

# Russia: Where State Security Always Trumps Public Safety

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A recent deadly fire in Tatarstan highlights the glaring gap in Russia between the concepts of state security and public safety. While the state spares no expense on expanding and improving an apparatus dedicated to perpetuating the authority of President Vladimir Putin, the lack of strong building codes and lax enforcement of existing standards underscores the Russian regime's general disregard for the individual safety of its citizens.

On March 11, a [blaze began](#) at the Admiral shopping center, one of the largest in Kazan, Tatarstan's capital. Flames quickly spread and at least [19 people were killed](#) and over 40 injured. A large portion of the mall burned to the ground before firefighters managed to extinguish the blaze.

Local officials have [arrested](#) the shopping center's 30-year-old director on charges of negligence. Investigators, meanwhile, are still trying to determine the cause of the fire: the possibilities still under consideration include arson and an [electro-technical](#) malfunction.

"Such tragedies do not happen without the guilty," [said](#) Tatarstan's president, Rustam Minnikhanov, who claimed that the mall's managers failed to comply with building safety standards. "It is a great tragedy."

Though quick to find individuals culpable in the blaze, officials are equally responsible for the Kazan mall fire. Old buildings with outdated Soviet-era infrastructure and faulty electrical and heating systems go up in flames all the time across Russia these days. Dilapidated firefighting equipment and poor emergency procedures hinder firefighter response time. Socio-cultural factors, such as alcoholism, smoking, and widespread disregard for safety regulations compound problems. But at its core, the plethora of deadly fires is connected to pervasive state corruption and government indifference to fixing fixable problems.

According to a [2014 report](#) by the Geneva Association, which compiles international fire statistics, the rate of fire deaths in Russia since 2008 is eight times more than that in the United States. Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry reported 12,000 deaths from fires in 2011.

The situation stands to get worse before there is any chance it gets better. Putin's administration in the years when state coffers were brimming with energy-export revenue never seemed to prioritize fire safety and other civic initiatives designed to prevent needless deaths. Now that the Russian economy is shriveling, thanks mainly to a plunge

in global oil prices and Western sanctions, it appears likely that Putin is willing to starve the civilian infrastructure in order to continue feeding his military-security machine, as well as keep the Crimea economically afloat.

The words of the late Boris Nemtsov, the outspoken opposition leader assassinated near the Kremlin in late February, are worth repeating. In the aftermath of a nursing home fire in 2009 that killed 23 elderly people, and which was attributed to lax building safety standards, Nemtsov assailed the Kremlin's lack of concern for citizens' wellbeing.

“Ordinary people mean nothing to the current cynical and corrupt regime — nothing at all,” Nemtsov told CBS News. “If the current Russian government continues with its present-day course, Russia will soon see a degradation of all its systems — from the infrastructure to the social sphere — and a final utter bankruptcy of its statehood.”

**Editor's note:** Peter J. Marzalik is a freelance writer pursuing an M.A. in Security Policy Studies at George Washington University.

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