

## Assigning Blame After Natural Disasters in Russia

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Russia has experienced a number of natural disasters in recent years causing hundreds of deaths and a massive loss of homes and property. The deadly and dramatic nature of disasters stirs people to seek an explanation for what has taken place—a process that entails assigning responsibility and placing blame. Because government is responsible for disaster preparedness and management, infrastructure, and laws regulating the safety and property of citizens, people make judgments about government performance when a disaster occurs. While in some cases citizens deem government to have been culpable and incompetent (Hurricane Katrina), in others they determine that it saved lives and property, dealt equitably with victims' needs, and effectively managed the damage that occurred. In general, when a natural disaster occurs, citizens may react in several ways: by assigning blame to the government, by giving credit to the government, or by viewing the event as outside the realm of politics altogether.

How have citizens in Russia assigned responsibility for recent natural disasters? An analysis of the 2010 wildfires and the 2012 flood in Krymsk suggests a somewhat complicated answer. Some people maintained that as accidents of nature/God, state officials should not be held accountable. Many others, however, strongly criticized the government. In this memo, I concentrate on the interactions of federal leaders and victims. I show that although the federal government has developed a set of tactics to deflect blame away from itself and onto local leaders, these efforts are not entirely successful. Disaster victims, as well as some citizens living outside the affected areas, do blame local officials but also assign responsibility to the regional level (governors) and to federal leaders.

Thus, though blame assignation by Russian citizens has not resulted in leaders being held accountable and voted out of office as has happened in the United States (Brown, 2010; Malhotra and Kuo, 2008), it can damage the reputation and reduce the legitimacy of even top leaders. Any threat to the legitimacy of Russia's government is a pressing concern for President Vladimir Putin. Since the emergence of the opposition in 2011, Putin has worked to buttress support for his government among rural and regional populations—precisely those whom natural disasters tend to impact the most.

### **The Wildfires of 2010**

In the summer of 2010, a series of wildfires erupted across central and western Russia, burning down more than 120 homes, killing 52 people, and leaving approximately 3,500 people homeless. Rapidly spreading fires threatened to release nuclear contaminants into the atmosphere from areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Uncharacteristically high temperatures caused a choking smog from burning peat bogs to blanket Moscow, raising carbon monoxide to levels 30 percent above normal in the city. According to some accounts, the daily mortality rate in Moscow doubled in August. Foreign countries, including the United States, provided assistance fighting the fires, as President Dmitry Medvedev declared a state of emergency in seven of the most severely affected regions. The state responded slowly to the unfolding crisis and proved unable to stop the fires without assistance from ordinary citizens. A severe shortage of firefighters, firetrucks, and basic equipment motivated scores of volunteers to participate, demonstrating a grassroots activism that would be reproduced in the election monitoring campaign of 2011-12.

### **The Flood in Krymsk**

On July 6-7, 2012, a massive flood engulfed the town of Krymsk (pop. 60,000), as well as other settlements in the Krasnodar region. Rains were abnormally heavy and within hours, rivers ran through Krymsk, destroying homes, sweeping away cars, and killing 172 people. The storm hit in the middle of the night, catching people off guard so that some were not able to climb up to their attics or roofs. Many elderly were among those who drowned. The region's infrastructure—energy, gas and water supply systems, and road and rail networks—was severely damaged. The flood affected enormous numbers of people: approximately 7,200 homes were flooded and 29,000 people lost all of their belongings. During the disaster, emergency assistance was slow to arrive; people waited on rooftops of their homes for hours. News reports indicated immediate despair and rage among the population in Krymsk.

### **The Government Response**

Russia's federal leaders have a relatively standard set of tactics following a disaster, including personal intervention, the control of information, financial compensation, and criminal investigation of locals to assign legal culpability. First, a leader shows up at the scene of the disaster to appraise the situation and display resoluteness. Immediately after the flood in Krymsk, Putin jumped into a helicopter to survey the damage from above. Personal intervention may include a show of machismo, as when Putin co-piloted an amphibious aircraft and dumped water on a burning forest in Ryazan, all of which was dutifully recorded for state television.

Next, the leader travels to the crisis zone to meet with victims and promise financial remuneration. In Krymsk, Putin pledged payments of up to \$60,000 to people who lost relatives. After the fires, both he and then-president Medvedev promised new homes and payments of three million rubles (\$100,000) for families whose homes burned down. Putin even told villagers in Mokhovoye not to worry about the money

disappearing because he would set up video cameras to monitor the rebuilding sites that would broadcast feeds to both government buildings and his own home.

Displays of sympathy for disaster victims are extensively reported on in the media. Conversely, the media ignores the visit if the leaders become the target of popular anger, as happened in the burned-out village of Verkhnyaya Vereya in the Nizhny Novgorod region. Residents there surrounded an enormously uncomfortable Putin who kept trying to promise financial aid. They continually interrupted him, with one woman shouting: “You didn’t do anything, everything is burning, don’t make promises. We asked for help. We trusted you. Why didn’t anybody do anything?”<sup>1</sup> Putin reportedly turned on the governor during the incident, asking him: “Why haven’t you managed to save Vereya?” He also criticized local officials telling them that they should consider resigning their posts. A video of the incident was posted on YouTube<sup>2</sup>, and many people outside the region viewed it—suggesting the limits of the Kremlin’s ability to control information in the era of digital technology.

Finally, identifying responsible local leaders is a crucial tactic of federal leaders in avoiding blame. However, the federal government was more successful at doing so in the temporally and geographically delimited flood than in the protracted wildfire crisis. In Krymsk, Putin ordered federal authorities to investigate whether local officials employed an early warning system to inform the population that a flood was imminent. When it was determined only a week later that the system consisted of a few broken loudspeakers and sporadic text messaging, three officials—the mayor of Krymsk, the former head of the Krymsk district, and the acting head of the local emergency service—were charged with criminal negligence and arrested.

The federal response to the wildfires was more equivocal. As the wildfires spread, Putin and Medvedev initially vacillated about who to blame and ultimately punished relatively few individuals given the broad geographical reach of the fires. However, the tandem steadfastly deflected all responsibility from the federal government. Experts from Russia’s World Wildlife Fund, on the other hand, explicitly blamed federal authorities, pointing to a law the Russian parliament passed in 2007 abolishing the federal forest protection service and decentralizing responsibility for fighting fires to regional governments and private logging companies. Some experts criticized Putin directly, alleging that he personally pushed the law through parliament, benefitting companies with which he and Medvedev were associated, and which prioritized profits rather than sustainable forestry.

Initially, Medvedev said local authorities could not be held accountable for a natural disaster. But Putin stated that local officials who had failed to prevent the fires should resign. Days later, Putin told governors of affected regions that they were accountable. Yet in August of 2010, only one local official resigned, the head of a district in Nizhny Novgorod in which 19 people died. When fires in Volgograd caused seven deaths and destroyed hundreds of homes a month later, Medvedev ordered the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian Response to Fire Does Little to Calm Anger,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f5wXsB-Yp8&list=PL88B263CA41404A32>.

prosecutor general to investigate violations of fire safety. Three officials (a deputy governor, and the leaders of two decimated districts) resigned. Medvedev also formally reprimanded several military leaders and fired others of lower-rank for failing to stop a fire that destroyed their navy base in the Moscow region.

### **The Reaction of Victims**

Popular anger at the inability of the government to fight fires spread among victims in the hardest hit regions. In the Nizhny Novgorod region, citizens directed their anger toward local authorities, some of whom had been threatening volunteers with criminal charges for trying to protect their homes, and toward the region's governor, Valery Shantsev, who told the federal Ministry of Emergency Situations that his region could handle the fires on its own. In the small town of Vyksa, where residents fought the fire with shovels and their own cars, a factory worker told reporters that: "No one has the illusion that the [regional] government will help." Meanwhile, the governor's office tried to conceal its ineffective response and blame Mother Nature. Furious villagers in Verkhnyaya Vereya cursed Shantsev and called on Putin to oust him during his visit to the village, as described above.

Following the flooding in Krymsk, rage crystallized against local authorities and the region's governor when people heard that officials knew of the impending flood several hours before it began but failed to notify them. A second blame narrative emerged: that the authorities had purposefully opened the floodgates of a local reservoir in order to protect the important port city of Novorossiysk. Here, blame was directed at the owners of the reservoir, OAO Yevraziyskiy, which is co-owned by a former deputy minister of energy. Another, slightly different story alleged that authorities opened the reservoir gates to avoid flooding Putin's dacha located nearby. In both versions of this conspiracy theory local officials were seen not only as derelict in their duty to warn the population but as the cause of the flooding. The Putin dacha version suggests that some residents were prepared to implicate *all* levels of the Russian government.

Further inflaming public opinion was the callous response of Governor Aleksandr Tkachev, who told a group of survivors, "Do you think, my dear people, that we could have gone round to each one of you? This is impossible!"<sup>3</sup> Citizens also became upset by the slow pace of emergency assistance and by the often coldhearted reaction of emergency workers. Weeks after the flood, the local population continued to vent its anger about the state's response, complaining that the bureaucracy was impeding access to financial assistance. Observers noted deep anti-state feelings among victims. According to a member of Russia's Public Chamber who visited Krymsk, "The people feel terribly let down by the authorities ... people feel they are treated like pigs ... people aren't happy with the governor ... confidence in the authorities has hit rock bottom."<sup>4</sup>

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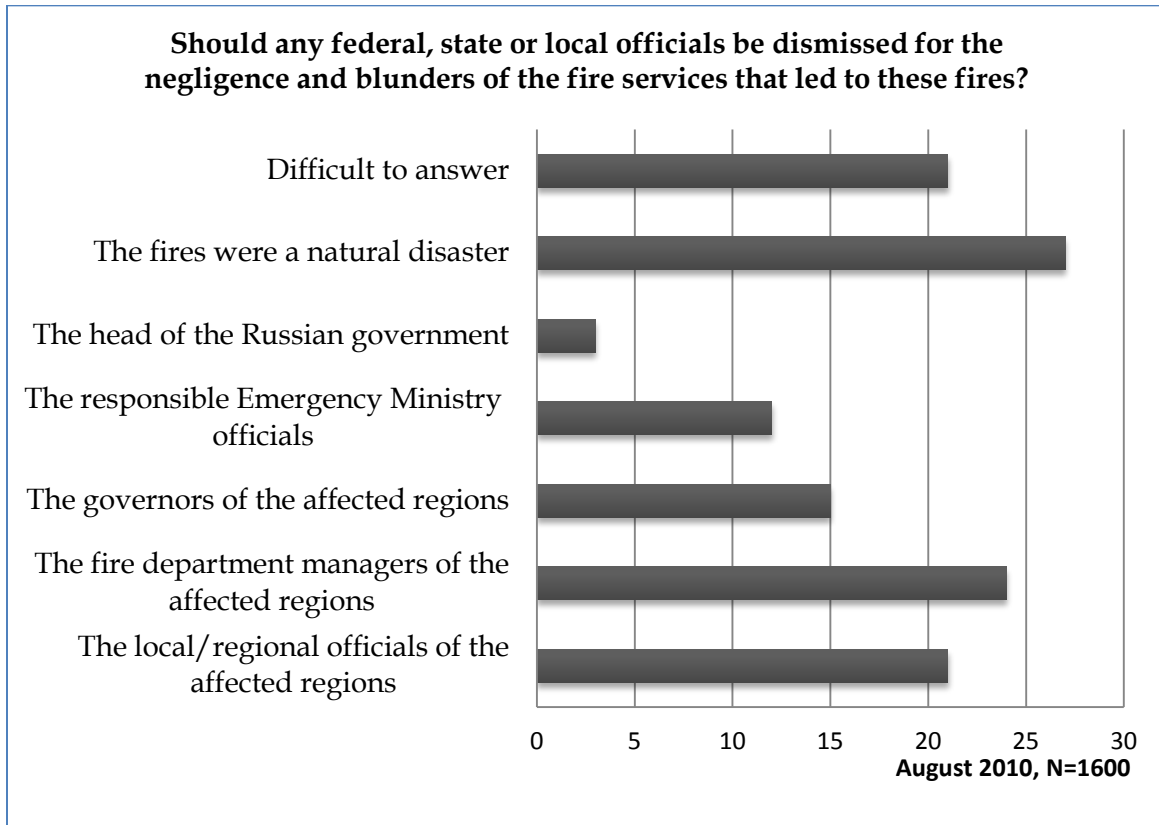
<sup>3</sup> Masha Lipman, "Floods and Suspicion in Russia" *The New Yorker*, July 12, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> "People in Krymsk Treated Like Pigs," *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, July 17, 2012.

### Public Opinion Among Russian Citizens

How did citizens outside the regions that were directly affected by the disasters apportion blame? With regard to the wildfires (the only disaster for which survey data is currently available), public opinion polls of three organizations—FOM, VTsIOM, and Levada—indicate that both Putin’s and Medvedev’s rating dropped from January to early August. This decline, however, was not necessarily caused by the wildfires.

There is evidence that many citizens accepted the government’s blaming of local officials, according to a Levada Center survey.<sup>5</sup> Of those respondents who supported firing state officials, the largest number (21 percent) believed that local or regional officials in the affected regions should be dismissed for the negligence of the fire services. Some respondents (15 percent) favored firing governors. Only 3 percent supported firing the prime minister. Other respondents thought local managers of fire departments (24 percent) or officials in the Emergency Situations Ministry (12 percent) should be fired. Finally, a significant number of respondents (27 percent) said that no officials should be fired because the fires were a natural disaster.



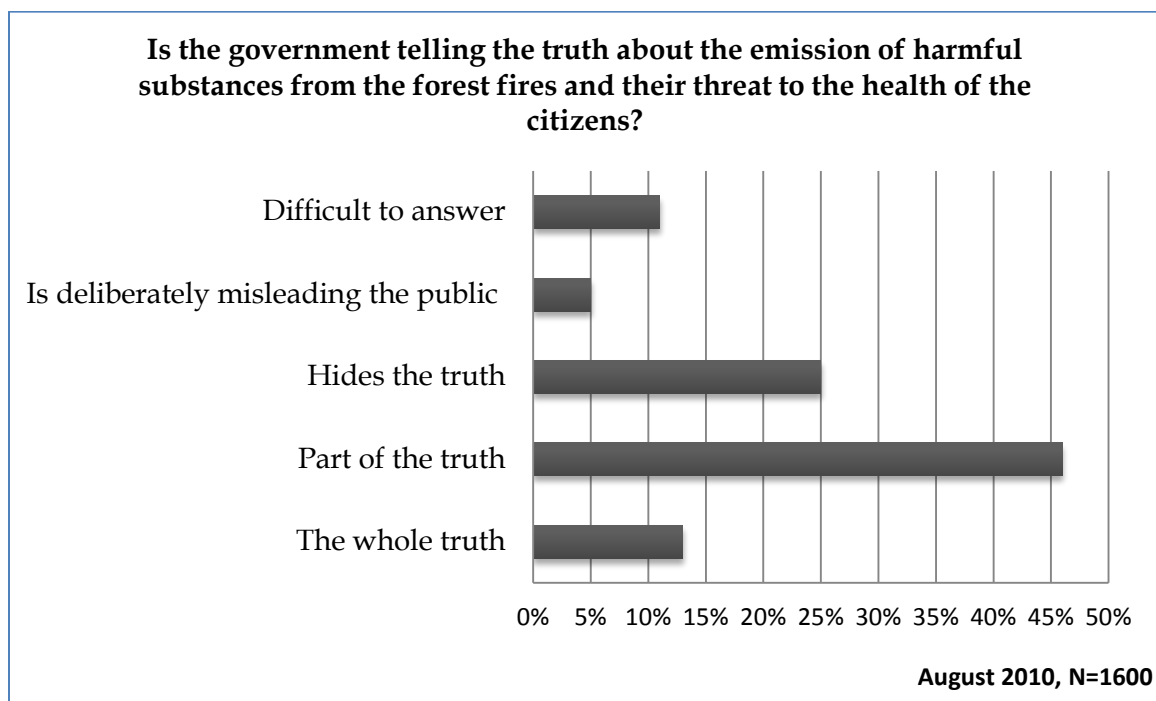
Still, the same survey also indicates that many citizens in Russia found the government’s response during the crisis inadequate and self-interested. When asked,

<sup>5</sup> The poll was conducted in August-September 2010. See <http://www.levada.ru/category/rubrikator-oprosov/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/vlast-v-chrezvychaynykh-situatsiyakh>.

“Do you think the government did everything it could to protect citizens in central Russia from forest fires and to help the victims, or was the government just engaged in self-promotion and public relations?” 38 percent of respondents answered “self-promotion and public relations,” while 44 percent said the government did everything it could.

Also, a majority of respondents indicated that they did not find the government credible. When asked, “Do you think the authorities are telling the truth about the extent of the fires and the number of victims?” 50 percent of Russians answered “only part of the truth,” 17 percent said “hiding the truth,” and 4 percent answered “deliberately misleading the public.” Only 19 percent said that the authorities were telling the whole truth.

Similarly, a little over three-quarters of respondents felt the government was hiding information or not telling the whole truth about “the emission of harmful substances from the forest fires and their threat to the health of the citizens.” Overall, these results suggest that the government’s response to the forest fires seriously damaged citizens’ trust in the state.



### **Conclusion**

Of the three options available to citizens following natural disasters, praising government performance, blaming the government, or failing to perceive disasters in political terms—citizens in Russia have chosen the latter two. Despite the strenuous efforts of federal leaders to shift blame for natural disasters entirely onto local leaders, victims and citizens outside the affected areas affix some responsibility onto regional leaders and some, albeit less, onto federal leaders. Thus, even in non-democracies such

as Russia, citizen attribution of blame for disasters can damage the legitimacy of top leaders. It remains to be seen what effect these opinions among rural and regional populations have on the tenure of leaders in office.

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