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How Democracies Fight Fires

By Alexei Bayer

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This summer's fire and smog disasters revealed little new about Russia's rulers. It has been obvious for some time that the government is incompetent at every level and that its bureaucrats, from the top down, are far too preoccupied with lining their own pockets to learn how to carry out their direct responsibilities — nor do they care since they have become very wealthy.

Instead, summer fires have shown why Russia has such a government.

Take the most famous bit of criticism of the authorities to emerge in August, the profanity-laced blog posted by top_lap, to whom Prime Minister Vladimir Putin personally answered. The blogger attacked the local authorities in the Tver region, 150 kilometers outside Moscow, for dismantling and then replacing a fire bell — the main firefighting system in his village, a leftover from the Soviet period — with a nonworking telephone. In response, Putin promised to instruct the local government to replace the old fire bell.

The blog post, although a bit profane, was well-written. It should now be made required

reading in Russian schools, to teach the kids what is wrong with their country. The blogger starts by praising the old Communist regime for its more or less adequate firefighting system, which once included a fire engine, and by accusing the "democrats," who ruled the country from 1991, of selling off the fire engine and filling the reservoirs so they could sell the property to wealthy Russians for dachas.

But it should be noted that democracy means "rule of the people," and it starts at the grass-roots level. Without democracy in the village, there will be none at higher levels of government. First and foremost, democracy means taking responsibility.

The blogger describes a previous fire at a neighboring village that had been put out by ad hoc efforts of local residents. The firefighter arrived on the scene by bicycle and, like everybody else, had no better way of fighting the fire than pouring buckets of water onto a burning house.

What would an average U.S. community have done in this situation? They would have called a meeting, appointed a fire warden and worked out evacuation and firefighting plans. Perhaps they would have collected money for at least rudimentary firefighting equipment.

In the United States, 90 percent of firefighters are volunteers. They are on call 24/7, and they also undergo tedious training. U.S. author Kurt Vonnegut in "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater" calls volunteer firefighters "the only examples of unselfish usefulness to be seen in this land." It is also one of the best expressions of U.S. community spirit and grassroots democracy.

But in Russia, the villagers probably cursed the government and pined for the Communists who used to take better care of them. The same blogger, with some bravado, declared that he would buy a firetruck for his village at his own expense — but only if the government freed him from paying taxes or contributing to his social security fund.

But when top_lap reaches retirement age without a pension to live on, he will probably write a similar blog post, declaring that he would have gladly contributed to his pension had the government made him do it.

This is infantile behavior par excellence. While children are naturally mollycoddled by their parents, helpless adults who have to rely on their rulers to make decisions for them are usually exploited. Thus, these Russians should not complain when their government plays them so mercilessly for suckers.

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