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Fighting Fires for the Rush, Not the Money

By Alexander Bratersky

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The birth of a daughter caused Andrei, a deputy captain at a Moscow fire station, to consider quitting because his monthly salary amounted to a meager $1,000 despite his senior rank and nine-year career. But Andrei, 30, a short, stocky man, said he refused to dwell long on leaving because he could not live without fires.

“I like my job, simply for the opportunity to work at good fires. It's kind of a boyish feeling,” he said in an interview after finishing a 24-hour shift.

Andrei describes himself as a devoted firefighter and a disciple of Yevgeny Chernyshov, Moscow's legendary firefighting chief who died in March battling a blaze in a business center.

“Yevgeny always took the bull by the horns; that was his character,” his deputy and replacement, Viktor Klimkin, said after Chernyshov's death.

But bravery and boyhood aside, being a member of Russia's 220,000-member firefighting force is not a promising career. Firefighters are underpaid and left to tackle dangerous jobs with obsolete or inadequate equipment.

The State Fire Service has faced a personnel drain in recent years, and this summer's raging wildfires in central Russia, which the authorities disastrously failed to prevent, has prompted calls for overhauls of both the fire service and related fire legislation.

Many firefighters are forced to moonlight at other jobs during the three days they get off after working 24-hour shifts.

"The payment is nothing, considering the risk. After a shift, I had to work as a security guard to make some more money," said another Andrei, who resigned as a Moscow firefighter in 2007 after a seven-year career.

He, like other former and active firefighters interviewed for this story, spoke on condition that his last name not be published, citing fears of ruining friendships within the close-knit firefighting community.

The death toll among firefighters nationwide stands at about 20 a year in recent years, said Nikolai Kopylov, who heads VNIIPO, a firefighting research center affiliated with the Emergency Situations Ministry in the Moscow region.

Firefighters outside Moscow receive half the pay that their colleagues earn in the capital, said Valery, who worked as a deputy captain at a Moscow fire station for five years. He said the salary difference causes the best firefighters to move to Moscow, stripping the regions of skilled staff.

Valery said he decided to quit firefighting in 2005 after the passage of a controversial federal law on the monetization of benefits that effectively stripped many firefighters of job perks such as a 50 percent discount on utilities payments and a chance to receive free housing from the state.

He said many firefighters resigned at the time — to the detriment of the quality of the work force.

"Today, firefighting units are filled with random people," Valery said.

Salaries were raised slightly after 2001, when the State Fire Service was transferred from the Interior Ministry to the Emergency Situations Ministry, but they remain low, and fire stations remain ill-equipped, firefighters said.

Kopylov said many fire stations use obsolete equipment, such as water tanks that can pump only 100 liters a second, compared with 200 to 300 liters for state-of-the-art models.

Still, some regional branches of the Emergency Situations Ministry forked out money for expensive SUVs instead of firefighting equipment, blogger Andrei Malgin wrote on LiveJournal on Aug. 4, citing Zakupki.gov.ru, a web site for state tenders.

Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, responding to a question from The Moscow

Times at a news conference Friday, said his ministry was “watching the situation” but the complaints should not be “driven to absurdity” because the cars only accounted for 1.5 percent of all vehicles purchased by the ministry.

Still, many bloggers who joined firefighters as volunteers during this summer's wildfires have noted that firefighting units lacked even rudimentary flashlights and spades.

Shoigu dismissed the bloggers' claims, saying people should “not create a complete picture out of separate cases.” But he acknowledged that firefighters were ill-prepared to work in forests.

“Our units are prepared to fight fires in the cities, and our reserves were just not enough,” he said.

In fact, federally funded firefighters bear no responsibility for wildfires under current legislation. The 2007 Forest Code, signed by then-President Vladimir Putin, made regional authorities contracted by the Federal Forestry Agency responsible for combatting forest blazes — a chain of responsibility that broke down badly.

This summer's wildfires showed that local authorities have neglected to buy essential equipment for fire stations, instead diverting funds for other purposes.

“The money was spent, and only then did the fires start to burn,” said a businessman who runs a Moscow regional company that sells firefighting equipment.

The businessman, who asked for anonymity for fear of losing business, said clients had sought out cheap bargains because of a lack of funds.

The wildfires prompted the government last week to approve $1.7 billion for the purchase of new firefighting equipment over the next three years.

Shoigu, speaking at the government meeting that approved the extra money, also revived a proposal floated by the Emergency Situations Ministry last year to draft legislation to create volunteer firefighting units that would assist professional firefighters on a regular basis.

The legislation is, in fact, crucial. The ministry says more than 100,000 settlements nationwide with a combined population of 37 million remain beyond the reach of professional firefighters.

A dozen volunteer fire brigades operate nationwide, but their legal status is undefined and their members receive no support from the state.

Professional firefighters also have mixed feelings about the involvement of volunteers.

"They are better than locals simply keeping an ordinary firetruck on standby in case something happens,” said Andrei, deputy captain at the Moscow fire station.

“But 70 percent of fires in Russia happen in people's own houses, and the majority of people don't even have a simple fire extinguisher," he added, gloomily.

Firefighters who work for the thrill, not the money, appear to remain the staple of the country's firefighting force, and, luckily for bedroom smokers and drought-hit regions, they seem unable to quit.

Andrei said he could not get enough sleep on his days off because he lacked the adrenaline rush that came from fighting fires.

"Firefighters are like hunting dogs. They live in a state of constant anticipation," he said.

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