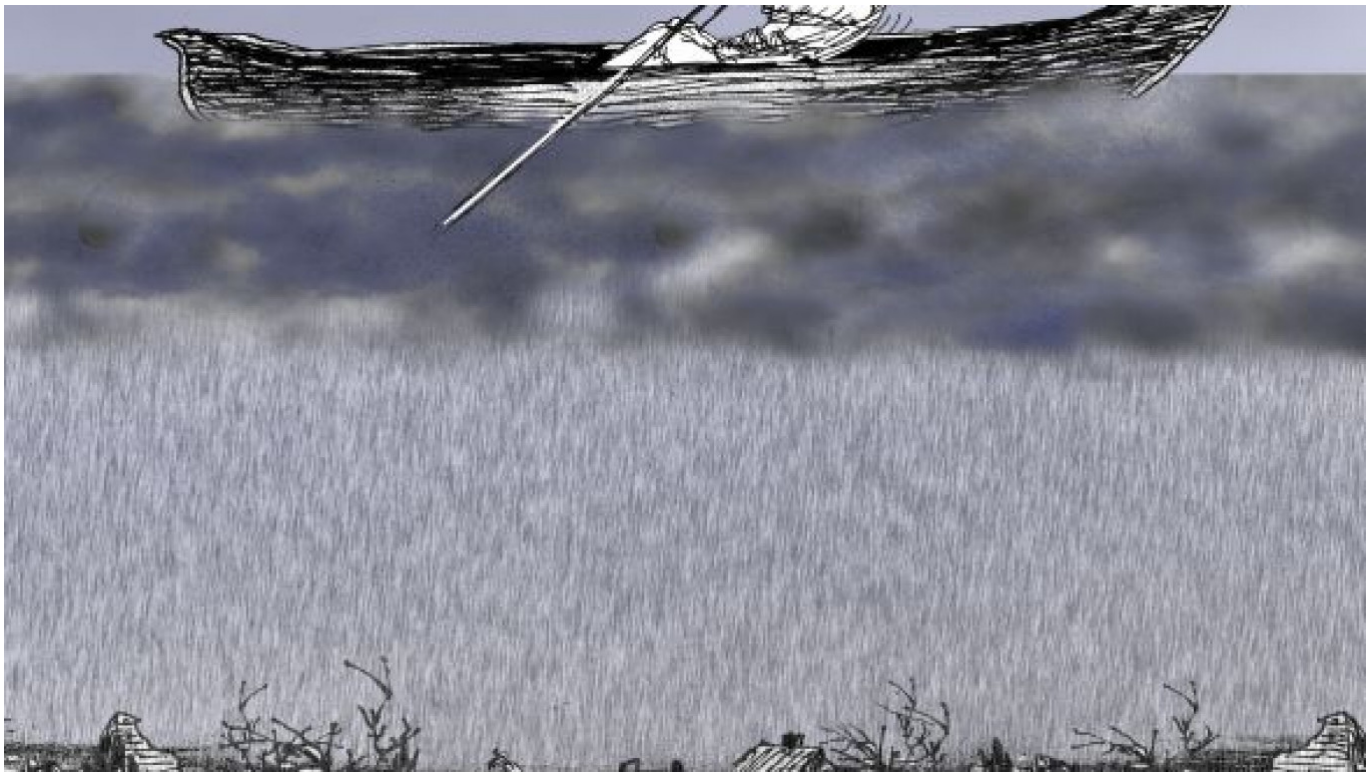
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Putin's Recipe for Disaster

By Victor Davidoff

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Is there a connection between the political regime in a country and the number of catastrophes and natural disasters that befall it?

This might sound like the basis of a science fiction novel, but statistics in Russia show that truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. There have been more natural and man-made catastrophes in Russia under President Vladimir Putin than at any time since the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1987. These include the sinking of the Kursk submarine, the accident at the Sayano-Shushensky dam in 2009, peat and forest fires in the summer of 2010 and, most recently, the flooding in the Krasnodar region.

Of course, the flood that wiped out much of Krymsk on July 7 was not comparable to Chernobyl in either scale or cause. But there are many similarities, particularly in how the authorities responded to the disaster and its consequences. Like in Chernobyl, the authorities didn't inform residents about the danger in time. Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov admitted that he had known about the danger at 10 p.m. on July 6, but warnings weren't transmitted on local television until early in the morning, after the electricity had gone out and no one could see them. Warnings sent by text messages were

no more effective. One of the residents reported, "My grandmother got the SMS at 12:37 a.m. on July 7, when she was already sitting in water."

Oddly enough, the region's leaders still think they did their best. Tkachyov's explanation for the emergency services' inaction was both extraordinarily naive and more than a little heartless: "Do you think that from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. we could have gone around to every house? That's impossible. First of all, with what resources? And second, would you have gotten up and left your home?"

Also like in Chernobyl, the number of victims in Krymsk is still unknown. There is the official statistic of 171 people, but that is disputed by countless witnesses. During a meeting of flood victims and authorities in Krymsk on July 17, four people who accused city leaders of underreporting the number of deaths were arrested and sentenced to 15 days in jail. A report on Rossia television also set off a barrage of rumors. The channel's news show, "Vesti," reported that about 3.5 billion rubles had been allocated for the families of victims. Given that 2 million rubles was supposed to be given to each family that lost someone, simple math came up with a total of 1,750 dead. As soon as a screenshot of the broadcast appeared on blogs, the text on the channel's site was edited, and all mention of money was deleted.

The authorities' actions in the Krymsk clean-up operation were also reminiscent of the chaotic and ineffective efforts during the Chernobyl accident. The Emergency Situations Ministry only repaired the infrastructure, and residents were left to their own devices. The situation changed only after the so-called "Committee of Public Oversight" was created on Putin's personal order on July 15. Ten days after the flooding, soldiers were finally sent to help the residents.

But even that didn't begin to solve the problems. A volunteer wrote on Facebook: "Despite their enormous resources, the regional administration and the Emergency Situations Ministry still haven't mapped out the city to show all the damaged houses and destruction. We find streets and houses that need weeks of work."

Instead of funneling all their resources and energy into the job at hand, the local administration has used them to fight the hundreds of volunteers who have come to Krymsk from all over the country. The administration moved the volunteers' tent camp beyond the city limits and has officially declared that the city doesn't need any more aid, human or material. Vasily Krutko, the former mayor of Krymsk, announced that the volunteers "are trying to create chaos."

Other sources of "chaos," he said, are the "destructive powers of the mass media, which are using techniques that aren't quite civilized." In fact, a local television station was threatened with the loss of its broadcast license. Several social media groups created to help flood victims were blocked, included on Vkontakte, a network popular in the regions.

In this situation, it's no wonder that for many people the lesson taught by Krymsk is what journalist Arkady Babchenko wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "We have to understand one simple fact: We don't have a government. In an emergency situation, you are going to be facing a disaster on your own. No one will come to help you. The people who clawed their way to power don't give a damn about any of us. You can only count on yourself. Only you can ensure the survival of yourself and your family."

After the accident at Chernobyl, many citizens of the Soviet Union came to the same conclusion. Five years later, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Perhaps the connection between politics and catastrophes exists outside the pages of science fiction after all.

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