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Police Let Furious Fans Rally

By Alexandra Odynova

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Surprising nationalists and opposition politicians alike, Moscow's notoriously tough police force took no action as about 1,000 football fans chanting nationalist slogans blocked the main Leningradsky Prospekt for an unsanctioned protest against the death of one of their own in an interracial brawl.

Moreover, Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin pledged Wednesday that his agency would seek justice in the death of Yegor Sviridov, 28.

Sviridov, an active member of the Union, a group of football hooligans supporting Spartak Moscow, died after taking four shots from an air gun in a brawl with North Caucasus natives in northern Moscow late Sunday.

A main suspect in the case, Aslan Cherkesov, 26, a Kabardino-Balkaria native, was detained Wednesday but said he fired in self-defense, fighting for his life, RIA-Novosti reported.

Cherkesov also told investigators that he feared Sviridov's supporters might try to take

revenge on his family.

He faces up to 15 years in prison if charged and convicted of murder.

Bastrykin said in a statement that the 1,000-member protest late Tuesday played a role in his decision to open an investigation into the death, which he said has caused "a wide social reaction."

The protest, organized by a Spartak Moscow fan club called Fratria, or Brotherhood, was staged near an Investigative Committee office on Leningradsky Prospekt in northern Moscow.

The crowd chanted nationalist slogans such as "Russia for Russians" and "Moscow for Muscovites," lit flares, stood on cars and obstructing busy evening traffic, according to videos (1, 2) posted on YouTube and LiveJournal.

Police, known for crackdowns on unruly sports fans and opposition protesters, only sought to shepherd participants off the street, without resorting to violence or detaining anyone. Some videos showed riot police officers negotiating with the rally leaders.

"I've been a fan for a long time, but this is the first time that I have seen the police treating young Russians with such respect," an unidentified Spartak fan told Gazeta.ru at the rally.

Law enforcement agencies learned about the rally in advance by tracking forums on fan web sites, and took care that the most potentially violent fans did not attend, Moscow police official told Kommersant.

"They were informed that they would have serious problems if serious unrest broke out," the unidentified official said. "As a result, the most active groups of football hooligans ... didn't take part."

Moscow police spokeswoman could not be reached for comment on police actions at the rally Wednesday.

But city authorities have softened their stance on some rallies since Mayor Sergei Sobyanin took office in October, allowing for the first time separate protests by gay activists and the opposition.

Ilya Yashin, a leader of the Solidarity opposition movement, which has a long record of clashes with the police over unsanctioned protests, praised the police for showing tolerance at Tuesday's rally. "If the riot police had provoked violence, it could have led to many casualties," Yashin said by telephone.

Government critics have complained that the authorities show more tolerance toward football fans than the opposition because pro-Kremlin groups, including the Nashi youth movement, have reportedly sought their help in intimidation campaigns against opposition activists. Media have speculated that football fans were hired to brutally beat Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin in early November, an accusation the fan community has vehemently denied.

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst at the Center for Political Information, said the rally indicated that "emotional causes" could prompt young people to join public protests, including

unsanctioned ones. “It disproves the thesis that Russians are idle and won't take to the streets,” he said.

This is not the first time football fans have rallied over a death this year. Hundreds of people rallied in July to protest the death of Spartak Moscow fan Yury Volkov, 22, who was stabbed in a fight with Chechen natives near the Chistiye Prudy metro station that month.

In November, a police officer was beaten during a march of Zenit St. Petersburg fans. Police initially tried to cover up the incident, but a suspect was identified on footage from surveillance cameras and detained, news reports said.

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