

Hundreds die in eastern Europe heat wave

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While Great Britain has experienced heavy rainfall and flooding with catastrophic results, high temperatures during recent days and weeks in the east and southeast of Europe have resulted in hundreds of deaths, including an estimated 500 in Hungary alone. Broad areas of Italy, Greece and the Balkans have been hit by a multitude of forest fires, resulting in numerous fatalities as well as massive damage to property.

Temperatures of up to 45°C (113°F) were measured in Bulgaria, Bosnia and Macedonia. In Serbia and Greece, the thermometer climbed to 46°C (115°F). In Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, the average temperatures ranged between 35°C and 40°C (95°F and 104°F). In Slovakia, temperatures registering at times higher than 40°C were the highest ever recorded in the country.

The southern Italian regions of Apulia and Calabria have been hit by the worst forest fires in decades. At least two persons have died, and a further 300 are being treated in hospital for smoke poisoning. Hospitals are already hopelessly overcrowded in the Greek capital of Athens, with doctors and hospital personnel working around the clock to treat heat-related circulation complaints.

The south of the country and the region around the Greek capital are the most badly affected, with additional problems arising from power failures. The fire brigade and the local population have been fighting forest fires for days, and at least two persons have died as a direct result of the heat wave.

Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo have all suffered from power cuts, and Bulgaria has also been hit by approximately 1,800 forest fires. A state of emergency was proclaimed in the south of the country as it became clear that the government and authorities had made absolutely no preparations for such a development. Following the outbreak of the fires, Bulgaria had to rely on the Russian authorities to make planes available to quell the fires. Despite the huge tracts of forest covering the country, Bulgaria does not possess its own fire-fighting planes.

According to the Bulgarian authorities, the heat wave and fires have so far claimed two victims, but the real figure is thought to be much higher. Many regions in the south and the east of the country are still largely cut off from any sort of modern, medical services. High levels of poverty mean that many inhabitants simply cannot afford trips to hospital or the nearest available doctor.

Following 30 heat-related deaths in June, Romanian

authorities announced that another 30 persons had died just last week. Most of the victims were elderly citizens who collapsed on the street. A further 1,000 victims suffered from extreme circulation problems and required medical treatment. Emergency services in the capital city of Bucharest were called out on nearly 20,000 occasions.

Once again, official government data does not reflect the situation in the country as a whole. Bucharest is the wealthiest city in the country and possesses an infrastructure far superior to that in the rest of the country. Rural areas in Rumania, as well as larger cities in the south, are plagued by high levels of poverty and lack any sort of basic amenities and services. In many areas, residents still rely on local wells for their water supply.

The latest heat wave has led to many of these wells drying up. While the government in Bucharest has organised water supplies for remote areas, the amount of water made available by no means covers the existing need. The authorities are incapable of organising supplies even for the capital city. In addition to the existing hospitals and clinics, just a handful of additional small stations have been erected to distribute drinking water and basic medical supplies to a city of more than 2 million inhabitants.

The worse-affected country in eastern Europe is Hungary, where according to health authorities, the heat wave has claimed at least 500 lives in one week—July 15-22. The highest temperature was measured in Kiskunhalas, south of Budapest, at nearly 42°C (107°F). Hundreds of inhabitants were treated in hospitals with severe breathing and heart problems, and emergency services were overwhelmed. Once again, most of the victims were elderly citizens, but others included the poor and homeless with no access to adequate medical treatment.

Any examination of weather patterns over the past 10 years makes clear that such high temperature conditions should not have been unforeseen and that the very high number of deaths were by no means inevitable. The Hungarian government and authorities, however, have demonstrated a shameful indifference to the fate of the population, with official spokesmen seeking to play down the crisis.

After it became clear that the heat wave had already claimed hundreds of lives, the chairman of the government's "coordination committee," Istvan Ujhelyi, declared that the situation was not a "disaster" and that everything would be

done to combat the affects of the “extreme weather conditions.” “There is no reason for concern,” he continued. “Energy and water supplies are guaranteed; road and rails are free for travel and the ministries have developed a plan of action against possible dangers should the temperatures rise again.”

This is not the first time the Hungarian government has made such empty promises. Periods of intense temperatures have clearly increased in this region over the past decade. The summer of 1998 was the hottest since the start of weather records in Hungary, and temperatures very similar to the current level were measured in 2000. The summer of 2003 was also extremely hot and led to many deaths. According to the national weather service, the last 10 summers were the hottest on record, but the government and authorities have failed to draw up any sort of emergency plan in response.

This incompetence and lack of preparation are behind the refusal of the country’s institutions to give any precise figures on the numbers of victims. The current total is a rough estimate based on the number of victims in the Budapest area, which has then been extrapolated to give a figure for Hungary as a whole. The same approach characterises the response in other countries. In Slovakia, officially there has been just a single victim of the heat wave. This is less than the total for neighbouring Austria, which has much better medical supplies and health provision.

The manner in which governments and state institutions have reacted to the crisis—their lack of readiness to provide assistance, or even provide reliable figures on victims—is indicative of their indifference to the needs of the population. The catastrophic effects of the heat wave serve to reveal the consequences of the continuous process of social decline in eastern European states, which are now officially part of the European Union.

The policies of the “social-democratic”-liberal government of the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt—MSZP) led by Ferenc Gyurcsany are typical in this respect. His government has been in the forefront of the systematic dismantling of social gains and services, a process that has taken place throughout eastern Europe over the last decade and a half. As head of government, Gyurcsany is a typical representative of the corrupt elite that was able to seize power after the collapse of the country’s Stalinist regime, enormously enriching himself in the process.

Following the collapse of the Hungarian Communist Party, Gyurcsany, who was formerly chairman of the CP youth organisation, did not join the successor organisation, the Socialist Party, but instead concentrated on business interests and amassing his fortune. In 1992, he set up the investment company Altus. With his income as head of the company, he now ranks among Hungary’s top 100 richest persons, with a fortune of around €14 million. In 2002, he returned to politics as a successful businessman and became head of government

two years later as a member of the Socialist Party.

Since then, the government has undertaken repeated attempts to denationalise state institutions—in particular, the country’s health system, where severe cuts have been made to healthcare in recent years. The situation is very similar in Romania and Bulgaria, where it is virtually impossible for certain low-income workers to receive proper medical treatment.

At the same time, most households, and even many public authorities, are unable to afford to run air conditioning systems following large-scale increases in electricity tariffs throughout eastern Europe. This is a deadly situation under heat-wave conditions. Based on average purchasing power, Romanians pay the highest price for electricity in the entire European Union. A kilowatt of electricity for private consumption in Hungary costs just as much as in Finland, where average incomes are many times higher.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the authorities to conceal the disastrous consequences of their policies. Only this week, the Hungarian philosopher Gaspar Miklos Tamas wrote a piece in the daily paper *Népszabadság* dealing with the consequences of the neo-liberal policies being implemented by governments across eastern Europe. He wrote on July 26:

“The eastern European economies have been stripped of their assets and their industries destroyed. Competitiveness was interpreted here as a race to see which country can attract the West’s multinational companies, which are the major proprietors of our times, with the lowest taxes, the cheapest loans, the lowest salaries and the longest working hours. Liberalisation and deregulation have rendered the entire region defenceless against the rich competitors from the West. We’ve been left looking at a field of rubble: within our societies, enclaves have developed that will be dominated by long-term unemployment and extreme poverty for generations to come.”



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