

The political and social roots of Russia's wildfire disaster

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A cold wave hitting central Russia has finally provided relief to millions of Moscow residents who have been living in suffocating heat and smog for weeks. While the wildfires that turned the air in the nation's capital into a toxic haze have reportedly been brought under control, numerous blazes continue to burn in other areas, in particular Siberia and the Far East.

Earlier this week, the government reported that the number of hectares in flames had fallen from 45,800 to 22,700. A wildfire threatening the nuclear facility in the closed town of Sarov has been brought under control. Blazes that consumed land polluted with radioactive fallout during the 1986 Chernobyl disaster have also been contained, although environmentalists have questioned the government's claim that the wildfires did not release radioactive smoke into the air.

Despite the improved situation, resource-strapped firefighters continue to struggle to extinguish blazes in peat bogs that have been smoldering for weeks. A fire in the Denezhkin Kamen Nature Preserve in the Sverdlovsk region that had been reduced to a quarter of a hectare on Tuesday has once again started to spread, threatening the region's unique species and ecosystem.

While officials acknowledge 54 deaths directly from the fires thus far, the numbers who perished as a result of the pollution caused by the fires are many times higher. On Tuesday, the BBC reported that, according to Boris Revich, a researcher with the Russian Academy of Sciences, 5,840 more people died in Moscow in July than during the same time last year. Statistics for August, when some of the worst smog blanketed the capital, are not yet available.

Over the past week news stories have begun to emerge about the difficulties fire victims have encountered in receiving even the limited compensation promised by the government. According to the business daily *Kommersant*, those who lost property due to grass fires, as opposed to forest fires, and those who were not able to legally register their property beforehand—a common problem in Russia due to the complex bureaucratic procedures associated with this process—are ineligible for compensation. In addition, family members of individuals who died before the government announced its special fund for fire victims cannot receive any aid.

On August 17, *RosBiznesKonsalting* reported: "In Zavadskii

village in Riazan oblast, Irina Iakovleva was refused compensation for her mother, who died in a fire. At the government office in Sasovskii, they told her that 'she died on July 26, but it has to be after the 28th.'"

The wildfire disaster has brought to the fore, once again, the vast chasm that exists between ordinary working people in Russia and all sections of the state bureaucracy and the wealthy elite it serves. This summer's events will further fuel popular discontent over the rising cost of living, limited economic and job prospects, the elimination of public services, and deteriorating social conditions in Russia's industrial towns.

The scale of the fires, and the thousands of deaths they caused, are bound up with the semi-privatization of Russia's forests in the interests of powerful logging and paper manufacturing corporations and the near-total liquidation of the country's 70,000-strong forestry service. The collapse of infrastructure in poor rural areas meant that villages burnt to the ground for lack of firefighting equipment, while in some cases the summer homes of nearby wealthy residents were saved by emergency services that were ordered to ignore the pleas of ordinary people for help.

The indifference of the ruling elite to the conditions of life of masses of people found graphic expression in the actions of Moscow Mayor Iuri Luzhkov, who did not bother to interrupt his vacation in the Austrian Alps as millions of his constituents choked on foul air. On Wednesday, Luzhkov, who only returned to the capital on August 8, went back on holiday.

The Kremlin is nervous about the political consequences of the wildfire disaster. It is also aware that lingering anger over this event will only be exacerbated by soaring food prices in coming months, caused by a 30 percent fall in the country's grain output due to drought.

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have attempted to head off rising popular anger over the wildfires through a series of publicity stunts. Medvedev held a meeting with Russia's oligarchs to insist that they "share" in the suffering by contributing financially to rebuilding homes and compensating victims, while Putin rode in the cockpit of a bomber dropping water on fires.

In a meeting with several of Russia's wealthiest and most powerful businessmen, Medvedev thanked oligarch Oleg

Deripaska for his willingness to extend his “patronage” to some of Russia’s destroyed villages. Deripaska, one of the most widely despised figures in the country, is the owner of a vast industrial empire. Last year he was the object of fierce popular protests in the town of Pikalevo, where desperate residents blocked a federal highway in order to demand back pay and the restoration of their jobs at factories recently closed down by Deripaska and other industrial magnates.

The amount of aid promised to disaster victims, which has ranged in different government statements from 200,000 to 2 million rubles (about \$7,000 to \$66,000), is probably equivalent to what one of Russia’s multi-billionaire businessmen spends on a casual afternoon of shopping. The Kremlin’s efforts to make a show of demanding that this criminal elite help the fire victims are at once absurd and grotesque.

Medev, however, is concerned that the deep-seated hostility towards these social layers could once again explode as people take stock of the summer’s events. His demands that they help rebuild the country are aimed at containing popular anger while providing a measure of cover for the oligarchs.

An August 17 article published in *RosBiznesKonsalting* noted, “Experts agree that major businesses will come out winners all the same, even if they are compelled now to raise money to carry out the president’s wishes... The state is considering procurement of Deripaska’s interest in Norilsk Nickel, a convenient moment for recommending him to build a village or two in his native Nizhni Novgorod.”

The online news site went on to quote an expert who pointed out, “The matter concerns \$8-9 billion, so that what Deripaska will spend on reconstruction of a village looks like a pittance in comparison.”

While the Russian government has made various well-publicized promises regarding the devotion of increased resources to forest maintenance and the reflooding of peat bogs, the Kremlin remains impervious to popular demands that the 2007 forest code that set the stage for the wildfire disaster be reversed.

The lesson that the ruling elite is drawing from these events is that it is necessary to further consolidate its grip on power in order to prevent similar crises in the future from sparking a challenge to its authority. In an August 11 article published in the government newspaper *Rossiskaia Gazeta* and entitled “Lessons of a Hot Summer,” Nikolai Zlobin warns that the Russian state must consider the national security implications of the wildfire disaster.

“Today [national security] threats frequently lie in spheres far removed from the purely military. When such threats are unexpectedly exacerbated the state and its citizens become vulnerable and defenseless and the situation threatens to get out of control, to become unmanageable, and to lead to destabilization, instability, and a decline in the authorities’ prestige.”

Russia’s liberal opposition has responded to the wildfire

disaster by denouncing the Kremlin, directing the bulk of its criticism to Putin, as opposed to Medvedev, who it views as a potential political ally. In particular, several leading newspapers have carried editorials insisting that the slow response of local officials to the disaster and the efforts of regional leaders to cover up the extent of the crisis in their areas point to the failure of Putin’s “power vertical,” whereby regional governors are appointed by the Kremlin. Government corruption, several have noted, contributed to the wildfire disaster, as money intended for firefighting purposes was often used to purchase luxury items for state bureaucrats.

The claim is made that if the people had the right to choose local leaders, the officials would behave more responsibly. Remarking on the fact that the governor of Vladimir oblast, Nikolai Vinogradov, was on vacation while thousands of hectares of forestland in his region were ablaze, the liberal daily *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* stated, “Of course, if regional heads were elected, they would hardly permit themselves such liberties.”

The profoundly anti-democratic character of the Russian political system no doubt contributed to the wildfire disaster and the suffering of the population. However, this alone cannot explain why villages burnt to the ground for want of firefighting equipment or the peat bogs in surrounding Moscow were left unmonitored for fire danger.

The collapse of public services in Russia and the semi-privatization of the country’s forests are part and parcel of the restoration of capitalism, which the liberal opposition hails as a great historic achievement. The 2007 forest code passed by the Kremlin is not simply a product of Putin’s corrupt relationship with powerful logging and paper manufacturing interests in Russia. It is entirely in keeping with the political principles dictated by Russia’s market economy, in which the profit motive, not social needs, determines how resources will be utilized.



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