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Putin's Ticking Time Bomb

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Moscow's horrendous daily traffic jams and this summer's wildfires have something in common: The roots of both of these problems can be found in the government's gross incompetence.

First, there were the Communists. They moved the capital from St. Petersburg to a large Asian village known as Moscow. Unlike St. Petersburg, Moscow grew in circles linked by radial lines, resulting in maximum chaos for drivers trying to maneuver around the city.

What's more, Moscow developed large industrial zones in the first half of the 20th century. During the Soviet era, land had no price value, and industrial zones close to the city center created serious logistical problems for transportation.

Then the Soviet state fell apart. In the chaos that resulted, the dominant principle was that everything that could be sold should be sold.

In June, the inevitable happened: The Moscow authorities shut down a vital artery — an

underpass on Leningradskoye Shosse — which meant that it took more than four hours to reach Sheremetyevo Airport by car from the center.

A similar thing happened with the fires. The Communists drained the country's expansive peat swamps, and as a result, wildfires broke out in Russia in 1972. But the Communists did get one thing right: They at least knew how to put out fires. Moreover, the authorities did everything possible to prevent a recurrence. The government created a nationwide firefighting service equipped with a fleet of aircraft capable of suppressing almost any fire before it could spread.

After the Soviet collapse, new leaders came to power. The country fell into a protracted period of corrupt privatization and asset grabs.

In 2007, the government adopted a Forest Code that served the interests of the pulp and paper mills owners. The code gave corporate interests — rather than the state — the responsibility for conserving and protecting the forests. Every forestry expert warned that there would be catastrophic fires during the first extreme heat wave.

The authorities have yet to tell us how many people died in the fires and smog, as well as what long-term health affects the smog will have on the tens of millions of people who inhaled the poisonous gases.

The vertical power structure under Prime Minster Vladimir Putin is notorious for not taking preventative measures to avoid disasters. Moreover, as the Forest Code so clearly showed, it often makes decisions that directly lead to a major disaster.

The next catastrophe could easily be nuclear. Take, for example, the Mayak nuclear weapons facility near Chelyabinsk. This facility has a storage facility that contains 25 tons of weapons-grade plutonium and 200 tons of uranium. In contrast to standard practice by other nuclear states, Russia's enormous stockpile of radioactive material is not housed in multiple sites to reduce the risk of a massive disaster. What's more, the repository is not buried deep under a mountain. It is simply enclosed by concrete walls.

During the Soviet period, Mayak had a horrific record of nuclear disasters, which resulted in roughly 500,000 people in the Chelyabinsk region receiving radioactive contamination that was many times worse than what Chernobyl disaster victims suffered. Far too little has been done to prevent another disaster.

The next disaster could mean the end of Russia.

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