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Rioting Erupts Near Kremlin Walls

By Alexander Bratersky

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Thousands of football fans rallying with flares and Spartak flags on Manezh Square on Saturday to denounce the death of Spartak fan Yegor Sviridov. **Denis Sinyakov**

President Dmitry Medvedev praised Moscow police for a violent crackdown on shocking downtown rioting near the Kremlin's walls Saturday, even as police sought information on who had led the mob of some 5,500 football fans in shouting racist phrases and attacking North Caucasus natives.

The unsanctioned rally demanding an investigation into the killing of a football fan on Dec. 5 erupted into violence after demonstrators spotted a group of dark-skinned teenagers and tried to beat them, news reports said.

Thirty-two people were wounded, including two seriously, Interfax reported. At least three of those hospitalized were Caucasus natives, all with stab wounds. Eight police officers were also injured.

Police briefly detained 66 people.

The mood in Moscow was tense Sunday as rumors circulated in online football forums that Caucasus natives were planning counterstrike attacks, but police called the rumors a provocation by ultranationalists.

During Saturday's rally, chants of "Russia for Russians" and "[expletive] the Caucasus" reverberated across Manezh Square, proving a major embarrassment for the Kremlin, which prides itself on allowing no unsanctioned public events and is accused by the liberal opposition of secretly sympathizing with nationalists.

The protesters came to the square to protest the death of Yegor Sviridov, 28, a member of a radical Spartak Moscow fan group who was shot dead during an interracial brawl with North Caucasus natives.

A suspect in the murder, Aslan Cherkesov, a native of Kabardino-Balkaria, was detained last week, but his companions were released after questioning, prompting speculation that they had paid off the police.

After the crowd attacked the group of dark-skinned teens, police whisked them into an ambulance, prompting the demonstrators to pelt officers with stones, flares, empty bottles and chunks of ice, and attack them with metal rods, news reports said.

Some protesters stomped on the head of a dark-skinned man and dragged the bloodied victim by the legs, Gazeta.ru said. Photos of the square by blogger Zyalt show some participants raising their arms in an apparent Nazi salute.

Moscow police chief Vladimir Kolokoltsev personally negotiated with the protesters, with photos by Zyalt showing him talking to a man hiding his face behind a balaclava, which he refused to remove.

The crowd dispersed after Kolokoltsev promised to solve Sviridov's murder, but then proceeded run in packs through metro cars, chanting, “White carriage, white carriage!” as they hit and kicked people who appeared to be Caucasus and Central Asian natives.

More than 10 assaults on dark-skinned migrants were reportedly attacked in the suburbs later Saturday, said Galina Kozhevnikova, who tracks xenophobia with the Sova watchdog, Gazeta.ru reported.

The protesters also toppled a New Year's tree on Manezh Square.

A similar rally took place Saturday in St. Petersburg, where some 3,000 football fans clashed with police during an unsanctioned downtown march, RIA-Novosti said. About 50 were briefly detained.

Early reports said police had identified the organizers of the Moscow violence, but a law enforcement source told RIA-Novosti on Sunday that investigators remained unsure and were examining feeds from surveillance cameras in the area to identify people involved in the attacks on policemen and passers-by.

Ultranationalist organizations and football fan clubs — two communities known to overlap — denied involvement in the violence.

“It was no doubt a provocation by nationalists, who try to drag football fans into these showdowns,” the Russian Football Union said, Interfax reported Sunday.

Fratria, the football club that Sviridov, the slain fan, belonged to, also distanced itself, saying in a statement on its web site that it “opposes any actions that violate Russian law” and "supports law and justice.”

Dmitry Dyomushkin, leader of the banned radical Slavic Union group, said that “blaming nationalists is ridiculous,” Interfax reported. But he conceded that at least half of the rally's participants were nationalists.

Three North Caucasus natives believed to have participated in the fight that killed Sviridov were detained over the weekend. News reports identified them as Khasan Ibragimov, Nariman Ismailov and Artur Alfibiyev.

Dozens of nationalists and football fans tried to crash a sanctioned anti-government rally of some 500 people organized by the Left Front group on the downtown Pushkin Square on Sunday but were stopped by police, RIA-Novosti said. The home of Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov was targeted Saturday by unidentified assailants who pelted the door with eggs and left obscene graffiti on the outside walls.

Internet forums maintained by football fans buzzed with reports that Caucasus natives planned to stage their own unsanctioned rally by the Yevropeisky shopping mall Sunday, but authorities called the rumors a ruse by nationalists and said representatives of ethnic diasporas in Moscow had denied the information.

Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev said Sunday that left-wing radicals had provoked Saturday's rioting. He did not elaborate.

He also praised city police officers, saying they had prevented large-scale riots. He said police initially had refrained from cracking down on the unsanctioned rally because they had sought to shield tourists and Muscovites walking in the area from getting caught up in a brawl.

Medvedev said Saturday that city police handled the incident correctly. He did not elaborate.

Independent analysts were markedly less impressed, with Alexei Mukhin of the Center for Political Technologies calling the authorities' reserved reaction “disgusting.”

“Our authorities often think everything will blow over by itself,” he said, warning that an ethnic confrontation in the capital could escalate if the instigators were not found and punished quickly.

Alexei Lebedev, a sports editor with Moskovsky Komsomolets, said the government has neglected the youth, including sports fans, leaving them open to nationalists' influence.

“Football fans are a part of the youth community — they haven't arrived from the moon,” Lebedev told The Moscow Times.

Critics have long accused Kremlin-linked groups, including the Nashi youth movement, of hiring football hooligans to beat up and intimidate opposition activists, though the

allegations have never been proven in court.

Nevertheless, Russia has a record of both football-related and ethnic riots in recent years, starting in 2002, where a football fans rioted after Russia's team lost to Japan during the World Cup. The game was broadcast on screens on Manezh Square.

One person died in the resulting violence, also blamed on nationalists. Kozhevnikova of Sova watchdog noted that police later tracked down and jailed the instigators.

In 2006, two ethnic Russians were killed in a cafe clash with Chechens in the Karelian town of Kondopoga that sparked riots.

On Tuesday, about 1,000 of Sviridov's supporters rallied by a Investigative Committee office on Leningradsky Prospekt, blocking the busy road during the evening rush hour. Police did not detain anyone.

A bank clerk said he attended Saturday's rally because even though he disliked hard-line nationalism, the organizers had "caught the mood in the air."

"People have had enough of the Caucasus natives, who behave like masters and are able to avoid any responsibility while authorities pay no attention," said Konstantin, 36, who refused to give his last name to avoid problems at work.

Konstantin said by telephone Sunday that several riot police officers expressed sympathy for the participants of the rally, which was also attended by Alexander Zaldostanov, a leader of the Night Wolves motorcycle club.

Zaldostanov, a self-proclaimed Russian Orthodox believer who rode with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin this summer, told the Rusnovosti.ru on Saturday that he did not want to feel like "a part of a diaspora" in his own country.

"We just came to support the guys because we don't feel indifferent," Zaldostanov said. "This is a blatant case of a person being taken in by police for murder and being freed."

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