

Putin Gives Inflamed Blogger a Bell

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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Volunteers fighting a fire Thursday at Plotava, 80 kilometers from Moscow. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Taking a new tact in fighting wildfires, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Thursday granted a fire bell to a blogger who published a profanity-laden post accusing the government of incompetence.

In a rare deviation from his tough public image, Putin said he agreed with the blogger's harsh criticism, which included a dig at President Dmitry Medvedev by asking, "Why the [expletive] do we need an innovation center in Skolkovo if we don't have common firefighting vehicles?"

Medvedev hopes to create a Russian version of Silicon Valley at Skolkovo, outside Moscow.

Unlike Medvedev, Putin is not known for being technologically savvy, and his first known reply to a blogger smacks of populism ahead of the 2012 presidential election, an analyst said.

The LiveJournal blogger, known only by the nickname top_lap, [complained in a post](#) Sunday about lax fire safety measures in an unidentified village 153 kilometers away from Moscow in

the Kalyazin district of the Tver region, where he said his dacha is located.

"With the [expletive] communists, who are scolded by everyone, there were three fire ponds in the village, a bell that tolled when a fire began, and — guess what — a firetruck," the blogger wrote in the 600-word post titled "Do You Know Why We're on Fire?"

He said everything changed when "the democrats" came to power, with authorities replacing the bell with a village telephone and filling the ponds with sand.

"Give me back my [expletive] fire bell, you [expletive], and take away your goddamn telephone," the blogger wrote.

The blogger also suggested that his tax money be directed toward a firetruck.

A copy of the post, which has ignited a flurry of attention in the Russian blogosphere, was forwarded to Putin by Alexei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvyy radio.

The post, [Venediktov wrote to Putin](#), is a typical and "not overly sharp" example of the public criticism that the government is facing as it struggles to extinguish the wildfires.

"I knew I was taking a risk," Venediktov told The Moscow Times. "I purposely sent the text of the post to Putin, not Medvedev, because I know for sure that Medvedev really reads blogs on the Internet himself, while Putin would never see that post himself."

He said the post was found by station staff who monitor blogs and had caught his attention because the blogger had offered a solution by proposing that his own tax payments be used to buy a firetruck, rather than just complaining.

On Wednesday evening, Venediktov received an e-mail from the government's web site with Putin's answer. He called Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who confirmed that the letter had been written by Putin longhand and then typed up as an e-mail.

Peskov said by telephone that the government's press service had showed the blogger's post to Putin and Putin had decided to write the reply himself.

Addressing the blogger as "dear user," Putin wrote that he had read the post "with interest and enjoyment."

"You are surely an amazingly honest and candid person," [Putin wrote](#), adding that the author was also "a gifted writer."

Putin also said the authorities were partly excused by the fact that the current heat wave that fueled the fires is the hottest on record, meaning that the Communists never faced such a large problem.

He also noted that Europe and the United States have to deal with similar disasters. The blogger did not mention any other country in his post.

But Putin wrote that he agreed with the criticism "in general."

He said he hoped that both he and the blogger would "manage to survive until pension age"

despite the ordeal and invited the blogger to claim a fire bell from Tver Governor Dmitry Zelenin.

[Zelenin confirmed on Twitter](#) late Wednesday that he had, at Putin's request, asked the head of the Kalyazin district, where the blogger's dacha is located, to install a bell and added that it was already being installed.

But the blogger wrote early Thursday that the bell had not been installed and the real problem was not bells but a lack of resources to fight fires.

An e-mailed request to the blogger for an interview went unanswered Thursday. His LiveJournal blog was created just last week, on July 27.

Zelenin's spokeswoman Zhanna Lyapunova said Thursday that the Tver administration had failed to make contact with the blogger, saying he had not provided his name or the name of his village, Interfax reported. She did not explain why her boss had earlier said the bell was being installed if the village name remained unknown.

"The governor was aware of the problem even before the correspondence with Putin was released," Lyapunova added.

The head of the Kalyazin district, Konstantin Ilyin, told Ekho Moskvyy on Thursday evening that a new bell had been installed in Vysokovo, a village whose location matches the blogger's description.

He added that a second bell for the blogger's personal use had been left with the village's administration because he could not locate the blogger.

He also said there was no threat of wildfires in the district.

Venediktov said he found the blogger by sending a reporter to the village and planned to interview him on the air Saturday. He declined to identify the blogger.

Putin, with state television cameras rolling, has met nearly daily with Russians who lost everything they owned in the fires that have destroyed more than 3,000 homes and killed at least 50 people over the past week.

But communication with bloggers has hitherto been the domain of Medvedev, who runs a LiveJournal blog, a channel on YouTube and even a Twitter account.

Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said the fire bell story resembled an elaborate publicity stunt aimed at attracting a younger generation of voters. He noted that Putin also met with bikers and rode a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson last month.

"It all looks like an election campaign," Petrov said, referring to the 2012 election.

Putin and Medvedev have not said whether they would run in the election.

Petrov said he did not expect public discontent over the wildfires to grow or pose a threat to the popularity ratings of Putin and Medvedev, which top 70 percent.

"In the current situation with the fires, both Putin and Medvedev are building up their images as saviors," he said.

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