

Surkov Says Riot Justifies Slow Reform Pace

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Vladislav Surkov, the president's first deputy chief of staff, defended the country's slow pace of political reform, saying in remarks published Thursday that last weekend's violent riot near the Kremlin further justified the cautious approach.

More than 30 people were injured when nationalists clashed with police and attacked non-Slavic minorities on Manezh Square on Saturday, the biggest single outbreak of racist violence in Moscow since the 1991 Soviet collapse.

Surkov, a top policymaker for President Dmitry Medvedev, said the Kremlin would stick to its stated policy of gradual reform to prevent further unrest.

"Do you need a revolution again? Total destruction? So that everywhere it would be like it was on Manezh Square on Dec. 11?" Surkov said in an interview in Izvestia.

"We need to be careful about our political and economic institutions," Surkov said.

Opposition activists have staged frequent protests in Moscow in past years calling for political reform, but Surkov suggested their activities were fomenting unrest. He said they had set a precedent for the nationalist unrest, even though their rallies have been peaceful.

"The 'liberals' have made unsanctioned rallies a fashion while nationalists and hooligans are following suit," he said.

Medvedev has championed the importance of civil society and democracy for Russia's future, and he raised eyebrows further by warning recently of the danger of "stagnation" in a country where politics is dominated by the ruling United Russia party.

But Surkov said those who interpreted Medvedev's remarks as a signal of faster reforms were mistaken.

"Medvedev has clearly sent the message that 'change will be gradual but unswerving,'" Surkov said. "This is the key to understanding his style and philosophy. I think we are moving forward and there is no stagnation."

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