

Russian City of Ufa Takes Drastic Measures Ahead of Global Summits

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) attends the BRICS Summit in Ufa, Russia, July 9, 2015.

Ufa officials went out of their way to prepare for the high-profile BRICS and SCO summits being held in the Russian city this week, urging residents to go on vacation, painting all the wooden houses in the city center gray and camouflaging run-down buildings behind giant banners depicting other things.

The city administration advised residents to take time off work while the summits were taking place from July 8 to 10, the region's minister for labor and social security, Lenara Ivanova, told *Russkaya Sluzhba Novostei* radio station Thursday.

“It's very important to understand that we didn't obligate anybody [to take a vacation], we simply suggested it,” she was quoted by the radio station as saying.

Ivanova said that the advice had only been meant for those who work in the south of the city

where the summits were being held. According to her, the advice helped lighten traffic in the area.

The appearance of the city also underwent some drastic changes in preparation for the arrival of world leaders. Prominent Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov reported earlier this month that large pieces of material depicting trees were being erected around old and derelict buildings in a bid to make the city look presentable.

It is common practice in Russia for buildings that are under renovation to have their exteriors covered with plastic sheeting depicting sparkling new facades — an artist's impression of what they should look like when the work is complete. But in recent years, the authorities have taken to covering up even buildings that are not under renovation, but simply neglected, dressing them in fake walls for visits by high-ranking officials.

In 2013 old wooden houses in the town of Suzdal were hidden under colorful facades in anticipation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrival. His predecessor Dmitry Medvedev was also often shown hastily covered up buildings around Russia, and called officials out on it several times.

Varlamov also posted numerous photos on his blog of wooden houses in downtown Ufa that had been painted gray and red.

“They painted all the city center gray! I'm not joking. House by house. Whole districts are gray now,” he wrote on his blog on Monday.

The head of Russia's republic of Bashkortostan — of which Ufa is the regional capital — Rustem Khamitov conceded there was truth in Varlamov's allegations, but called on people not to dramatize the situation.

“We need to work on our taste,” he was cited as saying Wednesday by local news site Ufacitynews.ru.

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