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Moscow Officials Move to Stifle Flooding Fears

By Daria Litvinova

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After a torrential downpour over the weekend left streets, walkways and a metro station flooded, city officials scrambled Tuesday to assuage critics' fears that corruption or a poorly maintained sewage system were to blame.

Representatives of Mosvodostok, the state enterprise responsible for the city sewage system, told reporters that the drainage system — the design of which dates back to the 1940s — was faulty, but emphasized that a certain degree of flooding is normal in the case of extreme weather conditions.

Storm Courts Suspicion

On Saturday, social networks and news sites were alight with images of drowned cars, streets that had for all intents and purposes become rivers, and people literally swimming through the city. The heavy summer storm impacted parts of the city center and caused the temporary closure of the Shchyolkovskaya metro station.

Mosvodostok deployed 91 brigades to fight the flooding, television channel Moscow 24 cited the enterprise's spokeswoman Irina Kuznetsova as saying.

As questions of what happened and why ran rife, answers varied.

Some attributed the widespread flooding to a meteorological anomaly. According to news site M24.ru, Moscow experienced record rainfall Saturday — with 31.7 millimeters having poured down over the city within 24 hours. Previously, the rainiest June 20 Moscow had experienced was in 1933, when 23 millimeters fell.

Mikhail Blinkin, transportation and road construction expert and director of the Institute of Transport Economy and Transport Policy at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, told The Moscow Times the flooding was likely due primarily to a poorly maintained drainage system.

“In cases like this, two factors are likely to be the reason: one — the sewage system is poorly designed, and two — the sewage system is poorly maintained,” he said, adding that individual cases should be thoroughly investigated; the reason for a collapse is always specific.

Alexander Ageyev, a State Duma deputy and member of the A Just Russia party, blamed recent and ongoing high-rise construction in already densely developed areas of Moscow. Not only do large-scale projects such as these alter the cityscape, they also increase the load on the drainage system.

He further complained of corruption in the construction and maintenance of the city's sewage networks, a grievance that prompted him to file a request Monday to the Prosecutor General's Office calling for an investigation into the recent flooding. In the complaint, he noted that Moscow authorities had earmarked 18 billion rubles ($366 million) to be spent on modernizing the sewage system this year — and called for an explanation of the whereabouts of the funds.

“There is no report about what the money was spent on and which parts of the sewage system were modernized,” Ageyev told The Moscow Times on Monday. “It's understandable that the sewage network are old and out of date. But if the authorities had spent billions on its upkeep, it should have been revived by now,” the lawmaker complained.

Man vs. Nature

On Tuesday, city officials begged to differ, offering up a series of comparatively benign explanations.

“The intensity of rainfall on Saturday was up to 60 millimeters per hour. We classify rains like this as 'super-intense.' In case of 'super-intense' rainfall, our standards allow up to 25 centimeters of water to accumulate on roads and up to half a meter to accumulate in low places,” Anatoly Chibrikov, chief engineer of Mosvodostok, told reporters.

He pointed out that Mosvodostok's job during storms of Saturday's magnitude is not to battle nature.

“Our job is to cope with the consequences as expeditiously as possible and to ensure the system works properly,” he said. “According to our regulations, it should take accumulated water two hours to disperse.”

In other words: If Moscow sees more storms like the one over the weekend, there's not much Mosvodostok can do. “We are on duty all the time, we monitor the weather and send our emergency brigades to places that are most likely to experience flooding. During the storm they clean out the drains to make it easier for the water to go away,” the engineer explained.

Construction issues can exacerbate flooding in some areas, Chibrikov said, for example when building mishaps lead to drains being clogged with asphalt. He noted, however, that such mishaps are easily — and generally immediately — corrected.

He disagreed with Ageyev's estimate of how much had been earmarked for sewage modernization this year. “I have no idea where he got these figures from. This year, our budget for renovation and reconstruction of the pipes amounts to 120 million rubles ($2.26 million),” Chibrikov told The Moscow Times. Reconstruction projects are set to take place on 15 streets this year, including some in the city center, he said.

No New Problem

Critics asserted that the problem of flooding in Moscow is recent, claiming that Moscow didn't experience floods like this during Soviet times or in the bygone era of ex-Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

Ageyev of the State Duma suggested that the problem may owe to the fact that current Mayor Sergei Sobyanin is not a Muscovite.

“I think it has to do with Sobyanin, as well as some members of his team, not being from Moscow,” he told The Moscow Times. “They might be great professionals, but they need to start thinking globally and to consider Muscovites' comfort as a top priority.”

Chibrikov disagreed. “It always depends on the intensity of rainfall. In June and July 2006 we had rains like this and we had the same flooding. This happened in 2012 as well,” the engineer told The Moscow Times.

Blinkin sided with Chibrikov. “Low spots like the one between Trubnaya Ploshchad and Tsvetnoy Bulvar have been flooded numerous times no matter who was running the city,” he claimed.

“The person responsible for the sewage system in Moscow has [since 2010] been [Deputy Mayor for Housing, Utilities and Amenities Pyotr] Biryukov,” Blinkin said. “So the quality of system maintenance has remained consistent. And he hasn't done the worst job — it could have been much worse.”

Collateral Damage

Scores of cars tend to fall victims to large-scale storms like the one on Saturday, Pyotr Shkumatov, the coordinator of Siniye Vedyorki (Blue Buckets), which advocates for the rights

and interests of drivers, told The Moscow Times on Monday.

Car interiors tend to suffer the greatest damage, often requiring specialized dry cleaning to help get rid of the stench of mold. Such services often cost upwards of 10,000 rubles ($189).

“It's much more costly if the water reaches the engine, requiring repair or a replacement, but that almost never happens,” Shkumatov said. “Some people asked us to help them sue the authorities, but it's very hard to prove who is at fault. I don't know if anyone actually went forward with lawsuits,” he added.

When heavy rains hit, Shkumatov advised drivers not to park their cars in low places. “If you have already done this, though, and the rain started, move it somewhere else — it's worth the effort,” he said.

“If your car is already in the water, don't do anything until the water goes away, because it's likely the interior of the car has not been damaged. You could make it worse by opening the doors,” Shkumatov explained. He also encouraged drivers to shell out the money for a professional dry cleaning if the interior had been soaked, as delaying the inevitable could prove even more expensive.

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