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Riot Called a Result of Growing Anti-Migrant Sentiment

By Oleg Sukhov

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People lining up Monday as they wait for police to check their documents at a vegetable warehouse in Biryulyovo. **Denis Tyrin**

In response to a violent race riot in southern Moscow over the weekend, federal and city authorities announced new measures to fight illegal immigration and detained about 1,200 migrants at a vegetable storage facility that had been attacked by rioters Sunday.

With these actions, the government took a first step in addressing what several observers and analysts said was the core reason for the riot: a rising tide of anti-migrant sentiment that is gaining momentum over migrants' alleged involvement in criminal activities and a general lack of law and order.

More than a thousand people protested in the district of Biryulyovo on Sunday against the alleged killing of a young man by a person hailing from the Caucasus, in the largest ethnic riot in the country since a protest on Manezh Square in 2010. Protesters calling for tighter

immigration laws tipped over cars, stormed a shopping mall and attacked police officers.

On a raid Monday of the vegetable warehouse attacked by rioters, police said they found a car containing several million rubles, three non-lethal pistols, two knives and a baseball bat, RIA Novosti reported. Later on Monday, Chief Sanitary Inspector Gennady Onishchenko said the vegetable facility had been closed.

In another response to the protesters' demands, the State Duma on Monday began preparing bills to fight illegal immigration, said Vladimir Vasilyev, head of the United Russia faction in the parliament's lower house. Another senior member of the ruling party, Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, said the legislature could launch an investigation into the riot.

The threat of further violence lingered, however. Several dozen people participated in an unauthorized rally in Biryulyovo late Monday, demanding tighter immigration laws, Interfax reported.

Moscow police said they were taking measures to ensure safety during celebrations of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, set to begin Tuesday. Some observers have voiced concerns that the event, during which Muslims will celebrate in the city's streets, could trigger clashes between ethnic groups.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny responded to the Biryulyovo protests by launching an effort to collect 100,000 signatures, the minimum threshold for a legislative initiative to be considered by the Duma, for a bill mandating visas with Central Asian countries.

He said the cause of the riot was rampant corruption.

"The more of a nightmare the migrant ghetto creates for residents, the more law enforcement officials and local authorities can earn," Navalny wrote on his blog. "People get away with committing crimes because they bribe the authorities. The government supports them and is against us."

The authorities will have to adopt anti-immigration measures to save face, said Alexei Makarkin, a deputy head of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies. But this is unlikely to have a lasting impact because the economy needs migrants, and any such efforts will get bogged down due to corruption, he said.

Blogger and journalist Ilya Varlamov said the riots were a logical consequence of the authorities' failure to establish the rule of law.

"People are asking for simple things — law and order, the inevitability of punishment for criminals," he said. "They have been demanding this for years but nothing is happening."

Anti-migrant sentiment is often driven by the belief that migrants — among whose ranks people include natives of the North Caucasus republics of Russia as well as those from the South Caucasus and Central Asia — are disproportionately responsible for crime, although official statistics paint an unclear picture.

In August, Moscow City prosecutor Sergei Kudeneyev said that about 20 percent of all crimes in Moscow were committed by foreign citizens and that in recent months the number

of crimes committed by migrants had risen by 60 percent. There are about 1.8 million officially registered foreigners in Moscow, or about 15 percent of the city's population, but experts estimate that there are hundreds of thousands more who are unregistered.

Dmitry Oreshkin, a political analyst and the head of the Merkator research group, said the riot was caused by the Kremlin's own domestic policies.

In the early 2000s, Putin used positive incentives like economic growth and higher incomes to curry favor with the population, but gradually this model ceased to work due to a lack of innovation and an economic slowdown, he said.

But the Kremlin is now trying to rally people around the regime through the image of a common enemy, either external or internal — liberals, immigrants, foreigners or the rich.

"The government is switching from positive incentives to negative ones," Oreshkin said. "The authorities have intentionally stimulated hostility against various groups."

The riots are useful for the Kremlin because people might demand order and "an iron fist," and the government could use this pretext for pursuing a more authoritarian line, the analyst said. This could lead to measures such as abolishing the Moscow City Duma elections scheduled for September of next year, he said.

Kremlin clans have intentionally nurtured soccer fan organizations and nationalist groups to stimulate ethnic tensions, Oreshkin said, adding that many nationalists had gotten away with their crimes due to government protection.

"Sooner or later, the aggression must burst through," Oreshkin said.

The police Monday released most of the 380 protesters detained during the riot, an action some interpreted as a sign that the authorities would be taking a lenient approach on the participants. The police said that they would seek to impose administrative penalties on 70 of those remaining in custody and that criminal cases would be initiated only against two people.

But a police representative said criminal cases related to attacks against police officers would be sent to the Investigative Committee. Five injured riot police officers had been hospitalized as a result of the violence, according to law enforcement officials.

Oreshkin said that some of the more insignificant participants might be jailed but that the police are unlikely to launch a large-scale investigation against the organizers of the riot because some Kremlin clans might be behind the Biryulyovo protests.

Makarkin agreed that the authorities are unlikely to impose long prison sentences on local protesters in Biryulyovo because it might trigger new protests. But the penalties for activists from outside the neighborhood, including nationalists, might be harsh, he added.

Anti-migrant protests have become more widespread in recent years. In 2006, thousands of people rioted in the city of Kondopoga in the Karelia republic to protest a killing reportedly committed by people from Chechnya and Dagestan, while in 2010 tens of thousands of people staged a violent protest on Manezh Square in Moscow in response to the alleged killing of a

soccer fan by a person from the Caucasus.

Earlier this year, unauthorized rallies against migrants took place in the Sverdlovsk, Tver, Ivanovo and Saratov regions, and in St. Petersburg.

Contact the author at o.sukhov@imedia.ru

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