

Attacks Mar City Weekend

By Galena Stolyarova
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St. Petersburg was witness to a series of violent nationalist and politically motivated incidents during the weekend.

On Friday, the headquarters of the office of human rights group Soldiers' Mothers was broken into and robbed, while racist posters and slogans were plentiful at Saturday's Russia-Latvia football match. A Latvian journalist covering the game was beaten up and robbed.

Ella Polyakova, head of Soldiers' Mothers, said used clothes collected for Chechen refugees had been strewn throughout the organization's office, the safe and drawers had been opened and their contents were turned upside down.

She was in shock when she saw the mess left by unknown burglars in the group's office in central St. Petersburg, near the Vladimirskaya metro station, she said.

"It looks to me as if somebody was trying to intimidate us, but was also looking for something," Polyakova said.

The burglars didn't touch several bottles of champagne and boxes of candies. But two telephones and a computer monitor were taken.

The thieves left the computer itself, but two flashcards dropped nearby led the tenants to think that the contents of the computer had been copied and taken away.

Asked who she thought was behind the attack, Polyakova sighed and said the list of suspects is endless.

"We constantly find ourselves under huge pressure, as our organization is a thorn in many people's sides," Polyakova said.

Soldiers' Mothers opposes the armed conflict in Chechnya, educates potential conscripts and their families how to fight against hazing and bribes in the army and how to legally evade conscription.

At the moment, the organization is involved in two high-profile court cases. One case involves marines who deserted saying they had been abused and hazed by their seniors in Kronshtadt. The other case involves alleged physical abuse of cadets at the Nakhimov Navy School.

"Our office has been raided and robbed a few times before, and the attackers were never found," Polyakova said. "But the barbarian style of this invasion was really

disgusting."

The rhetoric of posters and slogans at the World Cup qualifying football match at the city's Petrovsky Stadium on Saturday went far beyond being merely competitive toward a sports rival.

"Dead donkey ears," a reference to President Vladimir Putin's comment last month about what Estonia and Latvia were likely to get for their territorial claims, was among the most colorful insults.

Latvia has already accused the Russian fans of abusing the visiting sportsmen.

Krisvanis Klavins, spokesman for the Latvian Football Association, said that "there were three separate incidents involving Russian supporters abusing Latvia" and "many Latvian supporters were threatened by Russians," Reuters reported.

Latvian sportsmen were addressed as "Nazis" and "fascists" by some fans. The slogan "Our MIGs in your Riga" looked like a political threat. The police didn't take any action against people holding offensive posters. About 3,000 police provided security at the match.

The references to Nazis and fascists were to Latvia's tolerance of marches by Latvian veterans of a German Wafer SS unit that fought against the Red Army. Riga says their citizens were forced to fight on the German and Soviet sides during World War II and that the SS veterans had tried to preserve Latvia's independence.

Klavins said he was hit from behind by a group of Russian fans as he was walking with some Latvians to the stadium, Reuters reported.

"During the under-21 game, Russian fans were calling us 'fascists' and 'Nazis'. At the senior game, the crowd was chanting 'Latvia sucks'," he said.

"I don't think it's appropriate to use such slogans in international matches. Also, many of our supporters were threatened by Russians."

In a peculiar twist, the offensive insults of local fans were addressed to ethnic Russians. Most players in the Latvian team have Russian surnames - Stepanov, Astafyev, Smirnov, Isakov, Prokhorenkov - and are even ethnically Russian, which can't be said of all members of their rival team. The Latvian coach is Yury Andreyev.

In a different incident, Arturs Vaiders, a sports journalist with the Latvian newspaper Diena, was severely beaten and robbed Friday night by a man in a car whom the reporter had asked to take him to his hotel after touring the city.

The driver took him to a different place, beat him up and robbed Vaiders of his credit cards and a digital camera.

The journalist is undergoing treatment in Riga's Galilees Hospital, where he will have to stay until the end of this week.

Yuly Rybakov, a human rights advocate and founder of the new human rights radio station Free Voice, said the dangers of growing nationalism are still underestimated by

the Russian public.

The trend deserves much greater attention, as Russia's social and political environment provides a fertile ground for racism, extremism and nationalism, he said.

"Widespread poverty, low life expectancy and plummeting population levels make most Russians feel weak as a nation, and all that isn't going to get any better in the near future," Rybakov said.

Some Russians see aggression toward foreigners as some kind of a defense gesture, he added.

"To simply reproduce the current population level, every Russian family must have eight or nine children. Otherwise, migrants will eventually dominate the country. This prospect looks scary to many natives."

St. Petersburg Times, 7th June 2005.