

A tragic passenger cruise ship sinking on the Volga River has highlighted problems with ageing infrastructure and lack of safety enforcement on Russia's river transportation system, according to **Lina Kolesnikova**

Sinking on the River Volga

ON JULY 10, AT 14:00HRS, THE passenger cruise ship *Bulgaria* sank within minutes in the Kuybishev basin in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia. The vessel, which was on a two-day return cruise from Kazan to Bulgar, had more than 200 people on board; only 79 of them survived (just one child among them).

The double-decker river cruiser, built in Czechoslovakia in 1955, was said to have a capacity of 120 passengers plus crew. At the time of writing, rescuers had retrieved the remains of 114 people and 15 passengers were considered to be officially missing. Reports also indicate that there were between 20 and 25 unregistered passengers on board; some claim there were as many as 208 people on the boat.

About 60 children lost their lives. Survivors told the media that approximately 30 youngsters were gathered in the recreation room just before the accident and were trapped as the ship sank. All of the deceased were Russian citizens, most of them residents of Tatarstan.

The wreck occurred during a storm, sinking in about 20 metres of water at one of the river's widest points, three kilometres from the shore, close to the village of Syukeevo in the Kansko-Ustinovsky district.

Bad weather, mechanical failure of the 55-year-old vessel (one of two engines was not working) and overcrowding have all been cited by the Russian Government as possible causes of this tragedy. Evidence also suggested that a number of safety violations could have caused or compounded the disaster.

Meanwhile, the Czech passenger ship designer who was involved in work on this line of passenger cruise ships, including the *Bulgaria*, declared that he did not think the weather could have been the reason for the accident. He said that only a collision with a bridge or land could cause such a rapid sinking, insisting that ships of this type were specially designed for large river basins such as this.

Most survivors were picked up by the riverboat *Arabella*, which was passing by. Two other boats had sailed past drowning people without stopping. One woman claimed that

tourists aboard one of the vessels had even filmed survivors in the water on their mobile phones. The Ministry of Transportation later said that these two boats passed without stopping as they could have induced further damage rather than help. The investigation continues and the captains of these two ships – the *Arbat* and the tugboat *Dunaysky-66* – have been arrested. Both captains could be prosecuted under the Russian Criminal Code for not attempting to rescue drowning shipwreck survivors.

Day of mourning

July 12 was declared an all-Russian day of mourning for what was the country's worst river accident in three decades. The last large-scale disaster happened in 1983, when the *Alexander Suvorov* crashed into the railroad bridge over the Volga River, killing more than 170 people.

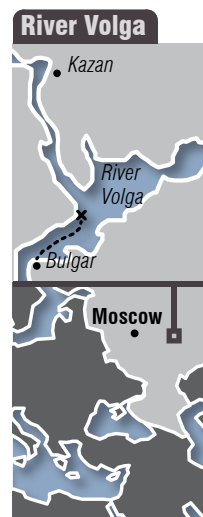
On July 15, the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev demanded a thorough investigation

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of the disaster, headed by the Russian Central Investigation Committee. He insisted that the investigation should not concentrate on finding convenient scapegoats, but that it had to identify those really responsible for what had happened. He also claimed that all river transport should be inspected carefully to ensure that proper licences and the necessary authorisation for tourist service provision are in place. All vessels of the same type as the *Bulgaria* have stopped sailing while investigations are ongoing.

The General Director of the vessel's lease holding company and the senior River Registration expert in Tatarstan, responsible for licensing and technical performance of the vessel, were also arrested by the authorities.

Investigations have also focused on the local authorities in charge of river transport security in Tatarstan – it has since been discovered that the tourist agency, which was the main



lessee of the *Bulgaria*, had not obtained any licences for tourist cruise activities.

All this prompts questions. How could port authorities make agreements with the tourist agency when it did not hold the appropriate documentation and permissions? How was the agency allowed to sell the tickets and operate cruises? Why did other authorities responsible for supervising river transport – such as the Russian Technical Supervision Office and Russian Transport Supervision Office – not monitor the port?

The ex-captain of the *Bulgaria* made a statement to the media, saying he was fired in 2007 after refusing to sail a ship which, he claimed, was not adequately safe. He said that crew members repaired the ship and complained to the lessee about the vessel's condition. The crew was not given the necessary spare parts to carry out proper repairs and was told to set sail.

The ex-captain also complained that increasing numbers of managers and owners in river transportation do not have the necessary professional background, lacking knowledge of the required safety and security measures concerning vessels and organisation of passenger cruises. Special workshops aiming for complete ship renovation every five years were in place; nowadays most of the ships pass only cosmetic repairs, he added.

As the investigation proceeds, so does the salvage operation. Special equipment has been delivered from Moscow and Volgograd, including the 'Mighty' lifting crane. Experts from the 40th State Research Institute for search and rescue operations and deep water diving activities from the Ministry of Defence of Russia joined the team which will lift the *Bulgaria* from the water – these are the same specialists who were involved in the *Kursk* submarine lifting operation in 2000. Investigators believed that once the vessel had been lifted from the water, they would be able to clarify what happened.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Sergey Shoigu, Minister for EMERCOM of Russia, raised the issue of equipping all river ships with 'black boxes', similar to those used for flight recording on aircraft. Currently, such boxes



This was a seriously traumatic recovery operation as 60 children died in the incident – 30 of them were trapped in one area of the submerged vessel. The tragedy has called waterway safety into question, especially as it was followed by another incident in August, when nine people died after an overloaded pleasure craft sank after colliding with a barge in Moscow

EMERCOM of Russia

are already installed on ships built after 2005. Such recording and registration devices would facilitate investigations, and, ultimately, help to improve the robustness of vessels and bring security and safety on board to a higher level.

During search and rescue operations, EMERCOM of Russia deployed more than 200 rescuers, nine speedboats, pressure chambers and two lifting machines. EMERCOM's 197 divers worked 778 hours under water, sometimes risking their lives. They tapped on the hull in the hope of hearing possible survivors but, unfortunately, there were none. EMERCOM and supporting teams also conducted an inland search on nearby islands in hope of finding survivors who might have managed to swim ashore.

EMERCOM psychologists, together with non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent of Tatarstan, provided special assistance to 3,600 people during the search phase and victim identification processes. Psychologists also had to help divers who suffered from severe stress after retrieving the corpses of so many children trapped inside the wreck.

The Russian Government called for special assistance from the Islamic and Orthodox clergy to support victims' families. The Tatarstan Muslim Religious Board Chairman, Ildus hazrat Faizov, and Superior of the Kazan Mother of God Monastery Pitirim, had several meetings with bereaved families. A Muslim mosque and an Orthodox chapel will be built on the Kuybishev basin shore near the accident scene.

Russian Internet users launched a large-scale charity campaign calling for assistance for survivors and relatives of those killed in the catastrophe.

The tragedy in Tatarstan has shown again that Russia is experiencing serious trouble with its ageing infrastructure, most of which was built in Soviet times. This ageing is made worse by a lack of proper controls, more often turning out to be actual negligence, with regards to technical and licensing conditions of vessels and supporting equipment.

A lack of safety culture and the prevalence of a profit-making versus safety attitude, all further contribute to the growing risks in Russian river transportation.

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