

Russia in flames

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The unusually high temperatures seen in Russia since mid-June have caused a huge series of wildfires in central Russia. The fires have claimed more than 50 lives, thousands of hectares of forests and several thousand houses. The scale of the disaster has laid bare the weakness of Russia's state structures against natural disasters and also the negative consequences of centralised power under Vladimir Putin's governments and the neglect of fire prevention measures.

The heat wave and wildfires will have a strongly negative impact on the Russian economy (particularly in the agricultural industry). Initial estimates put the costs at over 1% of Russia's GDP. The political consequences of the natural disaster will most likely be very limited. It is rather unlikely that there will be dismissals among high ranking state officials; more likely is a reshuffle of low-ranking officials. Moreover, despite a growing dissatisfaction in society with the government, Russians are unwilling to express their criticisms in large-scale protests.

The scale of the fires and the measures taken by the government

As a result of the unusually high temperatures which have been ongoing for almost two months and the drought which has been caused by them, there have been – according to official figures – almost 30 thousand forest and peat bog fires covering an area of 856 thousand hectares (including two thousand hectares of peat bog). Towns in regions affected by the wildfires have been suffering from a thick, toxic smog. Two federal districts have been most affected: the Central Federal District (the Voronezh Oblast, Vladimir Oblast and Moscow Oblast) and the Volga Federal District (the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, the Mari El Republic and the Republic of Mordovia). 53 people have died as a result of the wildfires and two thousand houses have burned down. The natural disaster and the measures taken to counter it are still underway however the scale of the fires is consistently going down (on 17 August an area of 22.5 ha was burnt).

Over 166 thousand people (including almost 130 thousand civil servants from the Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM), ten thousand Russian army soldiers and five hundred

foreign fire fighters) and over 26.5 thousand fire engines and planes have been employed in putting out the fires. On 2 August President Dmitri Medvedev declared a state of emergency in the seven most affected regions. The government has allocated five billion rubles (approx. US\$170m) for the reconstruction of homes lost in the fires and compensation for those affected. A further 300 million rubles (US\$10m) has been allocated for dousing the peat bogs surrounding Moscow.

Both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin cut their holidays short and monitored the firefighting actions in real time. They visited people affected by the fires (as a public relations exercise Putin took part in a dousing operation, taking the controls of a firefighting aircraft). Local government proved of little use in the attempts to put out the fires and at first tried to play them down (e.g. the governor of the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, ignoring the fact that the region was suffering from uncontrolled wildfires, informed Putin that the situation was under control and that there was no need for help from the central government).

The causes of the natural disaster

The chief cause of the fires is the heat wave which has been ongoing since mid-June with temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius, and a drought. However, structural-administrative problems, including Vladimir Putin's policy of centralising the state, have impacted on the scale of the losses. Among the administrative causes, the most significant was the Forestry Code introduced in 2007 which resulted in approx. three quarters of foresters being made redundant (at present approx. 50 thousand people work in forestry) and the responsibility of protecting forests from wildfires was removed from them (thus destroying the lowest level of monitoring the situation in woodland areas and of extinguishing fires as they are beginning to spread). Another important influence of the scale of the disaster was the neglect of preventive measures (concerning firebreaks, access to water, evacuation routes and the system for reporting fires) and also the failure to secure drained peat bogs (from the 1920s to the 1970s peat was an essential source of energy in Russia).

Some of the fires are likely to have been caused by arson committed in part by residents hoping for high financial aid from the state and by illegal logging companies to conceal their crimes.

Structural problems in the Ministry of Emergency Situations (which is responsible for firefighting measures) also influenced the scale of the fires. EMERCOM has an enormous disproportion of its officer corps compared to its troops (there are 160 troops to each general, a figure almost seven times lower than in the Russian army). In recent years EMERCOM has had repeated opportunities to display its efficiency, for example during terrorist attacks or in firefighting demonstrations abroad. This is the first time it has had to fight a major natural disaster.

The administrative problems hindering the firefighting operations were exacerbated due to the centralisation of power in Russia and the fact that regional governments are nominated by the Kremlin. Governors have had their independence limited and have ceased to look for the support of society in their regions and to care for the interests of local residents since their fate is dependent on political decisions in Moscow (e.g. Medvedev has disregarded the failure of the governor of Nizhny Novgorod to fight the wildfires and has not backed down

his decision allowing him to serve a second term).

The consequences of the fires

The consequences of the wildfires in Russia may be examined at several levels: the economic, political, social and ecological. At present it seems that the economic factors will be the most severe for Russia. There has still been no precise account of the costs of the wildfires but initial estimates indicate that the direct costs (e.g. fire damage real estate and property, woods, destroyed crops) are above US\$15 billion (i.e. approx. 1% of Russia's GDP). It is still too early to calculate to what degree Russia's macroeconomic indicators for this year will be affected by the natural disaster. Many plants have reduced production, harvests are 20% lower than last year while rising food prices are negatively impacting on inflation and the costs of tackling the fires and removing obstacles may increase the deficit.

Despite enormous economic costs, it appears that the political-social consequences of the fires will be very modest. While it is true that the president's and prime minister's approval ratings have fallen (according to the public opinion researcher VCIOM, the president had approval ratings of 39% of people interviewed at the beginning of August, i.e. 5 points less than in January; the prime minister's approval ratings fell 6 points to 47%), still both politicians have a high level of support and lack political competition. Despite the growth in social disapproval of government policy, Russian citizens are significantly less likely to protest than during winter and spring of this year when Russia saw protests sweep through the country. The holiday season is a factor in this as is society adapting to the economic crisis situation.

We should not expect to see spectacular dismissals of high ranking federal officials (e.g. the minister in charge of EMERCOM, Sergey Shoygu, was praised for his actions and received additional funds for equipment to his ministry). It cannot however be ruled out that the fires may be exploited by the Kremlin to remove inconvenient or disloyal officials from the elite, especially at the regional level. The brunt of the consequences will most likely be borne by low-ranking officials; President Medvedev has already dismissed the head of the research centre for a Russian Navy base outside Moscow (which burnt down during the fires) and several other low ranking officers.

The suffocating smog and stifling heat have impacted on an increase in the mortality rate in Russia (in July in Moscow at least 50% more deaths were registered than a year earlier) and on the health of Russians. At present it is difficult to estimate the ecological consequences for Russia. It is clear that there will have been an increase in the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and many ecosystems will have been destroyed; the regeneration of these will be very difficult and time consuming.

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