

Putin's Own Hurricane Katrina

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President Vladimir Putin should call Crawford, Texas, and ask his pal, former U.S. President George W. Bush, for advice on how to salvage a presidency from sinking after a flooding disaster that took multiple lives.

Bush's second term effectively ended a year after his re-election when Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans in late August 2005. Bush did not interrupt his vacation after the disaster struck. His first visit to the devastated Gulf Coast was on Sept. 2, five days into the tragedy. He made an upbeat national television address with a smirk on his face that came across as cynical and highly insensitive. Katrina exposed Bush as incompetent and detached. ☒

Putin avoided Bush's worst mistakes as he tried to project the image of a leader in control, doing a fly-over of the disaster area a few hours after the floods hit the city of Krymsk. Putin also chaired disaster-response meetings with local and federal officials and ordered Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin to investigate charges of gross negligence among public officials. While Putin was stern and confident, he also came off as somewhat detached.

Putin's problem is not how he personally reacted to the disaster, but why his government has done nothing to prevent it. The devastation hit exactly the same area where a smaller flooding took 100 lives in 2002. At that time, Putin was president, and Alexander Tkachyov was governor of the Krasnodar region. In 10 years, no preventive measures have been taken, and no emergency plans or early warning systems have been put in place.

On July 6, regional authorities and the Emergency Situations Ministry had at least six, maybe even more, hours of warning of a possible disaster in Krymsk. Three people should have ordered an evacuation — Tkachyov, Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov and Putin. The order never came. ☒

Puchkov later conceded the early warning systems to inform the population of the coming flooding did not work. This is despite millions of dollars in budget outlays in the past 10 years for developing and installing modern early warning systems. Some hard questions should be addressed to former Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, now governor of the Moscow region.

Incredibly, Tkachyov told a crowd of survivors in Krymsk that they would not have left their homes even if his administration had told them to in an early-warning effort. This statement alone — crude, unapologetic and arrogant — is more than enough reason to fire him, even if you ignore his previous dismal record of handling natural disasters in the Krasnodar region. United Russia's support for Tkachyov is a cynical display of their total disregard for public accountability and a desire to cover up for one of their own incompetent leaders. Tkachyov's firing of a local administration official in Krymsk is a belated and cowardly effort to shift the burden of responsibility for the death toll that could have been avoided.

The buck of political responsibility has to stop somewhere. If it does not stop with Tkachyov or Puchkov, it should stop with Putin. It is not enough to merely show up at the site of the tragedy and promise compensation for the victims. Taking political responsibility is the only way to keep at least a modicum of the people's trust in public officials and government as a whole.

Bush's ugliest moment in handling Hurricane Katrina was when he praised Michael Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency that botched the disaster response. Bush's infamous quote, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job," became a burning symbol of Bush's incompetence and detachment from reality.

Tkachyov and Puchkov are Putin's "Brownies." Both should go.

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