

Market Gets the Ax After Mob Attack

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July 31, 2013



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Authorities on Wednesday announced the impending demise of Moscow's Matveyevsky market, where migrant workers from the North Caucasus brutally beat a policeman on Saturday, prompting speculation about whether the move is retaliation for the mob attack.

Police officer Anton Kudryashov was attacked on Saturday by Khalimat Rasulova and her husband, Magomed Rasulov, who say they were protesting the detention of Rasulov's cousin in connection with the rape of a 15-year-old girl.

Kudryashov was hospitalized with head trauma and left requiring several brain surgeries.

But as the aftermath of that violent incident continued with six police officers fired and two charged with negligence — not to mention rumors of corruption at the market and President Vladimir Putin slamming the police reaction at a special meeting Wednesday evening — city authorities said the closure was actually part of a City Hall campaign to get rid of street

traders in an attempt to improve the city in general.

Saturday's incident may have simply thrust the Matveyevsky market into the spotlight, as it triggered immediate citywide inspections of all open-air markets on Monday, with Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, city police chief Anatoly Yakunin and acting Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin all coming together to call for a "clean-up" at such markets.

The Matveyevsky market is now slated for closure by Jan. 1, 2015, when the lease agreement of its owner with the city expires, Olga Veldina, spokeswoman for the Western Administrative District Prefect's office, told The Moscow Times.

According to Veldina, however, the explanation for its closure is simple: A 2006 federal law ordered open markets that sell produce to be closed or transferred to permanent buildings by 2015 in order to "make them look civilized." "Tents just don't look nice," Veldina said by telephone.

Since 2006, the once-popular Luzhniki and Cherkizovsky markets have closed down — in July 2011 and June 2009, respectively.

Moscow boasts a total of 51 markets, both in the open air and in permanent buildings. Forty-three of them are agricultural markets and there is one grocery market, City Hall's Department for Trade and Services said in an e-mailed press release.

The head of the department, Alexei Nemeryuk, said by phone that authorities are unhappy with the quality of food sold at the city's 27 agricultural markets located in the outdoors, and that they will all be closed by 2015 and replaced by permanent markets or shopping malls in the same locations.

And despite mounting speculation, Nemeryuk said that Saturday's attack on the policeman will not speed up the closure of open-air markets in the city.

"Sometimes, given the cost of the land [for rent] it is not practical [for market owners] to construct a permanent building to house only about 200 stalls, but it is practical to construct a shopping mall, with part of them occupied by a market," Nemeryuk said.

Another complication in reopening the markets in permanent buildings is that the sales may not be sufficient to pay the high rent, and the market owner may simply decide not to reopen or may be forced to shut down.

Andrei Klychkov, head of the City Duma's Communist faction, also questioned the need to move open-air markets to permanent buildings, saying such markets "offer quality produce for acceptable prices," while authorities have "failed to offer an alternative" in the near future.

Klychkov said only large producers would be presented at permanent markets and dismissed City Hall's sanitary concerns, saying such issues should be left up to law enforcement, who should ensure that "everything is in order" at markets.

Some have expressed concerns that Muscovites would have to pay more for produce of a lower quality if the markets were shut down.

But Lada Belaychuk, deputy head of research at Cushman & Wakefield, said produce sold at markets is often more expensive and of a worse quality than that sold in grocery stores.

“Supermarkets order volumes of products that are so large that they can afford to raise the retail price only slightly,” Belaychuk said by telephone.

The share of sales at markets has fallen by almost 10 percent in Moscow since 2000, from 29.2 percent to 19.5 percent, Belaychuk said later by e-mail.

Yet, while some chalked the closure up to city authorities being practical, analysts say it’s not all that simple. Another issue is the role open-air markets play in illegal migration, as such markets have been found to be hotbeds of migration violations in the past.

The Cherkizovsky market is perhaps the most notorious example, with not only numerous safety and immigration violations, but also a major smuggling operation uncovered.

Vladimir Mukomel, chief migration expert at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said the closure of open-air markets would not help in reducing illegal migration, however, partly because only Russian natives work as sellers due to a ban on foreigners in retail sales.

In addition, he said, illegal migrants who work as handymen at markets would only return after they are moved to permanent buildings, Mukomel said by telephone.

The question of corruption at open-air markets also arises, especially in light of Saturday’s incident, as the Investigative Committee has now opened a criminal case against two police officers on negligence charges over their failure to stop Rasulov from pummeling Kudryashov. The policemen now face up to five years in prison.

Putin hinted at the possibility of corruption at a meeting on the topic Wednesday evening. Lambasting the two police officers who stood by and did nothing, he said “ ... most likely, with their inaction, they were working off 30 pieces of silver,” RBC reported.

Russia’s deputy chief investigator Vasily Piskaryov told Putin investigators would examine whether there was in fact a “corruption component between the sellers and law enforcement officers,” Interfax reported.

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