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Russian Nationalism Threatens to Destroy the Russian Federation

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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The rise of ethnic Russian nationalism, of the kind characterized by the slogan "Russia for the Russians," threatens the country both directly by promoting countervailing nationalisms among non-Russian groups and indirectly by making it more difficult for Moscow to move toward a law-based state, according to a Moscow analyst.

Even though there is some evidence that Vladimir Putin is beginning to recognize this threat and is distancing himself from the phenomenon with which he earlier played, Yevgeny Ikhlov argues in an essay posted online this week, none of the strategies he has tried so far appears likely to work.

Indeed, there are many indications that if the current wave of protests grows, Putin and his representatives will seek to deflect anger from themselves by promoting the idea of "Russia for the Russians," a final throw of the dice that will only exacerbate the agony of his regime and accelerate the disintegration of the country.

A central element in debates about identity in the Russian Federation, Ikhlov notes, concerns the relationship between "russkiy" and "rossiiskiy." Most see the former as being ethnic and the latter being political or civic, but the relationship between the two is historically far more complicated and important.

A century ago, Ikhlov says, it was possible to conflate the two because "russkiy" was a cultural term and for the overwhelming majority of people living in the Russian Empire culturally equivalent to the political term "rossiiskiy." But now times have changed, and efforts to restore their equivalency are not only impossible to achieve but dangerous to try.

That can be seen if one considers the case of the American civic nation that many Russians have viewed as the model. A century ago, "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)" culture defined what many understood to be "American," but demographic change means that any effort to restore that equivalency would be fatal for the United States.

"It is surprising," Ikhlov continues, "that those who propose just such a transformation for Russia (which is the equal of the United States in ethno-cultural diversity) &mdash that is, the creation of 'a Russian political nation,' &mdash do not understand that just as instantaneous from the point of view of history would be the disintegration of our country."

Instead, he says, they operate on the assumption that Russia has a close analogue to the American WASP, the "RUPS," the Russian acronym for "a Russian-speaking Orthodox Slav," an idea that infects the Moscow Patriarchate's ideas on imposing a course of Orthodox Culture on all school children in the Russian Federation.

"When a contemporary resident of Russia is offered Russian national identity," Ikhlov says, "he is asked to accept the entire corresponding historical path &mdash great power rule, autocracy, serfdom, and bolshevism. Naturally, the Russian tradition includes [other things as well, but] the main thing is that the national tradition is formed around the force lines from these phenomena."

And that in turn means that "the project of 'a [an ethnic] Russian political nation is a proposal to all bearers of non-Russian socio-cultural traditions to be swallowed up in the Russian tradition," because the Russian powers that be at present "have nothing else to offer to Russian unity except the payment of pensions and the likelihood of meeting [siloviki officers]."

Putin and some of those around him, Ikhlov suggests, understand this danger at least in part, but what they are offering instead of "Russia for the Russians" is unlikely to hold the country together either. And thus it is possible to say that "the main historic sin of Putinism is its role in the dawning collapse of the Russian Federation."

"A great state," the analyst argues, "can be based either on a great past or on a great future. All that unifies in spirit the entire Russian population is May 9, 1945. But the unifying theme of the war was completely exhausted by Brezhnev". In Russian history, "every other event has the effect of dividing the population."

Again, a comparison with the United States is useful, he says. "America has a constitution, [it has] freedom and law. All the shortcomings including Bush junior and cruel police actions can be removed by self-affirming struggle.... There was slavery, [the Americans] defeated it. There was discrimination against women, they rose up in struggle and won."

The Americans "oppressed immigrants and workers. They struggled, suffered, and won. They defended the rights of unions. They fought against racial discrimination. They fought against poverty. They impeached Nixon. They put the CIA in its place. They elected Obama. Just like in the film, 'The Belarusian Station': it was bad; it became better."

But Ikhlov says, "consider the course of Russian history: [the Russians] overthrew the regime...they wanted order, they asked for a dictatorship, they overthrew the regime, they wanted order, they asked for a 'vertical." And he adds, "it seems to me that one might want to become a separatist just to avoid being associated with such a history."

But it did not and need not be this way. "Russia ought to have been united by freedom. If objective difficulties, I am not joking, do not allow the establishment of full-fledged democracy (public power and individual rights), then Russia should have been united by law. Just laws and an independent judiciary . . . should have been the very principles of the government system."

Unfortunately, Russians "received not only authoritarianism. We have received arbtirariness, rightlessness and sadistic cynicism &mdash three in one &mdash on the part of the powers that be." And that in turn has been reinforced by the development of "social passivity, xenophobia and subordination to those in power, a cult of masochistic fusion with the hangmen."

As a result of this pattern and regardless of what Moscow is saying now, Ikhlov says that he is "absolutely convinced that when the Putin regime will be confronted by waves of mass protests, the entire network of agents and agents of influence will be used in order to shout out 'Russia for the Russians!'"

And after that, just as the Russians did in 1991, "the agents among the remaining peoples will not be worried by the inevitable question: Why must we be subordinate to Russians?" Instead, these agents, just as the KGB did 20 years ago, will find themselves in "the same ranks with local ethnocrats," as "the federation will have lost its last moral-political legitimacy."

But ethnic Russian nationalism is not only dangerous for those in power, Ikhlov suggests, it can be "fatal for the unified opposition" as well, even if the one or the other is prepared to "deceive" itself and its opponents by asserting that it is "ready to consider as Russians all those who love Russia."

That notion, he says, was attractive "for assimilated [groups living in Moscow] 40 years ago," but it is isn't for most other peoples now within the borders of the Russian Federatin who will see it not as a suggestion that they identify with "those who took the Reichstag and flew into space" but rather as demand that they accept and approve the entire Russian past.

That is not something very many of them are prepared to do because today "every ethnos [in the Russian Federation] has its own national mythology." And consequently, ethnic Russian appeals to the national roots of that nation "are reanimating historical conflicts which arose in medieval times."

An "objective picture" of Russia, Ikhlov insists, shows that the country "is not simply an enormous space populated by different ethnoses and representatives of different confessions." It "includes within itself several swallowed up or undeveloped states." And "these potential states can be conceived as countries/lands" because they view themselves as such.

More than that, the Moscow analyst continues, "Russia contains within itself several alternative variants of state development" that are now submerged but could reemerge. He lists six ranging from the lands beyond the Urals without a history of serfdom and aristocracy to Novgorod the Great and Pskov to the Turkic kingdom of the Middle Volga.

And because of that, he argues, "in Russia, the question of the rights of regions is ineluctably connected with nationality policy since some of the regions are 'embrionic states.'" And because that is so, the Russian Federation can survive in its current borders only if there is genuine, asymmetrical federalism, something the advocates of ethno-Russian nationalism reject.

Indeed, he points out, such people talk about "the restoration of Great Russia (in the borders of the USSR) ... primarily as an enormous national Russian state with lands not having their own statehood or even autonomy united to it," a recipe, Ikhlov says, for disaster not only beyond the current borders of the Russian Federation but within it.

The near term does not promise a good outcome given the increasing "fascization" of the Russian state and the desire of many of the powers that be to exploit ethnic Russian nationalism, the Moscow analyst says. The Russian government may try to suppress the national republics within the Federation and even add as provinces one or more of the "newly independent" states.

But that will not be the end of the story, because such efforts will prompt the non-Russians within the country to leave in much the same way that the union republics departed in 1991. And what will be left will be a much smaller but "ethnically pure" Russian statehood, whose leaders may try to compensate by declaring an Orthodox monarchy.

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