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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Aggrieved Siberian Sets Herself Ablaze

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Emergency Situations Ministry staff working to put out the blaze.

A 50-year-old woman set herself on fire in a United Russia office in Novosibirsk on Wednesday, dealing herself severe burns and setting a party employee ablaze in the process.

The woman, apparently disgruntled over advice she received from party officials regarding a legal dispute, had earlier invited reporters to gather at 11 a.m. at the office in a mall at 1 Ulitsa Lenina to witness "something special," Novosibirsk news portal Sib.fm reported.

Shortly before noon, a fire broke out in the party's office, after the woman poured fuel over herself from a pickle jar and ignited it with a cigarette lighter.

United Russia employee Oleg Puchkov, 42, tried to extinguish the flames and suffered injuries as well. Puchkov and the woman, identified by Interfax as Valentina Gerasimova, were rushed to a burn unit at a local hospital.

Gerasimova suffered burns to roughly 90 percent of her body and was in a coma as of

Wednesday evening, while Puchkov received burns on 13 percent of his body, the news agency said.

Investigators later said Gerasmiova may have been driven to commit suicide, without specifying who was suspected of the crime, according to an online statement.

United Russia said Wednesday in comments posted on its website that it had sent senior staff to Novosibirsk to identify the causes of the incident and to provide assistance.

United Russia Duma Deputy Olga Batalina said she had consulted with local health and party officials and would personally fly to the Siberian city of roughly 1.5 million people, according to the comments.

Batalina added that the party's local branch had held more than 20 one-on-one meetings with Gerasimova and had offered her legal assistance in a dispute with a building contractor over an apartment she had ordered built.

The contractor refused to return Gerasimova's money after failing to meet her requirements and stalled on paying her back until a court eventually intervened, the statement said.

Batalina said her colleagues' comments led her to suspect that Gerasimova "was in an unbalanced mental state, which then led to the tragic turn of events."

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