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Basargin Admits Moscow Lacks a Strategy for Dealing With Company Towns

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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VIENNA &mdash Viktor Basargin, Russia's minister of regional development, said today that "it is too soon to speak" about a Moscow strategy for dealing with the country's more than 400 company towns like Pikalevo, although he did say that resettling their residents to new locations was "an extreme measure" that would cost more than helping them in other ways.

The minister was speaking at a St. Petersburg forum called "Strategic Planning in the Regions and Cities of Russia," and during his remarks, he suggested that Moscow should seek to solve the problems of each town on an individual basis. However, he also indicated that finding additional sources of investment for these cities was important.

Galina Izotova, the first deputy chairman of the Duma Committee on Federation Affairs and Regional Policy, indicated that the Russian parliament is pursuing that individual approach. At present, she said, there are two draft bills under consideration to deal with two of these company towns.

No one would deny that each of these single-company towns presents unique aspects, but this one-town-at-a-time approach seems certain to take a long time to implement. Situations in some towns are perhaps likely to deteriorate and even become explosive long before any help from Moscow can arrive.

On Friday, Kommersant called attention to that possibility in an unusual kind of company town &mdash Shatalovo, a military settlement in Smolensk region whose "workers" have threatened to stage "a new Pikalevo" if Moscow does not agree to leave their aviation intelligence unit where it is.

Members of the unit, which has been stationed there since 1959 and which is famous for its involvement with the MiG-25 detachments that conducted military reconnaissance over Israel in 1973, said in an open letter to President Dmitry Medvedev that if he does not countermand Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov's order to move them, they will block a major highway.

After threatening all year to convene a general assembly of the military settlement, more than 1,000 Shatalov residents did so, and many of them spoke contemptuously of those officers who had been willing to follow orders and begin the move. "At first only officers will go to Voronezh," a speaker said. But "a woman's voice broke him off and said 'And prostitutes!'"

Given such statements and the threat that military personnel might block the highway, both civilian officials and military commanders showed up. But the situation remains tense: Officers who had already gone to the new place returned and told their comrades that conditions were bad.

Moreover, under the defense ministry's relocation order, only about 1,000 of the 4,000 people living in Shatalovo will move to Voronezh. The remainder, consisting of civilian specialists, including military retirees who have been working at the Shatalovo base, will be left behind without any real chance of employment.

Nikolai Frolov, Federation Council member from Smolensk, said "if the military doesn't need the site, then it must be used in the civilian economy." But he acknowledged that he did not have any ideas in this direction, although he said "serious people in Moscow" with whom he had spoken "have promised to think about that."

Meanwhile, Nikolai Palaloga, the chairman of the Shatalovo Veterans Committee, warned his fellow residents that they should think before taking any dramatic actions and "remember the experience of Bloody Sunday [in 1905]" given that "the number of interior ministry troops is five times greater than the number of military personnel there."

Despite that warning, the Shatalovo assembly unanimously adopted the letter which promised Moscow "a new Pikalevo" if the authorities did not help them out and said the policies of the Russian Defense Ministry and high command are leading "not only to a loss in defense capability but to a distrust in the powers that be as well."

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