

Russia in the Shadows

By [Maxim Shevchenko](#)

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The biggest event of the past two weeks is the fires raging across large swaths of Russia. In Moscow, toxic smog from peat bog fires seeped through shut windows in apartments and offices — regardless of how powerfully your air conditioner was working. The smog made the Moscow that I have known so well since my childhood unrecognizable. Where were the chirps of birds and shouts of children? It seemed that both had evacuated the city, or perhaps their sounds were simply muffled by the thick pall of smoke.

Russia's smog clouded not only Moscow streets and skylines, but also the country's political landscape. Many analysts warned of a new schism between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Medvedev criticized politicians for using the fires for PR purposes. Could this have been directed at Putin, among others?

In addition, Medvedev tried to play Putin's traditional role of the tough boss, chewing out the government for its negligence and incompetence in handling the fires. In addition, last week he lashed out at regional authorities who bought CT scanners for as much as four times their factory price. On July 28, Medvedev ordered Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to investigate

corruption allegations against Kremlin official Vladimir Leshchevsky linked to construction projects for the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

While Medvedev asked what Mayor Yury Luzhkov was doing during the worst days of the fires and the smog that choked Moscow, Putin thanked Luzhkov for breaking off his vacation to come back to Moscow “in time.”

Amid the smog, Medvedev shook Russia with his idea to rename the country’s “militia” as “police.” Where does Medvedev plan to get the right people to increase the image and effectiveness of Russia’s police force so that their actions match their new name? I am afraid that Medvedev is simply pouring the same old, spoiled wine into a new wineskin.

During Moscow’s seemingly endless days of smog, I thought about my ill-fated country and how it vexes most of the world with its clumsiness, absurdity and disorder — as if Russia’s misfortunes suddenly became more pronounced. It seemed that our leaders, whose eyes usually seemed so piercing and bright on television, appeared fake and puppet-like.

The liberal opposition, which normally gains points when gross defects in Putin’s vertical power structure are revealed for the whole country to see, lost face. Most Russians sided with blogger top_lap when he wrote to Putin that the real blame for the breakdown in Russia’s firefighting system can be traced to the 1990s, when the liberals were running the show. It was the so-called democrats, the blogger wrote, who filled in the reservoir in his village used for putting out fires and removed its fire bell and firetruck. At the same time, it seemed that Russia’s ultrapatriots also lost their self-confidence and faith in their country.

In these kinds of tragedies, there is always a bright side. I take great pride in my fellow countrymen who cut down trees in burning forests, hosed down peat bog fires, operated on people in smog-filled emergency rooms in temperatures of 30 degrees Celsius, donated clothes and sent money to those who lost their homes.

Patriarch Kirill in early August said the draught that has caused so many fires could end when Russians stop sinning. This is a debatable thesis for sure, but in any case maybe the fires, smog and drought have helped Russians regain spiritual contact with their motherland.

Maxim Shevchenko is a journalist and head of the Center for Contemporary Strategic Studies, Religion and Politics in Moscow. Richard Lourie will return to this spot in September.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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