

Putin Warns of Nationalist Threat

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Vladimir Putin greeting Mordovian natives at the “We Are All Russia” theatrical performance Friday in Saransk. **Michael Klimentyev**

SARANSK, Mordovia — President Vladimir Putin said Russia must counter a serious threat from nationalists who he said were taking advantage of democratic freedoms to gain influence in a country with a fragile mix of ethnic groups.

He rebuked local authorities, saying recent outbreaks of ethnic violence were “primarily the result of the inaction of law enforcement organizations and irresponsibility of bureaucrats.”

“Today, more and more often, under the guise of development of democracy and freedom, various ethnic nationalist groups are raising their heads. They take part in rallies, work on the Internet and among teenagers and students,” Putin said Friday.

“In essence, they all are pushing, provoking separatist tendencies inside Russia,” he said, addressing the first meeting of his Council on Interethnic Relations. “It is important to confront their dangerous influence.”

The country has seen several outbreaks of ethnic violence in recent years, including December

2010 rioting on Manezh Square, near the Kremlin, in which thousands of nationalist football fans attacked non-Slavic passers-by and clashed with police.

Nationalist football fans on Thursday attacked supporters of a team from Dagestan in Moscow and St. Petersburg, cities where tension between ethnic Slavs and migrants from the Caucasus and other areas has risen.

“We do not have the right to ignore any negative tendencies that arise in this sphere. We should understand that conflicts may not only weaken the state and society but destroy its foundations,” Putin said.

“Corruption and prejudice among representatives of state bodies, and their inability to provide justice and defend people’s interests, are fueling ethnic conflict and tension,” he said.

Some of the tens of thousands of protesters who took to the streets in a wave of demonstrations against Putin’s return to the presidency in May were nationalists who shared their thirst for a stronger voice in politics.

The authorities responded to the opposition protests with tough measures, ranging from increased fines for infractions at protests to apartment searches and criminal charges against some activists.

They said the measures were needed to maintain order.

Putin interrupted a working vacation in the Black Sea resort of Sochi to travel to Saransk, capital of the Mordovia republic and home to the Finno-Ugric speaking Mordvin people, one of more than 200 ethnic groups in Russia.

The trip was to mark what is considered the 1,000th anniversary of the region joining Russia.

It was part of Putin’s effort to cast himself as a protector of Russia’s unity and ethnic diversity and use his power to discourage ethnic tension.

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