

Volunteer Bill Fights Fire With Red Tape

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Volunteer firefighters battling wildfires in Russia in 2010. Volunteers not only fought the blazes in 2010 and aided the victims, but also prevented the authorities from downplaying the disaster. **Ivan Simochkin**

Summer 2010 remains in public memory as a season of calamity, when a record-breaking heat wave caused wildfires that blanketed central Russia in toxic smoke, causing dozens of deaths and inflicting damage in the millions of dollars.

But it was also a time when thousands of volunteers left urban offices — blessed with air conditioning — to join an unprecedented grass-roots campaign to fight fires that the authorities had failed to curb.

So what is the official reaction to the volunteer movement? It seems the government wants to mire it in enough red tape to cripple it.

A bill on volunteer firefighting spent three years in bureaucratic limbo before finally getting the go-ahead after the wildfires. But critics said the draft, penned by the Emergency Situations Ministry, will hamper volunteer efforts, not aid them.

The bill has been criticized by environmental activists and volunteers, and the Public Chamber has urged the State Duma to make revisions before passing it. But the Duma has ignored all calls, passing the bill in a first reading in January and scheduling the second, key reading for this week.

The bill has every chance of sailing through both houses of the parliament as they are controlled by the United Russia party, in which Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu is a senior official. The party explicitly voiced approval of the bill on its web site in January.

Volunteers will not be able to assist firefighters without paperwork, according to the bill, which requires volunteers to form groups and register as legal entities, obtain special firefighting licenses and have at least three permanent employees.

The state will not offer any funds or equipment, requiring volunteers to purchase firefighting equipment — which could cost 30,000 rubles (\$1,000) per group — and finance their operations from their own pockets. Volunteers also will not be reimbursed for days they miss work to fight fires.

Emergency officials, meanwhile, would be allowed to boss around legally registered volunteers, even to the point of drafting them into firefighting campaigns in which they would have no choice but to participate.

'Driven by Outrage'

The summer wildfires killed more than 50 people and left 3,500 homeless, as well as devastated vast swathes of land. Seven regions declared emergencies in August and September. The long-term effect of smog on public health remains to be analyzed, but the death rate in Moscow doubled at one point.

But in a mind-boggling twist, the Emergency Situations Ministry has [reported](#) that the number of fires across the country actually decreased by 4.5 percent last year, as had the number of fire-related casualties.

Grigory Kuksin, head of the volunteer department with Greenpeace Russia, said in an interview Tuesday that such statistics are shamelessly tweaked, with hundreds of fires simply uncouned.

Greenpeace forestry expert Alexei Yaroshenko said in August that less than a third of woodland fires nationwide were actually registered, and in the Moscow region, less than one in 10 blazes was counted.

Volunteers not only fought blazes and aided victims but also prevented the authorities from downplaying the disaster. Thousands of volunteers painted a vivid picture of the situation by spreading onsite photos and witness accounts on social networks and the media.

"Volunteers played a big role," Kuksin said. "Besides deliveries of relief aid and firefighting, they were giving a picture of what was really going on out there."

The volunteers were mainly "driven by outrage" at the perceived incompetence of emergency officials, said volunteer Igor Chersky, who spent a large part of last summer combating blazes in the Moscow region and other places.

"It was like we were the last hope," Chersky, 44, said in an interview Tuesday.

The volunteers did everything in their power to fight the fires, even buying equipment for regular firefighter units "technically unprepared" to face the disaster, he said.

Some volunteers paid with their lives, dying in subsequent months from health problems they developed while fighting the fires, he said. He could not say how many volunteers had died.

Shifting the Blame

Legislation on volunteer firefighting is long overdue in a country as vast as Russia, Greenpeace's Kuksin said.

"In Western countries, for example the United States, volunteers comprise more than 70 percent of firefighters," Kuksin said.

Officials also admit to the problem, with Emergency Situations Minister Shoigu saying about 34,000 remote settlements nationwide are unprotected by professional firefighters.

"The construction of fire stations out there is not financially reasonable, but the problem can be solved with the development of volunteer fire squads," he said earlier in March, presenting the bill on volunteer firefighters to the government.

During last summer's heat wave, the Emergency Situations Ministry reported deploying some 166,000 staff to fight the wildfires.

No estimates have been collected for the number of volunteers who joined the campaign, but Shoigu said the country needs at least 700,000 volunteer firefighters.

Shoigu's deputy Vladimir Puchkov told the Duma that only 4 percent of fires nationwide are put out by volunteers. But like other ministry statistics, the figure raises questions simply because current legislation does not recognize volunteer firefighters, so no one tracks their efforts.

The bill in its current form would allow the state to put volunteers under their direct control and impose an "information blockade" on them, filtering unwanted reports on the authorities' firefighting failures, both Chersky and Kuksin said.

"The ministry is trying to delegate its responsibilities without spending a kopek while at the same time setting up volunteers to take the blame if anything happens," Chersky said.

The 2010 wildfires proved that volunteers could enact "public control" over officials — which is the very thing authorities loathe and avoid, Kuksin said.

The bill will likely discourage many volunteers, who are not as easy to rouse and organize as

emergency officials appear to believe, said volunteer Sergei Tkachyov, who lives in the Nizhny Novgorod regional town of Vyksa, which was caught in the middle of last summer's fires.

Tkachyov said his area direly needs volunteer help with fires and other regularly occurring troubles, such as floods, but many local residents prefer to sit out the problems.

"I personally brought up the issue at our local online forum, but it remained unnoticed," he said.

Of course, the wildfires may not repeat this year. The federal weather service predicted Wednesday that summer temperatures would be "average and above average," but not at last summer's levels of 37 to 40 degrees Celsius, Itar-Tass reported.

But then again, no forecaster managed to predict last year's heat wave.

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