

Never Apologize: A Russian Bureaucrat's Creed (Op-ed)

For Russian officials, the trick to keeping your job is knowing who to apologize to

By [Maxim Trudolyubov](#)

March 30, 2018



Vladimir Putin **Kremlin Press Service**

This has been a cruel week in Russia on so many levels. The fire at a shopping mall in Kemerovo was a horrific, preventable tragedy that shook Russians awake. The spectacle of the frightened Kemerovo bureaucrats cringing before an angry boss who flew in from the Kremlin was humiliating to watch.

A national tragedy that left 64 people, including 41 children, dead, combined with the continuing saga of the Kremlin being pinned down as a preeminent rogue actor in the world, drove Russia and the West even farther apart this week.

Many Russians feel lonely and exposed these days, more so domestically than internationally. Kemerovo, a major coal-mining city in Western Siberia, has been on everybody's mind, not the Skripal case or the diplomatic expulsions.

The Kemerovo disaster was not a Moscow story, it was a greater Russia story. It eclipsed everything else.

Hundreds of large shopping malls went up all over the country during Russia's fat years in the mid-2000s and early 2010s. These centers of Western-style consumption and entertainment were a revelation for many in the former industrial Soviet cities. A family could enjoy a meal, watch a movie, leave children to play, and go shopping, all in one glittering place. And it felt so safe, too, with everyone else doing the same.

Many children who played in the center's activity zone were bused from nearby small towns to spend a fun Sunday. Dozens of them were watching "Sherlock Gnomes," a recent computer-animated Hollywood flick, when they died. The shock of this supposedly safe environment turning into a deadly trap struck deep.

Related article: [Two Days After the Kemerovo Mall Fire: Here's What We Know So Far](#)

In shock, Russians recounted on social media their weekly trips to identical shopping behemoths all over the country, realizing how precarious it all was. Playgrounds often located at top floors that are hard to evacuate, the doors to staircases often shut to prevent people from leaving without enough shopping done, the brazen neglect of security rules, the local officials usually owning stakes in these profitable businesses, the local authorities' fear and awe of the visiting leader, not of the grieving public—it all went on display this week.

The way regional dignitaries behaved when Putin confronted them on Tuesday was both familiar and shocking. It is not every day that an exchange between trembling, scared bureaucrats and their nemesis is broadcast to wide audiences.

"I am asking for your personal forgiveness for what has happened on our territory," Kemerovo governor Aman Tuleyev told Putin. Tuleyev, 73, was reelected as governor with almost 97 percent of the vote in 2015.

The one thing he had to say about his voters was that those of them who took to the streets to express their grief and indignation were "troublemakers." Those protesting were an "opposition force" who took advantage of an emotional outpouring, Tuleyev [said](#).

"Young man, are you trying to use this tragedy to hype yourself?" Kemerovo deputy governor Sergei Tsivil'yov asked a man standing in front of him, to which the man [replied](#): "My entire family died."

That was Igor Vostrikov whose wife, three young children, and sister died in the fire at the mall.

Later the deputy governor Tsivil'yov went down on his knees and [asked](#) people standing around him on Kemerovo's central square for forgiveness for the authorities' failure to prevent the deaths of their loved ones.

This was the human in him fighting his way out of the armor he has to wear as a Russian civil servant. His initial reaction was how Russian officials are schooled to react to any unauthorized bottom-up activity.

Related article: [Here's How Russians Are Mourning the Kemerovo Mall Fire Victims Across the Country](#)

Gleaned from Russian officials' behavior during the latest tragedy and during countless other emergencies, the most important tenets of Russia's bureaucratic faith would be as follows:

- A threat can only originate from an external source that is outside the boundaries the Russian state controls (foreign agents, extremists, etc.)
- An act of terror, a natural calamity, or a man-made disaster can be used by external forces to undermine the Russian state; addressing this threat is as important as providing emergency relief and, in practice, is actually priority number one
- Accountability only runs upward: a civil servant is accountable to his or her superior, not to the public. These types of accountability are mutually exclusive
- Any unauthorized movement or even self-directed dissemination of information through social media is a threat; if it is not sponsored by a source known to the state it is most likely hostile and foreign-funded.

Regardless of whether anyone at the top, including Putin himself, sincerely believes in this creed, it actually forms the basis for the way they act.

Now that the official days of mourning have passed, Russia's state-run media have intensified their attacks on those who "speculate on people's feelings" and "spread lies."

The Kemerovo governor, whose career was rumored to be on the line even before the tragedy, is now likely to remain in place longer. Firing him now will look like succumbing to the demands of the street, that is, to allow him to be accountable to his voters, not to the supreme leader.

Even more striking is a report about the deputy governor Sergei Tsivilyov, who knelt and apologized — in front of the people, not the president.

"A hasty removal [of Governor Tuleyev] would look like an unnecessary concession," a source in the Kremlin told the Vedomosti business daily. Tsivilyov, who until recently was seen as the aging Tuleyev's successor, has demonstrated he is not fit to run such a difficult region, the source continued.

This is how strong the creed is. One has to learn how to keep the human inside at bay. One has to know whom to ask for forgiveness.

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