

Nationalists stage violent protests in southern Russia

By Clara Weiss
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Over the past week, nationalists have been mounting violent demonstrations against immigrants from Chechnya in the southern Russian town of Pugachev. The protests began after a 16-year-old Chechen boy stabbed a 20-year-old resident of the city in a fight. Pugachev is located in the Saratov region near the North Caucasus and has just over 40,000 inhabitants.

The dispute between the two young men took place on the night of July 5. According to the details released by the police so far, the reason for the clash concerned a girl.

Twenty-year-old Ruslan Marzhanov, who had recently completed service in the army, suffered serious knife injuries and was taken to the local hospital. He died there because no surgeon was available to administer treatment to him. His funeral was held the next day. The 16-year-old boy from Chechnya, Ali Nazirov, made a confession to the police immediately after the crime and is now in solitary confinement.

On Sunday evening, a few hundred nationalists launched the protests, which were reportedly led by members of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the ultra-right opposition party. The LDPR is one of the main opposition parties in Russia and cooperates closely with the local government in the Saratov region. Other right-wing organisations also participated in the demonstration.

The protesters demanded that the local government deport all Chechens, threatening that otherwise they would take care of their removal themselves. The extremists withdrew to a northwestern neighbourhood of Pugachev, inhabited by many immigrants from the North Caucasus, and apparently started a huge brawl there. It is believed that many people were injured, but no precise details have been reported.

The deceased boy's father, Shamil Marzhanov, appealed to the demonstrators to end the protests. "I think it's very sad that my child can't be left in peace even after

he's died. The problem isn't nationality; it's vodka ...", he said.

On Monday last week, there were further protests and violent clashes with the police, resulting in injuries to several people. The online newspaper, *Gazeta.Ru*, reported that local administrative buildings were stormed by a group of nationalists. About 350 people blocked the motorway from Volgograd to Samara.

On Tuesday, about 1,500 protesters broke through a chain of police and interior ministry security forces that had assembled to dispel the protests, and again obstructed the motorway. It was reported that nationalists also planned to set fire to a café frequented by immigrants from the Caucasus and stage further attacks on residential areas. However, this was reportedly prevented by the police. Hundreds of people again blocked the motorway on Wednesday. While minor protests continued late last week, the weekend has remained quiet.

Government officials began to negotiate with the protesters on Wednesday and indicated that their demands would be met by officials unleashing raids on the Chechen population. Since the beginning of the raids, which were also launched in near-by villages, over two-dozen people without residence permits were arrested. Russian citizens are also required to obtain residence permits as soon as they move into a new region.

Another six young men were removed from the region by municipal order, because they were supposedly "radically tempered". The press office of the Chechen diaspora claimed that the families from Chechnya would "do nothing but sit in their homes". According to official figures, a total of only 97 people from Chechnya live in Pugachev.

In addition, a ban on the consumption of alcohol until July 19 was imposed on the town. Both of the young men were apparently drunk at the time of the stabbing. The town's chief of police has now resigned.

Simultaneously, the local government has tried to contain the protests, fearing that an escalation of ethnic and nationalist tensions might quickly destabilize the whole region. Right-wing extremists from St. Petersburg, including, the well-known neo-Nazi Nikolai Bondarik, had initially intended to travel to Pugachev to support the protests. Most were stopped on their way, however.

Southern Russia is characterised by extreme poverty, social inequality and the proximity of the conflict-ridden north Caucasus. Since 1994, the Kremlin has conducted two bloody wars against Chechen separatists that claimed the lives of approximately 100,000 people and devastated the entire north Caucasus.

Civil war-like conditions continue in Chechnya and Dagestan to the present day. A majority of the working-age population of the north Caucasus has to earn their money in other parts of Russia, owing to the impossibility of finding any work there.

The south of Russia is one of the country's poorest regions and has been particularly hard hit by the economic crisis. In early July, inhabitants of the village of Storozhevka blocked a highway because they had no access to a sufficient water supply. The villagers blamed rich entrepreneurs in the region for the lack of water. An angry female protester said: "They [the rich] use automated car washes, they have swimming pools; they sit there with all their water, while we have none at all. We've been a whole week without water; neither at night nor through the day has there been any water!"

The ethnic conflicts in the region are a legacy of the nationalist policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Since the restoration of the market in the early 1990s, ethnic divisions have been manipulated and exploited by the ruling elite to divide the working class.

The Putin regime has long fomented Russian chauvinism. Both the Kremlin and other sections of the political establishment routinely blame migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia for the country's social and economic woes.

Politicians such as Alexander Tkachov, the governor of the neighbouring Krasnodar region and associate of President Putin, recently set up Cossack militia in Krasnodar to drive illegal migrant workers out of the Caucasus.

Liberal opposition activist Andrei Pivovarov supported the Pugachev protests, even though he dissociated himself from the intervention of people who were obviously neo-Nazis. Another well-known liberal, the blogger Alexei Navalny, has participated several times in the

Russian March, an annual neo-Nazi mass rally, where he chanted the slogan "Stop feeding the Caucasus". Such slogans and ultra-right groups have also been features of the protest movement in Moscow and other Russian cities.

The Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) adopts ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic positions, repeatedly organizes campaigns against immigrants, and collaborates with fascist tendencies. Pseudo-left organisations like the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) and the Russian section of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) marched together with the extremists in protests last year, and have been cooperating with the right-wing National-Bolshevik party, the Other Russia, which has also supported the nationalist protests, in the "Forum of Left Forces" the autumn last year.

All these tendencies are united by their Russian nationalism and deep hostility to the working class. They deliberately try to divide the working class to divert attention from the social disaster created by the market economy, with the aim of blocking the development of a united movement of workers against the Kremlin and capitalism. The current protests in Pugachev expose the immense dangers involved in the efforts of right-wing forces to exploit the existing economic crisis and channel discontent behind reactionary politics. Only on the basis of a unified struggle of the working class—across all ethnic, religious, and national boundaries—armed with a socialist program, can a progressive solution to the present crisis be found.

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