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Manezh Clashes Were Orchestrated

By Paul Goble

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Though many social factors were behind the Manezh clashes last month, the action itself was orchestrated by political forces interested in destabilizing the country and exploiting "ethnic wars" in order to come to power, according to a leading Moscow psychologist.

In an interview with Novaya Gazeta, Aleksandr Asmolov notes that "Russia is ever more becoming a country of advanced xenophobia," with Russians in all sectors "dividing people into 'ours' and 'not ours,'" producing the kind of polarization that represents "a breeding ground for extremism" and inevitably generates aggressive behavior.

But, the Moscow State University psychologist says, "those who try to reduce everything to football fanatics" or "the criminal milieu" or the unstable personalities of the young are at best "naive" because a careful review of what was said and done in the Manezh incident on December 11 shows that it was orchestrated.

The political techniques used, he argues, were very "professional," an indication that "definite political" groups interested in promoting instability and then exploiting it were

involved. "I cannot name them," he admits, "but if we look at the film clips now on the Internet, we see" evidence of that.

While the references to the Jews as being to blame for all Russia's problems is hardly new, as offensive and untrue as it is, those on the Manezh Square who complained about the role of "the Saracens" were making a kind of ideological innovation beyond the imagination of most football fanatics, Asmolov says.

Such references, he suggests, were introduced by political forces who hoped to exploit such inter-ethnic violence by suggesting that the enemy of "Holy Russia," another term widely invoked in the December 11th clash, includes not just members of other ethnic groups, but anyone from "the other," however defined, who opposes "the us."

That is a level of sophistication, Asmolov continues, not found among the population at large but rather among "definite political groups [which] have taken up not only the rhetoric, but also the ideology of a crusade for Holy Rus" in order to "destabilize" Russian society and thus set the stage for a change in the country's "political regime."

Most of the discussion of the Manezh events, the Asmolov continues, has focused on superficial issues, but according to him, such clashes "cannot be explained if behind them do not stand a serious political program having serious political resources" and one whose nature it is important to understand.

Many commentators, he notes, have labeled these forces "the Russian nationalists," but Asmolov says he would avoid such a designation. That is because, in his view, "behind these events stand a different matrix of consciousness," one that is perhaps best labeled "fundamentalist."

Among the examples of such an ideological are "Italian fascism, German national socialism, and other manifestations of totalitarian cultures which lead to the facelessness of the individual," a pattern that was also very much in evidence on the Manezh Square, judging by the films.

Many of the participants wore masks. "Facelessness is a picture of definite political groups," one connected "with a definite rhetoric" and one that suggests "we are dealing with a very serious phenomenon."

Some of the commentaries about these events have spread this message, calling for "zero tolerance toward those who come from the Caucasus," an argument that Asmolov argues is "absolutely a Hitlerite slogan, a transition from individuality to the crowd" and a point of which holds that "you are guilty before you belong to this culture."

In sum, Asmolov says, "this is the legalization of faceless relations between people and the transformation of Russia into a country of ethnic wars," a trend that can and should be fought as it has been in post-1945 Germany but one that tragically, Asmolov continues, is being promoted rather than fought in Russia today.

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