

Flooding in the Kuban: a natural disaster overshadowed by politics

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Over 170 people died as a result of a flood wave which passed through the Krasnodar *krai* in southern Russia during the night of 6-7 July. The large number of victims was due to the lack of any warning system for impending floods, as well as the poor organisation of the rescue operation. This event has had serious repercussions in Russia. President Vladimir Putin visited the region, and promised high compensation to the victims' families. A 140-member Investigation Committee has also gone there; their role is to investigate the causes of the tragedy. Independent media and commentators have criticised the incompetence of the local authorities, as well as the government in Moscow, who has been charged with political responsibility for the ill-functioning system of crisis management.

Commentary

- The tragedy in the Kuban region (part of Krasnodar *krai*) has revealed the state's systemic failure to prepare for recurrent flood disasters in this region: the emergency warning system failed, and the rescue proceedings were delayed and disorganised. This problem does not only affect the Krasnodar *krai*: the minister for civil defence and emergencies publicly admitted that 40% of the regional warning systems were operating in an 'unsatisfactory' manner. The lack of a system to cope with natural disasters was already apparent during the wave of fires throughout Russia in 2010, when the monitoring systems, fire prevention and early-stage fire-fighting mechanisms failed to work.

- The events in the Kuban clearly illustrate the model of relations between Moscow and the regions, in which loyalty to the Kremlin is more important than the efficient management of the region. The Krasnodar *krai* has been run for twelve years by Governor Aleksandr Tkachev, who has consistently provided good electoral results for the Kremlin in recent years; he has also been supervising the construction of infrastructure before the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, which is one of Vladimir Putin's most prestigious projects. Tkachev's political position has not been weakened by the numerous problems in running the region, such as the inefficiency of the crisis management system, or the disclosure of close links between the local state structures and organised crime, as a result of the

notorious murder in the Kushchovska village in 2010. This year, Tkachev's term as governor was extended for another five years, and he has also been appointed the special presidential representative for Abkhazia.

- The residents' reactions show the scale of public distrust towards the government; conspiracy theories have been circulating among the inhabitants of the region. The most frequently repeated rumour says that the violent floods were bolstered by the release of water from a nearby reservoir, in order to prevent the flooding of nearby towns such as Novorossiysk, where an oil terminal is located, and the resort of Gelenjik, where according to public opinion Vladimir Putin's luxurious residence is located. Most government experts have denied the theory of water having been released from the reservoir.

- The state's failure in crisis situations will be exploited by the government's opponents to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Putin's long years of rule. The Kremlin, for its part, will seek to charge with responsibility the regional level officials. However, this is unlikely to affect Tkachev, who is close to Putin, and the repercussions will be limited to lower-level officials (Tkachev himself has already dismissed the head of the Crimean region, which was worst affected by the floods).