

Two Local Officials Fired Over Biryulyovo Riots

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Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has fired two district leaders in connection with the mid-October anti-migrant riots in Biryulyovo over the murder of a local resident blamed on an Azeri national.

Sobyenin's rhetoric about fighting illegal migration may be part of a Kremlin strategy to rescue President Vladimir Putin from having to speak on the issue and thus becoming the target of public discontent, Kremlin insiders and political analysts said.

The mayor dismissed Viktor Legavin, head of the Zapadnoye Biryulyovo district, and Georgy Smoleysky, prefect of the South Administrative District of which Biryulyovo is part, at a City Hall meeting Friday, Itar-Tass reported.

"You need to track what happens on your territory, attract law enforcement agencies, controlling bodies, [and] report to me when you detect mass violations instead of passing

by indifferently and saying that it is not your business," Sobyenin told the dismissed officials.

Riots in Zapadnoye Biryulyovo on Oct. 13 saw about 400 local residents take to the streets and a group of nationalist youth attack a local shopping mall and vegetable warehouse known to employ migrants.

The riots were a reaction to the Oct. 10 stabbing death of 25-year-old local resident Yegor Shcherbakov by an Azeri national, Orkhan Zeynalov, who has said he was acting in self-defense.

On Friday, Sobyenin also reprimanded another prefect, Vladimir Zotov of the Southeast Administrative District, over about 1,000 illegal migrants detected on his territory's Sadovod market in late October.

At the Oct. 13 Kremlin meetings it was decided to shift the conflict to a local level and "exclude Putin from the agenda," an unidentified law enforcement official told Urals news agency Ura.ru.

"This time the president was excluded from the information field so that, in the public conscience he does not associate with something negative," the official said.

But Putin was forced to comment on the riots in Zapadnoye Biryulyovo for the first time Oct. 22, after bloggers speculated that a female suicide bomber from Dagestan's attack on a public bus in Volgograd the day before was an act of revenge for attacks on migrants in Moscow.

Still, Putin remained brief in his comments, only blaming local authorities for the unrest.

"This is a willful avoidance because it is very difficult for the president to say something that would satisfy everybody," Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies said.

Although anti-migrant sentiments directed both at CIS nationals and natives of Russia's North Caucasus are running high, Putin cannot play to either of the two sentiments for fear of damaging relations with CIS and North Caucasus republics, Makarkin said.

Makarkin added that cutting subsidies for the North Caucasus could breed "anti-Moscow moods" there, while introducing visas with CIS states could make them "turn away from Russia."

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