

Flooding in Krymsk: Kremlin covers up causes and consequences

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Two weeks after the floods in southern Russia, both the causes of the disaster and the exact number of victims remain unknown. The population in the Krasnodar region in southern Russia had no warning of the floods which hit overnight on 7-8 July and overwhelmed residents in their sleep. Hardest hit was the city Krymsk, which has about 60,000 inhabitants.

The official death toll varies between 152 and 172. According to government figures, about 1,000 people were injured and 35,000 affected by the floods. What is clear is that most of the victims were elderly people, women and children, who had no time to leave their houses. Reports from residents of Krymsk, however, suggest that the real number of victims is many times higher than the government figures. At the end of last week there were a number of reports of Krymsk residents claiming that the bodies of children and old people were still being found on city streets.

One typical report was posted July 11 by a reader of an article on the popular online newspaper gazeta.ru. The man, who lives near Krymsk, based his report on information from his relatives in the city. Contrary to the claims of the mayor of Krymsk, the man reports that the population received no warning of the impending disaster. He states that no less than 73 bodies were found in the street where his brother lived, with entire families drowned in their sleep. During the night, a stream of trucks, capable of carrying 300-500 body bags, transported corpses out of the city.

Another Internet user commented on the report with a clear criticism of the government: “It is just like Goebbels—the more vulgar and blatant the lies, the greater the chances they will be believed.”

Many families have so far not received the (extremely small) compensation payments promised by the government. Since the real number of casualties is obviously much higher than officially acknowledged, many victims will be denied any sort of compensation. Some victims had to wait days for help, and 30,000 people remained without electricity, gas or running water last weekend.

There are currently around 20,000 aid workers in Krymsk, with one third drawn from the army. Following the floods, hundreds of volunteers also travelled to Krymsk to help those affected. In the meantime, the government is trying to drive these volunteers out of the city on the spurious grounds that the volunteers’ camp in a park threatens “to disturb local residents”. In reality, the Kremlin wants to prevent any independent reporting from the troubled region.

Just as the Kremlin seeks to cover up the true number of deaths and injuries, it glosses over the real causes of the disaster. In the wake of the flood, there have been statements virtually daily on public television or pro-government newspapers attempting to explain the unusual nature of the catastrophe. But none of these versions can plausibly explain why, according to witnesses, Krymsk was overwhelmed by a roughly seven-meter-high wave of flood water within just 15 minutes, while the city of Gelendzhik, where the rains were even heavier, was much less affected. Nobody takes seriously the official statements, which claim that the sole source of the disaster was the high levels of rainfall on that night.

The inhabitants of Krymsk, in particular, are convinced that the nearby Neberdzhavsky dam had been

intentionally opened by local authorities. Official sources admitted early last week that a certain volume of water had escaped from the dam. Nevertheless, the government-appointed commission of inquiry has refused to investigate this issue further.

The rains over the weekend of the catastrophe were the strongest in decades—a fact which is attributed by scientists to climate change. As the military scientist Andrey Shalygin stated: “The events in Krymsk were entirely predictable and are likely to be more frequent in future”. But even if one assumes that the floods were caused solely by the rains, this does not explain why no warning was given and why so many houses were destroyed by the flood waters in Krymsk.

Whether the dam was opened intentionally or not, the fact that broad layers of the population of Krymsk accuse their own government of murder indicates the extent of their hatred and distrust of the ruling elites.

The population has also reacted angrily to the arrogance and outright lies of the government. When asked by Krymsk residents why they were not warned in time, the governor of Krasnodar, Alexander Tkachov, a man notorious for his racist opinions and corruption, responded: “Do you think we can knock on the door of every individual? That’s impossible!”

The responsibility of local government for the extent of the tragedy is so obvious that even leading business media such as *Forbes* and *Vedomosti* have drawn attention to it. President Vladimir Putin too was forced to criticize the behaviour of local authorities. In a survey on the web site of the Russian *Forbes*, 88 percent of the population blamed the high death toll on the government’s failure to warn people of the floods in time.

The correlation between the decades-long deterioration of infrastructure and the high number of fatalities is also widely recognized. The Russian newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* wrote last week:

“After the flood here [Krymsk] ten years ago (which claimed the lives of more than 50 people), the government gave residents money to renovate instead of their promised new homes. It was entirely possible to learn from the tragedy and build houses sufficiently stable that they cannot be swept away. One could have been sensible

and built rain water drainage, strengthened the banks of the adjacent rivers, and taken other necessary precautions. (...) They [the government] may, of course, explain that such measures are expensive and the state coffers empty. [But] this will have to be explained by officials from a region that received billions [of rubles] in tax revenues from the Moscow government, which are exclusively intended for the Olympics in Sochi [2014]. What then will they tell the poor in this region and other impoverished Russians who may be victims of any natural or technological disaster, quite simply because they are poor?”

The flood in southern Russia is just the latest in a series of natural disasters and accidents in Russia which regularly claim hundreds of lives and whose effects are worsened by the country’s crumbling infrastructure. In the past two years alone, the country has been ravaged by massive forest fires and the heat wave of 2010, a number of plane crashes in 2011, and the plane crash in Indonesia two months ago.

Since the restoration of capitalism, public funds have gone almost exclusively into the pockets of the corrupt oligarchy and the government, while the infrastructure and social safety net have been left to decay. In the final analysis, the flood disaster in Krymsk is a result of the subordination of all aspects of social life to the lust for profits on the part of the ruling elites.

The reaction of the population to the disaster in Krymsk shows the extent of the social divide in Russia and the level of hatred for the government and the oligarchy. It is only a matter of time before this social powder keg explodes.



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