

Fires Not Likely to Scorch Tandem

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The country's ruling tandem has adopted different styles of responding to the record heat wave that has killed 53 people in wildfires and sickened millions more in unprecedented levels of smog.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin bet on his strongman image [by co-piloting a Be-200 amphibious aircraft](#) and dumping water over a burning forest in the Ryazan region this week.

The flight, widely shown on state television, led to much criticism from opposition politicians and bloggers, who described it as a publicity stunt with dubious legal grounds because Putin lacks pilot training and it is illegal to steer an aircraft without a license.

President Dmitry Medvedev himself had just denounced such moves. Speaking on Monday to local officials in Marii-El, a Volga River republic hit hard by the fires, Medvedev said it was unacceptable for politicians to use the natural disaster to boost their clout.

"To make PR here and to score political points is not nice," Medvedev said, according to [a](#)

[Kremlin transcript.](#)

But both Medvedev and Putin have spent hours meeting with people who lost homes in the fires and encouraging firefighters — just as opinion polls indicate that their popularity is in steep decline.

The drop, while far from devastating to their popularity, has prompted the leaders to take to the television cameras to show that they are actively helping fight the wildfires, said Nikolai Petrov, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center who linked the ratings decline to effects of the recession rather than the fires.

He and other analysts said the impact of the fires would be slight at best.

"As long as the government controls major media outlets, they do not have to fear much," said Lev Gudkov, an analyst with the Levada Center, an independent pollster.

But the opposition said the authorities' inability to quickly stop the fires and widespread doubt about whether promised aid would be delivered effectively bode ill for Putin and Medvedev.

"This will be a big problem for both," said Ilya Yashin, a senior activist with the Solidarity opposition movement.

He criticized Putin's plane flight as "cynical," saying Putin in his two terms as president had approved legislation, including the 2007 Forest Code, that set the stage for the wildfire disaster.

"Putin was flying over the blood of those killed [in the fires]," Yashin said.

Repeated calls to Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov went unanswered Thursday.

Yekaterina Yegorova, head of the political consulting firm Nikkolo M, said ratings would suffer as people continued to feel helpless.

She said Putin's plane flight was probably counterproductive because it did not show much effective firefighting. "It would be better to demonstrate efficient organized work aimed at helping victims," she said.

Putin's rating has fallen to 47 percent from 53 percent at the start of the year, and Medvedev's dropped to 39 percent from the previous 44 percent, the state-run VTsIOM pollster said earlier this week.

But a Levada Center poll found that Putin's rating actually shot up from 44 percent in June to 48 percent in July.

Both leaders have traveled to hot spots offering help to victims. On Thursday, Medvedev visited a children's health resort for fire victims in the Rostov region.

But Putin has looked uncomfortable when confronted with public anger. Last week, a video appeared where [he was berated](#) by fire victims during a July 30 visit to Verkhnyaya Vereya, a

village in the Nizhny Novgorod region.

Also last week, local and national media reported that the son of a Voronezh region firefighter who was killed fighting a blaze flatly refused an offer by Putin to give his family a new home.

As an explanation, the son, Andrei Galkin, said it would be "presumptuous" to accept such a gift while thousands of others were left homeless, the Moe-online.ru news site reported.

The fires have also taken a toll on Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Moscow region Governor Boris Gromov.

When Luzhkov returned from vacation earlier this week, after staying away from the capital during the worst days of smog, he faced no direct public criticism from Putin or Medvedev, and Putin even praised the mayor for coming back.

On his return, Luzhkov immediately criticized Moscow regional authorities for failing to implement safety measures decided after peat bog fires in 2002.

Gromov struck back on Thursday, saying he was "surprised" by the criticism and that City Hall should provide better assistance in the efforts to put out the fires. "I'd like to remind them that Moscow also has numerous problems," he said, Interfax reported.

Luzhkov and Gromov have little to fear from voters, since Putin abolished gubernatorial elections in 2004 and many analysts believe that neither will be reappointed for another term.

A federal state of emergency remains in effect in the Moscow region as well as three other regions. Medvedev on Thursday ended a state of emergency in Voronezh, Vladimir and Marii-El.

Meanwhile, meteorologists said winds would keep the city's sky clean until Saturday — when the smog is likely to return.

Roman Vilfand, director of the federal weather bureau, said that while the heat wave would end next week, there was a high possibility the smoke would return before that.

Despite clear skies, the capital's air remains highly polluted, he told reporters, Interfax reported.

The Emergency Situations Ministry said Thursday that the overall size of the fires around Moscow has shrunk by 25 percent to 126 hectares.

Nationwide, 562 fires were still burning, covering more than 81,000 hectares.

Meanwhile, a team of American experts will visit some fires to assess their ecological impact, the U.S. Embassy said. The United States also will send fire-resistant clothing, water tanks and backpack pumps to Russia, the embassy said in an e-mailed statement.

Leaking air conditioners have wrecked computer servers of the only company that produces biometric passports nationwide, forcing the Federal Migration Service to stop issuing passports, Interfax reported Thursday.

The incident happened Aug. 5, but the service's spokesman, Mikhail Tyurkin, only confirmed it on Thursday, adding that operations should resume by Friday.

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