

A Burning Wake-Up Call

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Since so many predictions about the future are negative, few people want to wait around to see whether they come true. Perhaps that is why the Russian authorities and society prefer to ignore information about impending problems. When the world began speaking about global warming, no countries in Europe treated the topic as lightly as we did. Russia believed that it was all much ado about nothing, a fabricated crisis invented by the West or leftist environmentalists.

Moscow's responses were: 1. There is no climate crisis; 2. Humanity and the existing economic system are not responsible for it; 3. The crisis in no way affects Russia; and 4. Even if it does exist, it can only be to Russia's benefit.

Not only did Russia make no attempt to help solve the global environmental crisis, it did everything to exacerbate the problem on its own territory.

When the European part of Russia was engulfed by wildfires, the media, in their search for someone to blame, pointed the finger at the authorities. But society carries no less

responsibility for the crisis. As the old saying goes, the people get the type of government they deserve.

When the new Forest Code was adopted in 2007, only a few environmentalists protested. The public was completely indifferent to what was happening. As with the question of global warming, nobody was interested in the future of Russia's forests. Many of those who are now upset with the authorities did not say anything when the Forest Code was being prepared.

The real purpose of the code was to give the people exploiting the forests complete freedom over the resources transferred to them. Toward that end, the system of state controls had to be dismantled. That task was accomplished. The authors of the code sincerely believed that with the transference of the forests into private hands, they would finally have a "responsible caretaker" for Russia's huge forestland. With this, the privatization of the country's forests began. But the unattended trees began burning even before the privatization was completed.

"Who could have foreseen the unprecedented heat of summer 2010, the worst in more than 100 years?" officials asked. They view the heat wave as a rare exception and still do not believe that the issue is much deeper and more disturbing — the global climate is changing. This fundamental lack of understanding of the dangers — or even existence — of global warming explains why they saw no need to prepare for problems associated with higher temperatures.

Meanwhile, natural, social and economic crises are accelerating — both within Russia and globally. The situation is much worse than the strongest pessimists and critics of the Forest Code had predicted in 2006 and 2007. They expected disaster to strike in five or 10 years, but it only took three years after the code was passed to realize that the situation is already out of control.

It will be impossible to re-establish control without a change in policy. Restoring the forests, flooding the dried-out peat bogs and reviving the economies of the towns and villages that were destroyed by the fires is a task that can only be addressed at the federal level. But to cope with that daunting challenge, both the state and society must be willing to change.

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