

Russian Leader Attacked

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Minority groups in Kazakstan fear a political terror campaign is in the offing

Moscow politicians are demanding a full investigation into last week's vicious attack on a Russian community leader in Kazakstan.

Alexander Shushannikov, chairman of the East Kazakstan branch of the Lad (Harmony) Slavic Movement, was waylaid by unidentified assailants in the town of Ust-Kamenogorsk and badly beaten.

The attack comes less than a month after Platon Pak, a prominent figure in the Azamat party, fell victim to a similar assault. Most observers agree that the incidents are part of an ongoing terror campaign against leaders of minority political groups in Kazakstan.

Shushannikov was attacked on the eve of a trip to Moscow where the capital's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, was to host a meeting of Russian ethnic organisations from across the CIS.

Despite apparent signs that the attack had been orchestrated by Shushannikov's political rivals, the authorities made every effort to play down the incident and officials have refused to divulge details of the investigation.

Khasen Koja-Akhmet, head of the Otanashyldar opposition party, said he had no information about the assault and was unable to comment. Burkutbay Ayagan, the Almaty Civic Administration's press spokesman, was similarly non-committal.

However, independent commentators say the attack points towards a growing instability in Kazak society with unknown forces resorting to scare tactics in a bid to achieve their goals.

The issue was discussed at the Kazak Press Club last month when speakers claimed the attacks were "systematic, well planned and sophisticated". Some analysts have described the phenomenon as "open season" in the Kazak political arena.

But, in the case of Alexander Shushannikov, political pressure may only be half the story. Berik Abdygaliev, a deputy director at the Kazak Institute of Strategic Studies, said that the attack could have been organised by groups trying to drive a rift between the Kazak and Russian populations - and perhaps ultimately to sour relations between Astana and Moscow.

Abdygaliev believes there are powerful forces in Kazakstan whose primary goal is the destabilisation of society and political sabotage.

However, another commentator, Aldan Aimbetov, said Russian ethnic organisations in Kazakstan were betraying marked separatist tendencies. Some activists were demanding autonomy for Russian-dominated areas and even secession to the Russian Federation.

Aimbetov said it was possible the incident was the beginning of a deliberate campaign against Shushannikov in his capacity as leader of the Lad movement.

Other analysts speculate that the attack was organised by the regime in Astana in a bid to settle accounts with opposition leaders. They say that, since major rivals such as Gaziz Aldamjarov, chairman of the opposition RNP, left the political stage, the authorities have turned their attention to lesser figures such as Shushannikov and Pak.

The attack on Shushannikov has provoked a storm of outrage in Moscow. Mayor Yuri Luzhkov condemned the wave of violence against Slavic leaders in Kazakhstan and warned that the incident would have "serious consequences".

Luzhkov added that he would be calling Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev in order to "ask him to take personal charge of the investigation".

The mayor's comments were echoed by Gennady Seleznev, chairman of the State Duma, who claimed that the rights of the Russian population in Kazakhstan were being abused.

Meanwhile, Duma deputies and members of the Council of Compatriots have also criticised the Kazak government for bringing criminal charges against V Mikhailov, editor of the Lad newspaper and chairman of the Lad movement.

They have signed a petition asking President Vladimir Putin and Boris Pastukhov, chairman of the committee for CIS affairs, to take all necessary measures to protect both Mikhailov and Shushannikov.

The Russian Patriarch, Alexis II, has added his voice to the chorus of indignation. He claims Nazarbaev's government has brought pressure to bear on the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan, particularly with regard to Russian language and culture.

The Russian primate said he was concerned that all official business was now conducted in Kazak whilst the authorities were making concerted efforts to force the language on all sectors of society, including the church.

However, some Kazak observers point out that this wave of Russian outrage comes in sharp contrast to the Kremlin's apparent indifference last year when a number of Russian citizens were jailed by a Kazak court over the so-called Pugachev Affair.

The analysts say that the Russian leadership is currently looking for any excuse to put political pressure on Kazakhstan which recently chose to export its oil reserves through the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. The pipeline project enjoys the enthusiastic support of the United States.

Whatever the case, the experts believe the terror campaign in Kazakhstan is set to gain momentum. It is not yet clear which political forces stand behind the latest incidents and what they hope to gain by playing the nationality card. Only time will tell.

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