The decay of Russia's infrastructure

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The new year in Russia began with a series of disasters and industrial accidents that point to the decay of the country's infrastructure. These events, and similar incidents over the course of the past two years, have affected hundreds of thousands of people.

On January 2, Moscow oblast Governor Boris Gromov declared a state of emergency in over half the 45,900 square-kilometer region. The measure, which will remain in effect until the start of spring, was prompted by an ice storm just before the New Year holiday that knocked out electricity to 800 population centers in the region in which 200,000 people live. For days on end residents were forced to live in sub-freezing temperatures without light, electricity, and in many places, heat.

Several hundred cell towers and a number of telephone relay stations also lost electricity. In addition to train delays, Moscow's two major airports, Domodedovo and Sheremetovo, were paralyzed for several days, with approximately 10,000 passengers unable to fly at the height of the holiday season. Chaos and gross inattention to passenger needs led to violent outbursts directed at airport employees and the leading Russian airlines, Aeroflot and Transaero.

A similarly critical situation developed in other oblasts of central Russia—Vladimir, Nizhni Novgorod, Smolensk, Pskov and Tversk. According to government statistics, 4,400 population centers, home to 900,000 people, lost electricity over the course of this period.

As this disaster was unfolding, news broke that several fishing vessels had been trapped in two-meter thick ice in the Sea of Okhotsk, off Russia's Pacific coast. While three ships have been freed, a rescue operation is currently still underway to help two remaining boats. Efforts to free the boats and the 400 seamen on them were delayed for several days because all of the icebreakers in Russia's Pacific fleet had been leased out to the oil and gas company Exxon until 2016. A rescue operation was initiated only after the Kremlin intervened and guaranteed payment to the appropriate parties.

This miserable situation coincided with a disaster at the airport in Surgut, an oil town in Siberia, on January 1. A Tupolev-154, a Russian passenger plane that was once the pride of the Soviet fleet, burned to the ground while awaiting take off for Moscow. One hundred sixteen passengers were on board. Out of sheer luck, the majority managed to escape before the gas tanks exploded, with the exception of three people who were killed. According to an investigative commission, the cause of the accident lay in the complete decay of the electrical system on the aircraft.

All of these events follow two years of countless "natural" disasters and industrial accidents. Last summer forest fires ravaged central Russia, destroying 2,500 homes in 150 towns and villages, killing 60 people, and forcing a sharp spike in Moscow's death rate due to the inundation of the city with toxic smog. According to numerous experts and commentators, the disaster was caused by the adoption of new forestry laws in 2007, which disbanded the federal forest service and its 200,000-strong workforce.

In May 2010, there was a methane explosion at the largest mining operation in Siberia, Raspadskaya, part of the business empire of oligarch Roman Abramovich. Approximately 100 miners died. The explosion occurred due to gross violations of safety rules, to which the mine administration systematically turned a blind eye.

In December 2009, a fire at a nightclub in Perm killed 156 people. The blaze was sparked by the use of highly flammable material inside the building, in violation of regulations. The absence of emergency exits resulted in a stampede, in which many were crushed to death. It has since become known that local inspection agencies knew about these problems, but did nothing.

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This tragedy was preceded by a deadly explosion at the Sayano-Sushenskaya hydroelectric station in August 2009, which killed 75 people. The power generator, the largest in Russia and the source of 40 percent of Siberia's electricity, has had to be entirely rebuilt. The accident was caused by years of neglect and inattention to basic machinery. In September 2009, the government revealed that a 2007 audit had determined that 85 percent of the station's equipment was in need of replacement.

A similar situation exists throughout Russia's industrial base. According to the results of an assessment carried out by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian government, in particular sectors of industry as much as 80 percent of the infrastructure is worn out.

In comparison with 1970, the average age of equipment used in Russian industry has increased almost two times. In 1970, 40.8 percent of facilities were less than five years old, whereas currently it is just 9.6 percent.

On December 8, 2010, the newspaper *Izvestia*, citing an audit carried out by the same government agency, reported that "around half of enterprises have problems with their equipment, with domestic producers unable to outfit Russian enterprises with high-quality technology." Only the telecommunications and energy sectors are able to afford purchases of new equipment. "The rest are jealous," noted the newspaper.

Even as the government waxes on about the scale of its plans for the "modernization" of the economy, Russia's industrial base and basic infrastructure, largely left over from the Soviet period, continue to age. They have become a source of potential disasters, with unpredictable consequences. This situation is the consequence of neglect, corruption, the systematic violation of safety laws, the criminal character of business operations and the feebleness of regulatory bodies. These are essential features of post-Soviet reality.

While the authorities attempt to lay blame for catastrophes on the supposedly blind forces of nature or the mistakes of particular individuals, in reality responsibility lies with the political and economic order created out of the ruins of the Soviet Union. Despite all the crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy, on the basis of what remained of the powerful, progressive impulse unleashed by the 1917 October Revolution, the Soviet Union was able to modernize the technological base of the country and dramatically improve living standards.

Today, Russia's rapacious and ruthless "businessmen" bring together the worst features of Western capitalism and Soviet Stalinism. In the interests of profit, the *nouveau riche* are prepared to commit any crime. They operate according to the principle, "After us, the flood." The authoritarian Kremlin regime, which grew up alongside the emergence of this super-rich elite, serves as the mechanism for the collective defense of this parasitic layer.

Despite the fact that in the past 10 years high energy prices have flooded the country with not less than $1.5 trillion, basic infrastructure continues to decline. Virtually all of this money has gone to line the pockets of Russia's oligarchs and top layers of the state apparatus.

Russia's liberal opposition insists that changing the occupants of the Kremlin holds out the hope of modernizing the country along the lines of a "civilized" nation. This is false. What is happening in Russia reflects general world tendencies, witnessed in countries around the globe.

The horrific consequences of Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005, the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico this past spring, and the destructive floods in Pakistan, Australia and other parts of the globe are all bound up with the degradation and collapse of infrastructure, carried out in the interests of profit.

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