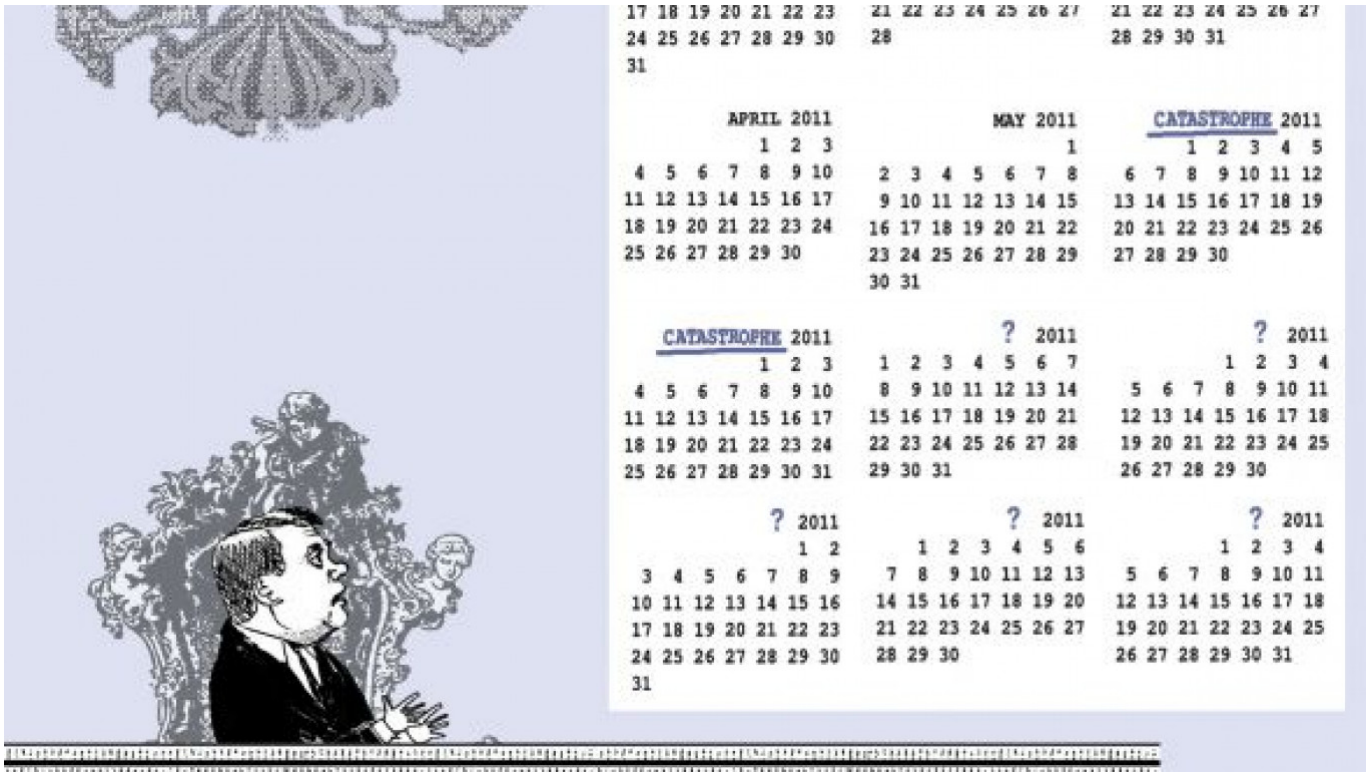
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A Sinking Ship

By Victor Davidoff

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There may not be a scientific explanation for it, but every Russian knows that August is a month of catastrophe. The sinking of the submarine Kursk, the forest and peat bog fires last year — not to mention the 1991 coup attempt against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev — all took place in August.

This year, however, August began in June. On June 20, a Tu-134 plane crashed in Karelia, killing 44 people. On July 13, an An-24 plane made an emergency landing on water in the Tomsk region, killing seven people. And on July 10, the tourist ship Bulgaria sunk not far from Kazan, killing 114 people (15 passengers are still missing and presumed dead).

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin rushed to Kazan and asked a group of officials sternly, "How could this have happened?" Actually, citizens are expecting to get an answer to that question from him. Why are citizens of a "great country that has risen off its knees" forced to fly aircraft that were designed before their parents married and to use boats built when their grandmothers were in grade school?

Even well before the disaster, the poor condition of the Bulgaria was ringing alarm bells. It

was built in 1955 and had never undergone a complete overhaul. Only one of the two engines was functioning, and that one required major repairs after a recent fire. Last year, the Bulgaria already had an emergency situation: The electrical system went out, leaving the passengers on board without water for several hours. (Then the passengers themselves contacted the Emergency Situations Ministry by cell phone.) According to eyewitnesses, just before the Bulgaria sank, the electrical system failed again. There was no reserve electrical system, which is why the captain couldn't send out an SOS.

Unfortunately, the Bulgaria wasn't an exceptional case. As an expert said in an interview with Gazeta.ru, "The word 'rust-bucket' can be applied to the entire fleet of river cruise ships." The "youngest" ship was built in 1992, and all the rest are legacies from the Leonid Brezhnev and Nikita Khrushchev eras. The blogger Maaddi wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Today, Russia is eating up ... the Soviet Union's material and technical leftovers. The transportation fleet is getting old, planes are falling out of the sky, and wires are rusting. Meanwhile, with a big smile we're cheerfully and enthusiastically building Skolkovo."

The specific cause of the ship disaster is unknown and still under investigation. The inspector who approved the Bulgaria for sailing has been arrested, and perhaps the investigators will clarify the role played by a certain Mikhail Antonov, who, through a complicated system of offshore companies, was the owner of the ship and also leased it to himself, Kommersant reported.

But it's obvious that the ship's technical problems and high winds on the Volga River are not the main culprits in this tragedy. "The sorry state of the civilian river and air fleets as a whole raises questions about the effectiveness of state policy," economist Igor Nikolayev wrote on his blog on Ekho Moskvy radio. "Or are the authorities just going to blame this on the 1990s again? The present leadership has been in place for almost 12 years. During this time, we were very lucky with high oil prices. So who is responsible for what is happening?"

The version put forth by officials, including President Dmitry Medvedev, is that there must be tighter oversight to avert tragedies in the future. Well-known blogger Anton Nosik disagreed on his LiveJournal blog: "Unfortunately, in our system of vertical kleptocracy, the number of oversight agencies is growing, and all the money that might be used for modernization is going to feed them."

Lawyer and whistleblower Alexei Navalny proposed a more proactive approach on his LiveJournal blog: "Instead of spouting hot air, they should investigate and punish the guilty. The people who are directly to blame should go to jail, their bosses should be fired, and the top political leaders of the guilty should bear political responsibility — and resign."

Navalny's ideas are nothing new. They are expressed after every major disaster strikes or terrorist act occurs. But since the leaders have never heeded them, there is little hope that the sinking of the Bulgaria will change anything. As the journalist Irek Murtazin wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Our political system is putting people in greater danger. The sinking of the Bulgaria is hideous proof of this. Yes, people responsible for disaster will be punished. But will the system change? I seriously doubt it."

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