Reassessing the Russian Identity, Part 1: Introduction

Analysis

NOVEMBER 26, 2012 | 12:30 GMT

Editor's Note: This is the first installment of a five-part series on Russian society and identity. Part 1 examines the overall problems facing the Kremlin as it attempts to consolidate Russia's diverse population.

Amid rising political, ethnic and generational tensions in Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered his Cabinet to devise a national social and ethnic policy by Dec. 1 — the first attempt to do so in 16 years. Russia is an incredibly diverse country in terms of its ethnic, religious, economic and political spheres. Throughout the country's history, leaders have made only three attempts to define and unite the many peoples of Russia under a common identity: once under Czar Nicholas I, once under the Soviet Union and now under Putin.

The current stereotype of a Russian citizen is a white, Slavic, Orthodox ethnic Russian who accepts the Kremlin's political system. Although this may be true for the majority of the country, notable ethnic, religious and political shifts are occurring in Russia that are forcing the Kremlin to develop new social policies in order to accommodate an increasingly diverse population — and to reconsider the country's age-old problem of defining the Russian identity.

Throughout its history, Russia has sought to expand to defendable borders. The core of the country, which runs from north of Moscow down through the Volga region, holds the bulk of its population and food supply but is indefensible. Thus, for more than 500 years, Russia has worked to expand its
territory to defendable geographic anchors, such as the mountains of the Caucasus, the Carpathians and the Tien Shan. Russia has also pushed out along the vulnerable North European Plain, one of the most critical routes for outsiders wishing to invade the country. These efforts have created a large buffer region surrounding the country's heartland. However, it has also meant that Russia has absorbed large populations that were not ethnically Russian or were hostile to Moscow. Russia's struggle to defend its territory from invasion has thus created the challenge of consolidating its internal population.

Russia now has 21 national republics and 85 regional subjects spanning nine time zones. The country's population is currently divided between urban and rural residents, 185 ethnic groups, four major recognized religions (Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism) as well as countless other faiths, and a growing number of political affiliations. Cross-border identification has also created divisions among populations found along Russia's shared borders.

Ethnic Russians make up the bulk of the country's population and have been the ruling class since they broke away from the Mongol and Muslim Tatar empires in the 16th century. Because their territory spans from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, the ethnic Russian rulers have power over millions of non-ethnic and non-Orthodox Russians, including Mongol, Turkic, Finnish and Inuit peoples, among others. And this is just inside Russia's current borders; the territory controlled under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union included large additional regions of non-Russians. Moreover, the size of Russia's territory has allowed foreign influence to shape regional cultural values and traditions; for example, western Russia identifies somewhat with the West and Europe, eastern Russia identifies with Asia, and southern Russia is influenced by the Islamic world.

Such divisions create struggles among various groups and
between these groups and the state. Although regional and ethnic loyalties can create conflict, they can also create kinship, helping unified minority populations to consolidate against the ruling class. An example of this occurred in the 1800s and the 1930s, when Russia attempted to consolidate control over what is today Uzbekistan. During both attempts, Uzbek populations were divided into clans that fought bitterly with each other but united in order to resist Moscow's rule.

With so many different identities in Russia, divisions typically are overcome only by ideology or administration. The Russian government's most successful period of control occurred during the Soviet era, when Moscow created an identity that could supersede the diversity within the empire and unite the population while creating an administrative system to organize the people and repress dissent. Putin has said that this strategy was one of that era's greatest achievements.