

The Kemerovo tragedy – a problem for the Kremlin

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According to official data, the death toll of the fire at the Winter Cherry shopping mall in Kemerovo was 64 (77 according to the list made by the victims' families). This is the greatest tragedy of this kind in Russia since 2009 (when 159 people died in a fire at a night club in Perm). On 27 March, thousands of city residents and members of the victims' families took to the streets in Kemerovo, demanding that those guilty for the tragedy be held accountable and that the governor Aman Tuleyev be dismissed (anti-Putin slogans were also chanted). On the same day, President Putin visited the site and met with representatives of the local government and of families of the victims, but he did not talk to the protesters. It was promised that the families would receive compensation (around 56,000 euros per person) and people would be made accountable.

Commentary

- The tragic way in which the situation at the Winter Cherry developed was a consequence of serious negligence from both the owners of the shopping mall and the government inspectors. The mall functioned without the required fire service permits, the fire alarm system did not work, no evacuation action was organised, and the emergency exits were locked, as was one of the cinema rooms where a children's film was being shown; as a result everyone in the audience died.
- The Kemerovo tragedy came as a contradiction of Putin's pre-election declarations concerning care for citizens' safety and welfare, and the modernisation of the country. The tragedy is clear proof that the pathologies typical of Russia continue to exist: corruption, chronic, criminal negligence, the lack of responsibility for citizens' life and health, a malfunctioning state apparatus, and the omnipresent fiction as regards obeying the law. The regional and the federal governments, as usual, took disciplinary measures only after the tragedy happened; and these measures were obviously dictated by fear of the escalating wave of public outrage (initially, they made attempts to downplay the scale of the tragedy). It was only on 27 March that President Putin signed a decree declaring a national day of mourning on 28 March (before that, mourning was declared in Kemerovo Oblast and a few other regions).
- The moves made by the government so far (Putin's visit to Kemerovo, organising a place to commemorate the victims in Moscow, aid to the families and the dismissal of Aleksey Zelenin from the position of deputy governor of Kemerovo Oblast) have been intended at bringing the heat down on public sentiments. At the same time, the government has

made efforts to discredit the protests, accusing their participants of acting at the instigation of 'opposition groups' (for example, Tuleyev has mentioned that). It is rather unlikely that the tragedy will trigger systemic actions to curb the pathologies. The next steps will most likely be restricted to punishing those directly responsible for the negligence, even though the tragedy can also be used as a pretext for dismissing Tuleyev (his term is set to expire in 2020). It is quite probable that the Kremlin wants to replace him with deputy governor Sergey Tsivilev who is linked to Putin's friend, Gennady Timchenko.

- The Kemerovo fire also revealed the presence of a high degree of public distrust in the government and people's readiness for self-organisation. Proof of this includes the action of a group of family members looking for victims' bodies at hospitals and morgues, and open accusations by the protesters that the government is lying. There is growing awareness that the real cause of such dramas is the very essence of the corrupt and malfunctioning regime. This, in turn, may lead to escalating local tensions (the protests against the poisonous waste dumps in Moscow Oblast are one example of this).