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Putin Sang Songs While Russia Burned

By Yulia Latynina

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Since the first wildfires started a month ago, 125,000 hectares of Russia's forest have been destroyed in 17 regions, and 40 people have died.

Russia's statistics on casualties from fires have always differed drastically from those in the West. For example, four firefighters died during wildfires in Washington state in 2001. Nine firefighters died in Colorado in 2002. Eleven firefighters died during Spain's fires of 2005. Only one firefighter has died during this summer's fires in Russia.

In developed countries, citizens don't perish in fires. Firefighters perish. In Russia, it is directly the opposite, and there is a very good reason for this. In so many cases, there are no firefighters to put out the fires. Take, for example, the village of Verkhnyaya Vereya in the Nizhny Novgorod region, where all of its 341 houses burned to the ground and seven people died. There was no fire station in the village, and the two firefighting vehicles on watch drove the other way when they were called to duty.

People don't die this way in Europe or the United States. This is how people die in Zambia and

Zimbabwe.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Verkhnyaya Vereya. While wearing a neatly pressed button-down shirt, he promised to severely punish bureaucrats who did not properly fight the fires. In reality, there is really only one bureaucrat who is responsible for this tragedy — Putin himself. After all, it was Putin who signed the Forest Code in 2007. The code placed the responsibility for defending forestlands on those who had the rights to use them. What an ingenious idea. This means that the Forest Code allows the Khimki forest to be "protected" by those who are now cutting it down.

There were two main groups who lobbied Putin to pass the Forest Code: paper mill owners — one of the biggest being Oleg Deripaska — and real estate developers.

Independent analysts and environmentalists heavily criticized the Forest Code. They predicted several years ago that the code would inevitably result in an increase in wildfires. Even the most loyal United Russia members from heavily forested regions opposed the code, but it was shoved through the State Duma under strong pressure from Putin's presidential administration.

Although Russia has been burning for a month, the army was ordered to join the firefighting battle only several days ago. Why was the army not called up three weeks ago? Because there is no fundamental system of controlling and managing the country. Putin decides everything in Russia, and he was too busy with other things during the first three weeks of the fires — for example, doing photo ops with bikers in Crimea or singing songs with the 10 spies who recently returned from captivity in U.S. detention centers.

In the modern world, there are no natural disasters but only social ones. For example, the number of victims in an earthquake depends less on its magnitude than on how effectively the state responds to the disaster. The Haiti earthquake is a case in point. And what is true for an earthquake is doubly true for forest fires.

In 2008, there were 200,386 fires in which 15,165 people died in Russia. In the United States for the same time period, there were 1,451,000 fires in which 3,320 people died. Here are the conclusions that can be drawn from these statistics: First, 99 percent of all fires in Russia are not registered. Second, the number of deaths from fires per 1,000 people is 10 times higher in Russia than in the United States.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio.

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