile, used the term in his study of Russian culture more instrumentally. Etkind has studied Russian culture (in particular nineteenth century culture) through the lens of internal colonization, which took the form of socio-cultural distancing between the intelligentsia and the people, between social sciences and the country’s population, etc. [11] This kind of sociocultural distancing forms an integral part of internal colonization and is one of its distinctive features. The application of the term “internal colonization” to present-day Russia [12] is tantamount to acknowledging the existence of this kind of distancing as well as of a capital-centric (and export-oriented) approach to generating social knowledge. Since “internal colonization” is not the primary focus of this article, this is not the place to delve into the discussion of the term in detail. Suffice it to note that the use of the adjective “internal” in the Russian context does not primarily concern an opposition between the metropolis and the colonies, but implies that the relations between powers-that-be (i.e. the centre) and the rest of the country are dictated by the correlation between the expansion and the development of the space that makes up the unified state. The key term in Vasily Klyuchevskiy’s oft-quoted statement – “the history of Russia is the history of a country that is colonizing itself” [13] – uses the reflexive form of the verb: Russia is not colonized by others but by itself. Any development and movement occurs at the expense of the space that is being developed, of the new resources and “new geographies” that are being exploited and brought into the sphere of influence.

During the first stage of post-Soviet capitalist modernization after the collapse of the Soviet economic system, the primary emphasis was on exploiting the natural resources that could be extracted very fast, yielding the greatest possible profit. The right to exploit them was claimed by the existing centres of power located at various levels of the “power vertical”. Yet again in Russia’s history, over-centralization made a comeback, this time characterized by economic power and presence of large financial and industrial groups in the region.

The space was thus colonized once again, as power was redistributed among financial and industrial groups. This colonization involves not only the development of the territory by key actors in the current iteration of modernization and the corresponding restructuring of social space (primary colonization) but also the creation of firm dependencies between the geography of places of residence and an individual’s social status and life prospects (secondary colonization). Each crisis of the system is followed by the introduction and establishment of a new, highly centralized system that strives to take on the role of a “supervisor of the everyday” (Mikhail Gefter). [14] When analysing the cyclical process of restoring the empire, it is of paramount importance to take a closer look at this “secondary colonization”.

The secondary colonization of a population takes place when certain mechanisms emerge that bind the people to a system of exercising power on the one hand, and imposing on them a certain duty to maintain a land, a space, resources, etc., on the other. The
emergence of these mechanisms in post-Soviet Russia (and in Siberia in particular) becomes apparent in the study of life strategies among populations in mono-cities, involving the perpetuation of poverty in smaller towns, as well as in the study of local government in villages.

The process of secondary colonization is particularly striking in the case of spaces that do not present an interesting business proposition to financial and industrial groups, having basically dropped out of the sphere of anyone’s responsibility. For example, workers’ settlements that once provided temporary housing for people involved in the extraction of non-renewable resources have been transformed into poverty zones. As a result of social stratification and distancing, a considerable proportion of their inhabitants have found themselves incapable of changing the trajectory of diminishing social mobility not only for themselves but also for their children – individuals and entire families have become tethered to a place that does not offer any social opportunities, turning them into stigmatized, undesirable and socially excluded elements. The perpetuation of poverty derives from the weakening of social networks and the exclusion of individuals from those networks.

What ties people to a territory is the problem of housing. Housing as a total instrument of social management has been an integral part of the Soviet-style organization of social space. In post-Soviet Russia, housing issues have been abandoned to the whim of the market, which has reinforced this legacy instead of eliminating it.

The newly established system of rule known as the “power vertical” incorporates an additional layer of local government, which has been given formal responsibility for resolving problems that central power cannot deal with, although the local authorities have been given virtually no resources and all they can do is put on a show of engendering development. The power vertical, created in order to maintain these vast spaces, is incapable of solving basic problems of everyday life. But since it is wary of losing control, it won’t entrust these tasks to local government and local communities either. The main difference between the current iteration of over-centralization and the versions practised under monarchy and serfdom or in the Soviet times is this: not only is the post-Soviet bureaucracy incapable of resolving social problems but it believes that any such attempt is a priori condemned to failure. And even where the authorities are aware that the relations between the “centre and the provinces” are in need of a fundamental review, their fear of losing control over the decentralization process outweighs any good intentions. The desire to strengthen the power vertical inspires repeated attempts to abolish the election of regional authorities and to make it easier to replace municipal city leaders “by order from above” rather than through democratic processes. In effect, local democracy is being driven down to the level of settlements and villages, where no funding is available.

**Ideocracy’s Siberian origins**

“The flight into the future”, the habit of fleeing from an unbearable life to a new place, which Vasily Klyuchevsky used to explain the radical spurts in Russia’s history and the country’s uncompromising relation to the past, constitutes the basis of another Russian phenomenon, whose resurgence we are witnessing today. It is ideocracy - a system of power which sanctions itself first as foremost as the custodian or carrier (and in extreme
cases, also the source) of major historical values and, secondly, demands from its subjects that they also champion these values as the basis of social governance.

The concept of ideocracy goes back to the 1920s, when a group of followers of Eurasianism [an ideology embraced by Russian émigrés in western Europe – trans.] became concerned about returning to a Russia that had turned Soviet and tried to devise a programme that the Bolsheviks might be able to perceive as a programme for continuing the revolution. The group of Eurasianists believed that the Bolsheviks had intuitively implemented the destructive phase of the Russian revolution but were incapable of achieving the theoretical breakthrough necessary for introducing a constructive practice, while the Bolsheviks acknowledged that they needed some ideological and theoretical assistance. In the spring of 1929, the Paris-based Russian weekly Eurasia published (in instalments) an editorial entitled “Problems of ideocracy”, which has been attributed mainly, if not solely, to Lev Karsavin. [15]

Ideocracy was justified by the need to resolve some eternal Russian-Eurasian problems, for which European models were unsuitable. Ideocracy was presented as an alternative to democracy, a chance to preserve the state unity of the “Russian-Eurasian continent” while preserving and relying on the cultural diversity of this area. Incidentally, Stalinist Russia implemented ideas of ideocracy without the help and advice of Eurasianists and without using the actual term. The Soviet project was based on the notion of creating a new historical sense of community, on galvanizing social energy towards a weighty historical goal and asserting the power of a great idea. Admittedly, unlike Eurasianism, Stalinist ideology formulated the country’s unity in terms of unification rather than diversity.

The Soviet project meant a decisive break with the past. Anyone who has tried to start a new life in a new place will understand and be able to relate to such spurts in the history of Russia and the desire to “start from scratch”. What the new revolutionary authorities could be blamed for is inculcating a loss of memory. However, rather than being an explicit goal for the Bolsheviks, cultural amnesia was a breeding ground for the birth of their ideas and aspirations, as well as for the adoption of their ideas by the “masses”. The habit of “starting from scratch” demonstrates a person’s indifference to the place at which he or she has arrived in order to transform this place and/or to find a safe haven, but at the same time, it also represents a break with the past and with the place from whence he or she has come, fled or was exiled. This provides solid foundations for ideocracy not only to be inculcated but also to be in demand as a means of supporting an imperial (turned “Soviet”) identity. The revolution took place in a country where, largely due to its geography, for most people mobility was a rule rather than the exception.

While certainly acting as a catalyst for modernizing processes that broke up social structures and generated a high degree of social mobility, Soviet power was also a consequence of these processes. The history of Soviet society came in the wake of a Russian empire formed over a period of more than two centuries, and of the life that its people had led on the empire’s territory. However, under the Soviet regime, natural modernizing processes (urbanization, rapid growth in the number of people enjoying education, etc.) were complemented by total and constant marginalization, where normal human relationships – between family members, neighbours, friends – were severed and people were persecuted for them. The only relationships that were supported and
promoted were those between people and the powers-that-be. However, this “effective management” deprived the powers-that-be themselves of any prospect of gaining solid social support. Ideocracy was affirmed as a mobilizing model of “unification from above”. The culmination of the repression has come to be associated with the year 1937, which coincides with the launch of an ideological project that aimed to incorporate the Soviet system into a greater imperial history. Soviet historiography organically linked Vladimir Lenin (i.e. the Russian revolution as a key event in the history not only of Russia but of global history) with Nikolay Karamzin (i.e. the history of Russia as the history of the Moscow/Petersburg state). And imperial history as the historically progressive collection of territories became the foundation of a “new synthesis”.

Blending Soviet history into a single historical narrative or indeed a single ideological tradition dating back to ancient Russian prinedoms and the growth of Muscovy was part of a clear official propaganda strategy and cultural policy in the mid-1930s. Although Stalin’s ideological machine could not construe the Soviet system as an heir to Russian serfdom and the state and party leadership as a continuation of Russian autocracy, the Soviet Union was presented as building on the legacy of “land accumulation” and the highest stage of the historical mission of the Russian people. The colonization of the area from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean and the Russian revolution were presented as national achievements of equal stature, the former being the prologue to, and guarantee of, the great significance of the latter.

The late Stalinist period advanced its own interpretation of history, consolidating in the Soviet mind the Slavophil myth, that is, the image of Russia as a country whose history was both the embodiment of a certain national idea as well as of the Russian people themselves. Stalin’s rule essentially reasserted the logic of the ideological behaviour of Russia’s late-nineteenth-century autocracy. Alexander III tried to turn the Russian empire into a nation-state. [16] Monarchic power reacted to the loss of its sacred character by proposing a historical justification of autocracy instead. Stalin pursued a similar policy, also directed at reinforcing the historical legitimacy of the regime that would compensate for the rapidly waning power of an ideological utopia.

During the Great Patriotic War, the goal of this strategy was ideological mobilization. But even before the end of the War, repressive intentions became apparent in the logic of “permanent civil war” and the coining of the phrase “toadying to the West”. The fight against “rootless cosmopolitanism” and a number of further propaganda campaigns introduced ethnic criteria into the search for internal enemies. The concept of a “Russian people” acquired both an ideological and an ethnic meaning. The “Russian party”, [17] whose activities have paved the way for the present-day ideological agenda (and the use of terms such as “the Russian world”, “Russophobia and a worldwide conspiracy against Russia”; “spiritual bonds”, etc.) owes its origins to this post-war ideological and social atmosphere.

Ideocracy made use of “big history” and endowed it with an existential importance for people living in Russia. In this scenario Siberia has been primarily allocated the role of a fundamental feature of the spread and indeterminateness of Russia’s space (while not the only possible destination for people to escape to, from the seventeenth almost to the end of twentieth century, it was synonymous with the chance of an escape). Secondly, in the new iteration of colonization, Siberia itself has become a platform for reasserting the
existential meanings of “big history”, albeit in radically new forms: from the gigantic “construction projects of communism” to public campaigns of the “Russian party”, whose activities are based on Siberian resistance to “big projects”. [18]

An organic part of the repertoire of ideocracy, which shaped Soviet internal colonization, was the great “Siberian myth” bred by past centuries of “Russian Siberia”. The formation of the present-day population of Siberia, however, represents a departure from the past, which for specific individuals or families used to signify a flight into the future no less radical than the revolution for the country as a whole. The departure from the past, a willingness or unwillingness to break with the “old world”, continued to be the most significant (if not the only significant) past event in a family’s history or an individual’s biography. Similarly, people did not feel any ownership of the past of the area they moved to “in order to start from scratch”. Rather, the people who live in Siberia regard “big history” as their own past. The principal features of this are: a) a celebration of past achievements – Russia has brought greatness to the far side of the Urals; b) the best people – the most courageous and steadfast individuals have ended up here; c) life in Siberia has brought out the best of human qualities; d) the Siberians always come to the country’s rescue whenever determination, perseverance and decisiveness are required.

The historical image of Siberia and Siberians has been extremely persistent and has never been questioned, despite the contradictions it entails. This persistence rests on the reiteration of the key messages mentioned above. Individuals are attached to mythology, which lends their own or their ancestors’ pathway to a life in Siberia a special significance. The contradictions of the image of Siberia have helped Siberian identity survive the sharp twists and turns of history. And while the individual pieces of the puzzle that it consists of may vary, the overall picture remains the same due to the uniqueness of the optics, which remain invariable regardless of how radically the times may change, always retaining the perspective of, and an attachment to, big history. People claiming a Siberian identity ungrudgingly accept the state’s own mythology, which gives itself credit for preserving the unity of this space because the mythology of the passage (which often took the form of flight from the state) and the mythology of the state that followed them (or their ancestors) are in organic unity with each other, reinforcing each other’s significance.

The fact that people’s ideas of the past are dominated by big history is not only the result of “historical” education but also a symptom of their lack of firm links with the history of the place they inhabit. Any balance between time and space, and between imperial and personal memory, has been disrupted, with big history playing an important compensating role. The “second-rate quality” of life on the periphery is compensated for by the individual’s participation in life – its big history, literature, politics, etc. And since urban identity is expressed in terms of big history, it tends to manifest itself in an imperial fashion: for example, the greater number of historical monuments recently built or restored in Irkutsk commemorate imperial history.

The latest contemporary iteration of Russia’s internal colonization is further reflected in the use of ideocratic terms, such as “the Russian world”, the fight against “falsifications of history”, and opposition to Russophobia. Big history as the history of invincibility, which provides the justification for being historically in the right, is advanced as a basis for Russian identity and national unity. The scale of the sacrifice endows this historical
right with a sacred nature.

What the current “party of power” has in common with Soviet ideocracy is that it understands social stability as a management issue linked to the realm of social deism, i.e. the moral regulatory role of the church. Becoming part of Russia’s historical mission and its “spiritual foundations” is construed as compensation for the losses people and the country have suffered since the collapse of Soviet identity. For the ruling political elites, great power statehood is a value which helps those who have survived the country’s systemic crisis and overcome their personal identity crisis, so that a new generation can acquire a Russian identity. The church is regarded through the same instrumental lens. The national idea is used as an administrative resource. In its first decade, “Putin’s Russia” dubbed its project “managed democracy”, which aimed to reconcile imperial statehood with basic liberal notions. The anti-liberal and anti-western rhetoric of the last three or four years have seen a shift to an emphasis on the management part as well as on mobilization by means of the instrumental exploitation of nationalism and, indeed, xenophobia.

**Siberian mission**

In conclusion, let us go back to the prospects for a “Siberian mission” outlined by Valery Zubov and Vladislav Inozemtsev. I agree with the authors’ claim that “what is most important is to understand that it is in Siberia rather than in the Caucasus that the fate of Russia as a modern society is being decided”. [19] However, I would add that this understanding is just the first step. The existence of multiple social practices, views and traditions, unavoidable in such a vast area, means that contingency poses a constant threat to the over-centralized power. Preventing the loss of control and the proliferation of “horizontal links” that might lead to a loss of state territory requires a much more flexible ruling style and a more dynamic relationship between the state apparatus and social life than is possible in a unitary state that does not recognize the principle of subsidiarity. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that even a radical change of political elite would result in a change of perspective from “vertical” to something more horizontal. Even the supporters of “realistic federalism” construe federalism as an issue of controllability rather than that of development. [20] Neither the powers-that-be nor their active critics regard the diversity of territories, structures and interests in terms of their potential or as an argument for subsidiarity. The subsidiarity principle, as well as ways of reconciling various interests, the need for public discussion - all these are on the agenda without being actually practised by Russian intellectuals. [21] Interestingly, the peculiarities of this political culture, which based neither on discussion nor horizontal relations, derive from the same social foundation that was created by the extensive development of the ethnos, that is, the practice of departing in search of a new place, a spurt towards the future and the affective character of social conflicts.

If, like Zubov and Inozemtsev, we regard Siberia, rather than the centre, as the key actor that can bring about a change in the country’s economic and political development; if we acknowledge the need for such a change and the fact that this mission is to be fulfilled by Siberia: then we will have accomplished the first difficult, albeit not the most difficult, step. What makes it so difficult is that the centralizing perspective has also been adopted by the periphery, by its own academic and media community and incorporated into the language used to describe social issues and articulate complaints, or make proposals, to
the centre. The same over-centralism is being depicted primarily in terms of the deprived regions’ dependence on the centre, without realizing or articulating the basis for the over-centralism and the centralistic vision, which is the backwardness of towns and regions and the fact that they are not agents of their own fate. This lack of agency is the first and most vital characteristic of the political relations between the centre and the provinces. [22] I prefer to use the terms “territory” and “land” because “region” has come to be associated with the administrative logic of territorial divisions, whereas when we discuss agency we are talking of self-organization and a certain collective identity of a people who share a place that is for their life, a common living space. In fact, the most difficult step is the development of an active and not only reflexive, agency in the countryside and the cities.

Zubov and Inozemtsev’s programme is based on the proposition that Siberia is a unified subject of reflection and action. Yet this is precisely what raises doubts, even if we assume a longer-term perspective and think in terms of several decades to come. While Siberian identity (“the Siberian”) is something very distinctive, it does not amount to agency, not even at the level of political reflection, let alone in terms of action. The failure to define and articulate the agency of the territory or the land, [23] that is, to own the space of one’s life both in theory and in language, is the inevitable result of a centralized humanities education and social research. It is education, the humanities, culture and centralized research, that play a key role in the inertia of internal colonization. After the wave of Soviet migrations east of the Urals subsided and the Soviet phase of Siberia’s industrialization was completed, Siberian cities found themselves in a situation where a significant portion of their city dwellers were third- and fourth-generation Siberians (in fact, this is what the claim of a Siberian identity is based on). [24] A similar situation arose in Siberia in the mid-nineteenth century, resulting in Siberian regionalism (a political movement to form an autonomous Siberian polity). A key programmatic goal of the regionalists was that Siberia should have its own university. Nowadays history is being repeated. The issue of the relationships between university education and social research on the one hand and, on the other, people’s awareness in the territories and lands of their own agency and the need for a language that will allow them to incorporate the issues of their social space into both Russian and global discourses and political agendas: these become key to overcoming the internal colonization of Siberia and of Russia as a whole.

Footnotes


4. ibid., 22


7. Perestroika began with Mikhail Gorbachov's April 1986 speech in Togliatti. The fact that the actual term "perestroika" was first used in this speech is just as significant as the fact that he mentioned local initiatives, rather than a single centrally preordained one, as the crucial foundation for systemic changes. The Secretary General of the Communist Party of the USSR and former leader of the Stavropol Territory raised his eyes from the text of a key programme speech and said, looking at the auditorium: "Development can't happen on orders from Moscow".


9. It is worth mentioning that the beginning of this process (still at the time of the battle among the Soviet leadership for Russia's sovereignty) was also marked by Boris Yeltsin's call for local initiatives (essentially regional subsidiarity): "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow" (*Izvestia*, 8 August 1990).


13. V.O. Klyuchevskiy, *A Russian History Course* in: *Collected Works* vol. 1, Moscow, 1987; 50


16. A number of contemporary scholars believe that this was a major cause contributing to the revolutionary explosion in Russia as social contradictions were compounded by national ones (See: B.N. Mironov, *Sotsialnaya istoriya Rossii perioda imperii (XVIII-nachalo XX. veka)*, [The social history of Russia in the imperial period (Eighteenth to the early twentieth century)], vol. 1, St Petersburg, 2000; 42; S.I. Kaspe, *Imperiya i modernizatsiya: obshchaya model' i rossiyskaya spetsifikasi* [Empire and modernization: The general model and Russian peculiarities] Moscow, 2001; 179-181.

17. Nikolay Mitrokhin, *Russkaya partiya: Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR. 1953-1985 gody* [The Russian Party: A Russian nationalist movement in the USSR, 1953-1985], Moscow, 2004; 624. Mitrokhin defines the object of his research as "the sum total of various organizations, groups, media and individuals, united not only by a common ideological platform (open to very wide interpretation) but also personal and organizational links. A close analogy with the movement of Russian nationalists can be found in the socialist movement in the past, and currently, for example, in the environmental movement."


21. For example, in his explanation of the reasons why there was no public discussion on the issue of nation, which is vital for national identification, Aleksey Miller concludes that "this is a peculiarity of Russian political culture characterizing the entire political spectrum of the country, who feel no need for a fruitful discussion but regard those who generate an intellectual product as groups driven by mutual hostility and fighting for the minds of the masses, the consumer of this product" (Aleksey Miller, ed., *Natsiya kak ramka politicheskoy zhizni: Nasledie imperii i budushcheye Rossii* ["The nation as the framework of political life: The legacy of the empire and the future of Russia], Moscow, 2008; 502.)

22. We may use the following definition of agency from A. Filippov: "To carry out an act for which a person can be held responsible, the person has to define his or her own defined space, in which their every action represents exactly what they intended to do and for whose consequences they can be held responsible. However, this space is also inhabited by others and to make it predictable, one either has to turn other people into
one's instruments or slaves, or reach an agreement with them, thus constituting a political community. Where this community has been constituted once and for all, the political apparently disappears. Where it needs to be constantly redefined and reconstituted, human freedom asserts itself." (polit.ru/article/2012/08/24/anons_filippov/)

23. The difficulties of articulating this become clearly visible in the protest movements in Siberian cities, where the dominant feature of all speeches and slogans is an "anti-Moscow" sentiment and accusations of colonialism, yet no programmatic proposals on decolonization are being made or voiced.

24. See, for example, A. Anisimova, O. Yechevskaya, Sibirskaya identichnost': predposylki formirovaniya, kontekst kontext aktualizatsii ["Siberian identity: Preconditions for its origin and a context for its updating"], Novosibirsk, 2012.

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