

Ethnic violence erupts in Russia

By Andrea Peters
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Ethnic tensions remain high in Russia after violent demonstrations by nationalists this past weekend in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Rostov-on-Don. Since the protests, marauders have continued to attack individuals who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia. Reports have surfaced of several fatal stabbings, shootings, and beatings occurring on public transportation and in other venues in different parts of the country.

Russia is bracing for further violence Wednesday, when targeted immigrant communities are expected to hold a counter-demonstration. The far-right Movement Against Illegal Migration (DPNI) has provocatively called on all men of Slavic descent to come armed to the event.

Fears of continued violence have caused prices to rise in Moscow, in particular at fruit and vegetable markets, where many people from non-Slavic ethnic backgrounds work as vendors. Recent events are fueling concerns about the possibility of the ransacking of shops run by immigrants.

The current wave of violence began on December 11, when a crowd of 5,000 soccer fans gathered in Manezh Square in Moscow, just outside the Kremlin, to protest the slaying of a Slavic supporter of the soccer team Spartak, Yegor Sviridov. He was allegedly shot by a man from the Caucasus, a restive, predominantly Muslim region in Russia's southwest.

At the Manezh Square rally, protesters performed Nazi salutes, chanted "Russia for Russians," and called for the repeal of the law that makes it a crime to incite ethnic hatred. Flares, ice, bottles and Christmas trees were thrown at the security services, fires were set ablaze in the square, and park benches were ripped out.

Riot police initially stood by and allowed the unsanctioned demonstration to proceed, entering into armed conflict with the crowd only after being assaulted. Eighty people were detained, but released shortly thereafter. The security services eventually dispersed the crowd by charging them onto the nearby metro, after the Moscow police chief tried to convince them to leave by promising Sviridov's killer would be found.

According to the government, 34 people were injured, including 8 riot police. Seven individuals ended up in the

hospital. Ten people of Asiatic or Caucasian appearance were attacked by the rioters around the square, or on the metro after the crowd was driven out of the square by police. Gangs of rioters ran through the subway cars screaming, "White carriage! White carriage!" and dragged non-Slavic looking people off the train.

Also on Saturday a similar, though less violent, protest of 1,000 people took place in St. Petersburg. Police arrested 60 people after the crowd began throwing ice and bottles.

Meanwhile, in Rostov-on-Don, a city in the country's far southwest, Russian nationalists staged a march, bearing signs that read, "We are Russians" and "Russians are united." There were no confrontations between the security services and the 1,000 individuals who attended.

On Monday, the government shut down Red Square and metro stations in the vicinity of the Kremlin in Moscow, based on expectations for further violence on the part of nationalists and neo-fascists. The central shopping mall, where many stores are run by individuals from Central Asia and the Caucasus, was also shuttered. The area has since been reopened to the public.

Observers and independent news agencies have suggested that the security services did little to contain Saturday's riot in Moscow, letting the crowd become increasingly violent and out of control before taking any action. The riot police, Russia's Special Purpose Police Unit (OMON), is well-known for the brutal tactics it uses to break up anti-government protests by civil rights advocates and the Kremlin's liberal political opponents. In contrast to what happened this past Saturday, demonstrators at such events are often arrested and packed off to jail within a few minutes of unfurling their banners.

In testimony before the city's Duma (parliament) on Monday, the head of the Central Directorate of Internal Affairs (GUVVD), Aleksandr Melnikov, insisted that Moscow's police force responded appropriately. He acknowledged that the police knew in advance of the intended protest by football fans, but had spread its forces across the city in anticipation of actions occurring in numerous locations.

When asked by a city deputy why the police had not taken

advance measures to detain the leaders of the melee, who were well known to them, Melnikov stated: “We cannot violate the constitutional rights of citizens. They arrived absolutely peacefully.” Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobianin has applauded the police handling of Saturday’s protest, as has Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

In a move clearly intended to placate Russian nationalists, the police have arrested three individuals from the Caucasus accused of being involved in the death of Sviridov.

After Russian Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev initially sought to lay blame for what happened in Moscow’s Manezh Square on “left-wing radicals,” the GUVN has since announced that it has determined that the leader of the riot was the banned far-right group, the National Bolshevik Party (NBP).

In the immediate aftermath of this past weekend’s violence, President Medvedev called for those responsible to be punished. The public prosecutor’s office has opened up several criminal investigations. However, there is no reason to believe that the government will aggressively pursue the matter.

Violent crimes directed against immigrants are a regular occurrence in Russia and are rarely followed up on by the police. In all likelihood, the government will pursue a handful of individuals or organizations implicated in the events, even as virulently nationalist and far-right tendencies grow in the country.

The Kremlin is anxious about the impact of the race riots on the stability of Russian society and on the international image of Russia, which just won the contest to host the 2018 World Cup. These political concerns are driving Medvedev’s response. However, the Kremlin is also one of the country’s leading promoters of Russian nationalism.

The political ascendancy of Vladimir Putin during the 2000s has been accompanied by the open promotion of nationalist ideology by the state. This has included, particularly on the part of now-Prime Minister Putin, an effort to rehabilitate the image of Joseph Stalin as the great defender of the Russian fatherland. Putin has publicly lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union not for the socio-economic misery that capitalist restoration has visited upon working people, but for the the Russian state’s loss of geopolitical power and international prestige.

This nationalist agenda has been promoted in culture and education as well. History textbooks used in Russia’s school have been rewritten in recent years to promote political patriotism and cultural pride in the achievements of Russia. In an effort to deflect attention from the super-rich Russian oligarchy and the state, the people of Central Asia and the Caucasus are regularly portrayed in the media as the source of working people’s misery, as criminals and parasites. The

Kremlin has also increasingly embraced the Russian Orthodox Church, making it the country’s de facto state religion at the expense of Russia’s other religious groups, including its vast Muslim population.

While President Medvedev has distanced himself from Putin’s promotion of Stalin, Russian cultural nationalism is an element of his current effort to “modernize” the economy. In a recent address to the country’s Federal Assembly, Medvedev devoted the bulk of his speech to extolling government measures being taken to increase Russia’s birthrate. This agenda fits into the overall outlook of Russia’s right-wing nationalist movement, which views immigration as a threat to the country’s Slavic core.

Russian chauvinism has a very long and ugly history. The socialist movement in Russia, which embraced internationalism, fought tirelessly against the conception of the cultural, political or genetic superiority of Slavs.

Stalinism, which rejected this internationalist outlook by advocating the building of “socialism in one country,” was rooted in Russian nationalism and the subordination of the interests of the international working class to the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy. In the Soviet Union, the rise of Stalinism was accompanied by a resurgence of Russian chauvinism in all aspects of political and cultural life. Although the Stalinist bureaucracy built up local ethnic elites in the USSR’s many ethnic provinces and republics, Russia always retained the leading economic and political position inside the USSR.

While the restoration of capitalism in Russia overturned the last remnants of the economic conquests of the 1917 socialist revolution, it preserved the nationalist political core of Stalinism. The new Russian ruling elite embraces this nationalism as a means to divert social opposition from working people and defend its wealth against rivals in other countries. The terrible scenes from Moscow this week are a consequence.

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