The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Fires? What Fires?

By Yulia Latynina

October 26, 2010



Any government that is accountable to the people dedicates a substantial amount of time analyzing and reporting on its actions and mistakes. Visitors to the U.S. government and Senate web sites will find hundreds, even thousands, of such reports. An unaccountable government behaves exactly the opposite. Rather than analyzing its mistakes, it makes empty promises, and instead of holding past actions up to scrutiny, it draws attention with predictions about the future.

Nowhere is this unaccountability of the Russian authorities more evident than in this past summer's wildfires. Three months after much of European Russia was engulfed in toxic smoke, villages burned and people lost their lives, we have no more information about what happened than what was offered at the very outset.

The State Duma, the Federation Council and the government have not made even the slightest attempt to analyze what happened. They have forgotten the fires as if they never occurred, which raises a number of critical questions.

1. We still don't know how many people burned to death. The official number cited Aug. 2 was 34 victims. On Aug. 4 the figure rose to 48 and on Aug. 6 to 52. After that, the authorities apparently stopped counting the bodies. Thus, 52 is not the final or even an approximate count. It's just the total number of bodies that had been found as of Aug. 6.
2. The number of people who died as an indirect result of the fires is also unclear. According to Andrei Illarionov, a former economic adviser to then-President Vladimir Putin, anywhere from 56,000 to 64,000 more people than usual died this July and August. That's only slightly fewer than all Soviet casualties from the war in Afghanistan. On Monday, the Economic Development Ministry reported — in passing, in an otherwise unrelated report — that 14,500 and 41,300 more people than average died in July and August, respectively.
3. The authorities have yet to report on the long-term effects of toxic smoke exposure, particularly on infants and pregnant women.
4. The authorities have never given a figure for total losses from the fires.
5. Neither the government nor parliament has made any attempt to analyze the causes of this catastrophe. The only reason offered was the unusual heat. But nobody has explained why the Bryansk region went up in flames while the immediately adjacent areas of Belarus and Ukraine did not. If the heat was the only cause, why was it confined to Russia's borders? Was it denied a visa?
6. Experts and the media were unanimous in saying the new Forest Code, which largely dismantled the sprawling Soviet-era network of forest protection, was one of the causes of the fires. But no changes to the Forest Code have been made.
7. One reason for the casualties was the ineffective response by authorities at all levels. Russia was already burning when Putin traveled to Crimea to ride a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson. People had already burned to death in the Nizhny Novgorod region when Governor Valery Shantsev reported that he didn't need any help from Moscow. Not only did almost all of the villages that burned lack their own fire engines, but none were sent in from neighboring municipalities. Nizhny Novgorod authorities went so far as to threaten criminal charges against people who tried to save their homes from burning. Now we have not seen any analysis whatsoever from the authorities concerning what happened — or more accurately, what didn't happen.

Accountable governments analyze their mistakes to learn from them. Unaccountable governments bury the past with visions of the future.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio.

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/10/26/fires-what-fires-a2518