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State Readies for Street Clashes

By Paul Goble

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Until recently, officials and most politicians have downplayed the risk of massive street clashes and the state's preparation for such street battles. But in the course of the last week, a commentator with Novaya Versiya said, they have expressed concern about this possibility and outlined steps to counter it.

Mikhail Sukhodolsky, the first deputy minister of internal affairs, said last week that the number of crimes connected with popular clashes and disorders "has markedly increased" and that those crimes "are generating a serious social response."

About The Columnist

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In the past, Novaya Versiya analyst Ruslan Gorevoy said, officials had been restrained in making any such assessment, but "now they are speaking about [this problem] openly." That's apparently because "it is becoming ever more complicated to rein in protest attitudes by bloodless means" and because law enforcement bodies want to justify the use of force pre-emptively.

Gorevoy said the powers that be have been preparing for just such a possibility. Both the central and regional offices of the Interior Ministry have set up "rapid reaction" forces to disperse street demonstrations.

Perhaps even more significant, the State Duma has passed a law denying the right to a jury trial to those charged in such cases.

In addition, Gorevoy said the belief that "in the near future mass disorders are inevitable" appears to be shared "not only by representatives of 'the extra systemic opposition...but also by those whose responsibilities include not allowing such excesses to occur and in the worst case to suppress them."

"Militia officers, court officials and legislators, as one, strongly make declarations about the inevitability of force actions," Gorevoy noted.

However, their explanations for this potential outcome vary. Militia officers blame the failure of the courts to punish those who have taken part, judges blame shortcomings in legislation and politicians blame "irresponsible opposition figures."

For example, Sergey Markov, a political scientist and Duma member, has said: "Disorders like those that we observed not long ago in Riga and Sofia can occur in all countries of the world, except those where there is a socially oriented economy. They can even break out in Russia."

In fact, Markov has said, "there are already elements of a pre-revolutionary situation in Russia" ⊠ but "there are only elements." They are more social-economic than political in nature because of the resources of the existing regime and the absence of credible alternative political leaders who could exploit such "elements."

Curiously, one measure of such concerns is the increasing popularity of insurance policies against the consequences of mass violence, said commentator Gorevoy. When such policies were offered two years ago, only five firms purchased them. Now, they are far more popular, with one in every four firms insuring itself against such problems.

More significant, Gorevoy added, is that the formation of the Interior Ministry special units was completed in August, a development that prompted the deputy minister of internal affairs to discuss his institution's ability to deal with anything.

"The crime-generating situation can deepen with the growth of protest attitudes, called forth by dissatisfaction of the labor-capable population of the country as a result of the nonpayment of wages, threats of firings and also unpopular measures taken in the framework of the [economic] anticrisis program," Sukhodolsky said.

Because of that risk, Interior Ministry units must give "heightened attention" to the risks of street violence and be ready to counter it before it spreads, Sukhodolsky has said.

Gorevoy reported that junior officials with the Interior Ministry, speaking on condition of anonymity, told him that the government agencies knew how to disperse street actions even in Soviet times ⊠ "and after the Moscow events of 2002...our people developed detailed instructions literally minute by minute on how to effectively and quickly disperse any group, even one numbering in the thousands."

According to those officials cited by Gorevoy, they recently received a special "bulletin" from Interior officers in Moscow and the Moscow region, and that bulletin "enumerated 'the structures destabilizing the social structure' that could be involved in the initiation of massive street clashes" ⊠ including nationalists and extreme right groups, especially in certain regions.

That document, as well as other officials and analysts, stressed that all of these clashes would be local and that they haven't come together in any nationwide fashion. Consequently, they believe that there is no cause for high concern, Gorevoy estimated in his commentary.

But, he asked rhetorically, is that really the case?

If it is, then why was Sukhodolsky compelled to talk about "the heightened aggression of certain citizens of Russia toward the militia" and take note of "the growing aggression and wildness in behavior of certain groups of citizens"? Perhaps Sukhodolsky is seeking to change the rules of engagement or to prepare the leadership for harsher actions.

Should that be the case, the rising frequency and size of such clashes does represent a real threat, perhaps not of a revolution, but certainly of a problem that the government is now far more worried about than it was just a few months ago.

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