

Kazakhstan: We didn't start the fire

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After Kazakhstan's deadliest wildfires in years, locals blame corruption — but not climate change

With a summer of [record-breaking heat](#) drawing to a close, wildfire season is still in full swing (just this week, acres upon acres of forest were burning in western Canada, northeastern [Greece](#), and along Russia's [Black Sea coast](#)). Naturally, this has led to conversations about everything from the associated economic costs and the toll of air pollution to [prevention tactics](#) and, of course, the Earth's climate crisis. In Kazakhstan, however, the country's deadliest wildfires in years renewed discussions about government corruption, which sparked nationwide protests in January 2022. But rather than becoming a rallying cry, the criticism seemingly fizzled out not long after the flames were doused. Meduza news editor **Emily Laskin** reports for The Beet.

On June 10, two days after a conflagration in northeastern Kazakhstan started what would become one of the country's deadliest wildfires in years, **Zulfiya Suleimenova**, the country's ecology and natural resources minister, [posted](#) a somber message on Instagram.

"We are mourning," Suleimenova wrote under a picture showing the portraits, names, and birthdays of 14 men. "On June 8 at 10:00 p.m., we lost contact with 14 Semei Ormany State Forest Nature Reserve employees. On June 9 at 1:00 p.m., we learned that three bodies had been found... We hoped for a miracle, but it didn't happen. Today, we found the bodies of the remaining 11 fallen men."

The post caused a minor uproar on social media. At that point, Suleimenova had been on the job for only about six months, and her age at the time of her appointment (32) had previously [made headlines](#). Her appointment had come amid reforms set in motion by [widespread protests](#) in January 2022, when initially localized rallies opposing sudden increases in fuel prices sparked massive public outcry against government corruption. Now that Suleimenova was helming a government agency, however, the response to her Instagram post suggested that many in Kazakhstan saw her as more of the same: a corrupt government official whose expressions of sympathy for Kazakhstan's working people rang false.

Though some Instagram users applauded Suleimenova's work or defended her as "young" and "inexperienced," most comments were unsympathetic.

"When will she have enough experience for us to say, 'she's to blame'?" asked one user. "How is a 33-year-old girl the ecology and natural resources minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, how???? Whose relative is she?" read another post. A third, particularly popular reply addressed Suleimenova directly: "It's really too bad that honest workers have to work under the leadership of such inexperienced, inarticulate ministers like you."

For a few days in mid-June, it seemed to many that the fury on social media might boil over into something like the January 2022 protests. Instead, the story faded from public consciousness. Researcher **Colleen Wood**, an expert on social media and activism in Kazakhstan (who has

previously [written for The Beet](#)), said the story of the wildfires was like “reporting the dog that didn’t bark.”

‘They said they had a plan’

Wildfires are natural occurrences in northern Kazakhstan, including in the Abai and other eastern regions where this June’s fires raged. This remote and ecologically diverse part of Eurasia — where Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan’s borders meet in the Altai mountains — features hot, dry summers on its grasslands and forested alpine slopes. And it’s not uncommon here for lightning strikes, carelessly flicked cigarettes, or poorly maintained power lines to spark vegetation fires that quickly spread to burn tens or even hundreds of thousands of acres of land.

According to the local [authorities](#) in Kazakhstan’s Abai region, lightning strikes on June 8 in the Semei Ormany State Forest Natural Reserve started the forest fires (though the national authorities would later announce plans to investigate potential human causes). High winds and dry conditions created a giant blaze that some have called the [worst wildfire](#) in Kazakhstan’s history. By June 13, the size of the fires had doubled, scorching over 60,000 hectares (nearly 150,000 acres) and killing 14 firefighters and a local tractor operator.

Like many natural disasters, the fires started as a natural occurrence but became a disaster because of human mismanagement. What’s not clear, however, is where the mismanagement occurred. By June 10, more than 1,000 emergency workers were battling the flames, but the fire continued to grow. Kazakhstani President **Kassym-Jomart Tokayev** expressed sympathy for Abai locals but didn’t take personal responsibility for the out-of-control fire and the attendant deaths, [saying](#) “those responsible for this tragedy will be held accountable.” Critics of Ecology Minister Suleimenova and people from the Abai region who spoke out after the deaths of the local firefighters were quicker to point fingers at the country’s top leadership.

The top authorities’ response was swift, if not necessarily productive. On June 10, Tokayev [fired](#) Emergency Situations Minister **Yuriy Ilyin**. The next day, he canceled a planned trip to Vietnam and went instead to the Abai region to meet with the families of the deceased.

During the meeting, victims’ relatives told the khaki-clad president that degraded infrastructure and a lack of equipment had hampered firefighters’ efforts. Unpaved roads had [slowed their progress](#); one local woman, **Tatyana Budyuk**, told Tokayev that her husband had rushed off to fight the flames in his own car because no official vehicles were available. Another woman who [complained](#) of long-term problems in the region with crumbling roads said that repairs began in haste in preparation for the president’s spur-of-the-moment visit.

Local officials and activists also voiced concerns about corruption and the misallocation of funds. On June 9, Abai Governor **Dmitry Garikov** [told reporters](#) that emergency responders had to travel long distances over sand dunes to reach the flames. He said firefighters lacked specialized vehicles, and rapidly shifting weather conditions made the trips long and dangerous.

Didar Smagulov, head of the anti-corruption watchdog Adildik Zholy (“Way of Justice”), [recalled](#) on Facebook that three of the Semei Ormany nature reserve’s managers had each been [sentenced](#) to 10 years in prison for embezzlement, just weeks before the fires broke out. “If that money hadn’t been stolen, we could have outfitted every forest in the country with various early fire detection systems over the past 30 years,” Smagulov said, adding that official promises to step up preparations after [last year’s forest fires](#) in northern Kazakhstan had amounted to nothing.

Tokayev, who has made it something of a mission to appear sympathetic to popular concerns about

government corruption, said the fires were the result of “criminal negligence” and declared June 12 a national day of mourning for the deceased firefighters. The presidential administration’s social media accounts also ran [footage](#) of Tokayev’s meetings with Abai locals, perhaps in an attempt to show that the president takes the corruption charges seriously.

Though the Abai region is sparsely populated, wildfires have spread from Kazakhstan’s wilderness areas into settlements before, destroying homes and killing people and livestock. In September 2022, for example, a wildfire driven by a prolonged hot and dry spell (coupled with windy conditions) damaged over 100 homes, forced nearly 2,000 evacuations, and killed at least one person in the [Kostanay](#) region.

According to **Paolo Sorbello**, English-language editor at the Kazakhstan-based news outlet [Vlast.kz](#), last year’s wildfires were on the government’s mind before fires broke out in the Abai region. In terms of fire-fighting preparations, “everything was officially in place,” Sorbello said. “The big difference [this year] was that they said they had a plan.”

‘A way to show what’s unseen’

It’s unclear why that government’s plan failed. Was it all just talk? Was the culprit corruption at the top or regional level? Or was it some other reason?

“The government’s approach [to environmental issues] is always, ‘Okay, something’s broken, let’s fix it,’” Sorbello said, explaining that this hinders the authorities’ ability to manage the risk from wildfires, which only occasionally become emergencies but have complex, long-term causes.

Perhaps because of that complexity, outrage on social media over the deadly blaze didn’t turn into a sustained activist effort, even though environmental issues are popular rallying causes in Kazakhstan.

Since 2020, a [coalition](#) of scientists, activists, and artists has been fighting to save Maly Taldykol — a reservoir on the edge of Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana, that’s been threatened in recent years by real estate development. This summer, the case went to Kazakhstan’s [Supreme Court](#), where Taldykol’s defenders argued that the reservoir provides crucial green space for city residents, a habitat for native flora and fauna, and beneficial temperature and weather regulation in northern Kazakhstan’s harsh climate.

The environmental group, known as SOS Taldykol, is a good example of how activists can use social media to spur in-person community building, explained **Aliya Tskhay**, an expert on energy security and global energy politics, focusing on Central Asia. The campaign’s online success was partly due to “what social media represents in Central Asia.” Given the dearth of independent media in the region, social networks are used to “show the unseen, or what isn’t portrayed in local or state mass media, and also as a way to voice opinions and grievances,” Tskhay said.

Indeed, the public outcry in response to June’s wildfires was part of that larger trend. “Ecology has traditionally been one of the spaces where protest is allowed to happen in Kazakhstan — it’s a safe topic,” said Colleen Wood, who has [written](#) about the ongoing efforts to protect the Maly Taldykol reservoir. In a political climate where being deemed too critical of the authorities can have [severe consequences](#) for protesters, some environmental activists have even seen local successes, since relatively safe topics, like ecology, don’t draw the kind of attention that other issues, like corruption, do.

However, there didn’t seem to be a coalition moment among Kazakhstan’s various environmental

causes back in June, Wood said.

Unlike the SOS Taldykol campaign, the backlash over the fires lacked both concrete demands on the government and an apparent “villain” to unite opposition forces against. Most people who spoke out about what happened in the Abai region were quick to point out the role of corruption in the firefighters’ deaths, but corruption is [endemic](#) in Kazakhstan. And President Tokayev got ahead of those critiques, to some extent, by calling the deaths the result of “criminal negligence” and [scolding](#) various government officials.

‘This issue could unite people’

Though regional officials initially said that lightning strikes sparked the Abai fires, Kazakhstan’s national authorities later announced that they would [investigate](#) several officials, including Ecology Minister Suleimenova, for their role in the blaze. Some have even [suggested](#) that arson may have been the cause. Interestingly, neither the government nor its critics have linked the disastrous spread of the fires to the global elephant in the room: the Earth’s climate crisis.

Though wildfires may be a natural feature in northeastern Kazakhstan, as they are in the neighboring regions of Russia, the increasingly obvious effects of global warming stand to make the situation more dangerous in years to come. The impacts of the climate crisis on Central Asia are [projected](#) to be particularly severe, leading to drought, year-round extreme weather, and drier summer conditions in an already arid climate. For northern Kazakhstan, less predictable snowpack in the Altai Mountains combined with longer, hotter, and drier summers could produce the conditions for prolonged fire seasons and bigger blazes that ignite more easily.

Although Kazakhstan has been a leader among Central Asian states in decarbonization and region-wide climate mitigation efforts, its status as a major [oil, gas, and coal](#) producer complicates the issue. Today, Central Asia’s governing elites reap most of the benefits from their countries’ fossil fuel exports. But as the growing impact of the climate crisis becomes increasingly visible, the population could start to protest profiteering from oil and gas, just as they have protested government corruption.

Although the wildfires failed to spark climate-related protests, Tskhay maintains that “eco-activism is booming” in all five Central Asian countries. Additionally, social media has been a crucial tool for educating people about environmental issues and environmental activism. At the same time, commitments to initiatives like decarbonization and green development at the state level remain “totally bureaucratic,” she said.

“People are very, very proud of the Altai [mountain] region and the wilder nature in the northeast,” Sorbello said, also acknowledging that “they’re very angry about the [Semipalatinsk](#) [nuclear test site] and about the [Aral Sea shrinking](#).” (Both are long-standing environmental problems with roots in the Soviet period). “Ecological issues are something that could unite people,” he added.

In recent years, the unifying power of environmental causes has fueled the effort to preserve Taldykol. The same was also true a generation ago when Kazakh writer **Olzhas Suleimenov** founded the [Nevada Semipalatinsk](#) anti-nuclear movement to protest the Soviet Union’s use of northeastern Kazakhstan as a nuclear test site and educate the public about the grave consequences this had for local ecology and human health.

Incidentally, the Semipalatinsk region — dissolved in 1997, a few years after Kazakhstan gained independence — covered roughly the same territory as the Abai region today.

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