

The Manege of Xenophobia

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Shortly after 5 p.m. Saturday, President Dmitry Medvedev announced during a Security Council meeting that he had signed a decree providing additional measures to beef up domestic security. This announcement came minutes after roughly 5,500 ultranationalists and football fanatics had just rioted on Manezh Square.

The motivation behind the decree was driven by the fact that governors have lost all authority in their regions. Apparently, Medvedev learned about this problem after the Kushchyovskaya tragedy in early November, in which 12 people were killed by a local gang that had extorted, killed and raped local citizens for years with impunity.

“In some cases, governors simply have no idea what is going on [in their regions]. In other cases, they do know, but they can’t take the serious measures required to fight crimes. They asked me to coordinate this work,” Medvedev said.

As a result of the presidential decree, there will now be regular “coordinative meetings” to help boost internal security within the country. Unfortunately for Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, Medvedev’s idea came a bit late to avert the Manezh violence.

Police paid far too little attention to the ethnic tensions that had been building for weeks before the Manezh incident. On Dec. 6, football fan Yegor Sviridov was killed by a group of people from the North Caucasus, and on Dec. 7 about 1,000 protesters blocked traffic on Leningradsky Prospekt. Thus, it was no surprise that on Dec. 11, 5,500 angry, crazed football fans, together with a motley crew of ultranationalists and neo-fascists, ran wild on Manezh Square pummeling any passer-by with dark skin or from Central Asia.

Moscow police were completely unprepared for the violence on Manezh as well as in a nearby metro station, where rioters continued their assaults.

There was a similar case this summer when football fan Yuri Volkov was killed. The chief suspect in the killing, a Chechen, was detained but then released for lack of evidence.

In the Sviridov killing, all of the suspects, who were North Caucasus natives, were also initially released after being detained (with the exception of one) — by all indications thanks to lobbying efforts from their diaspora leaders.

It is natural that a diaspora supports its members in nearly every country. Arriving in a new city and facing difficulties competing with native residents, a diaspora often unites and helps members find jobs and protect their rights as minorities. This is normal as long as they act within the limits of the law. But it is another matter entirely when the diaspora assists their members who get in trouble with the law by using illegal methods, including bribes.

To be sure, the government's lack of a nationalities policy doesn't help unify the country. Take, for example, Chechnya and neighboring republics in the North Caucasus that have been given quasi-

independent status in many areas of local rule. In addition, the military has discussed a proposal to establish separate divisions where only certain ethnic minorities will serve to avoid interethnic strife within the army. These measures clearly work against integrating minorities into society.

The subculture among extremist football fans is a priori xenophobic. This has to be addressed and controlled, but the government is unable or unwilling to deal with this problem. The fusion of football fanatics and ultranationalists is well known.

Experts have often expressed their serious concern that if the government loses its ability to provide stability in the country — particularly if there is a serious economic downturn — there will be a high risk that violent ethnic conflicts within Russia will cripple the country. Saturday's violence on Manezh Square proves that this risk is real.

Xenophobia is popular among a large swath of the population, and the government is weak. The president's decree that attempts to improve domestic security certifies this.

This comment appeared as an editorial in Vedomosti.

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