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Russia's Roads Collapsing From More Traffic, Less Money

By Paul Goble

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About this column

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA &mdash Even as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin again promises to complete a trans-

Russia highway and as Moscow media report progress on several high-profile road projects near the capital, including paid highways, the country's road system in many parts of the country is near the point of collapse, officials say.

They point to two reasons for that conclusion. On the one hand, according to a report in Irkutsk's Argumenty I Fakty, the number of cars and trucks using the roads is growing rapidly, putting pressure on highways that were not designed to carry either the number or weight of vehicles now passing over them every day.

And on the other, officials responsible for roads say, the amount of money available for keeping the roads in good repair has been declining each year, a trend that in domino fashion means that Russia will eventually have to spend even more to bring the highway system back even to the level it was at a decade or more ago.

Vladimir Malykh, the official in charge of construction and maintenance of roads in the Irkutsk region, explains that "a road is a living organism, and therefore its repair must be timely. If we will not do the repairs today, then tomorrow we will have to make larger ones, and if tomorrow we don't do that, then the day after, we will have to build a new road altogether."

Over the last several years, he says, there has only been enough money in the budget to pay for immediate repairs, even though "practically all the transportation arteries of the region need major investments and even reconstruction." And unless that changes, other officials say, the region's economy will not develop as the government projects.

The situation in Irkutsk is not promising. There are 14,300 kilometers of roads, of which 1,600 are federal roads, 3,500 are regional and 9,200 are "other" or local. Currently, 63 percent of the regional roads and 80 percent of the "other" roads do not meet Russian standards, and 172 population centers lack year-round road links to the rest of the region.

Irkutsk officials hope to get more financing, but even if they do, they may not be able to repair the existing roads. That is because they are being pressured by officials and businesses to finish three new road construction projects first, something that means there is less money left for repairs and upgrades.

Irkutsk official Lyudmila Pulyaevskaya says such competition for declining resources means that the tempo of new construction will fall, unplanned expenses will increase and "the realization of many investment projects of the region [will be] impossible" if the problems of the roads are not addressed and soon.

Malykh has come up with a program that, if funded, will reduce the number of roads that do not meet standards by 12.9 percent by 2015, increase the size of the highway system in the region by 105,100 kilometers and guarantee year-round road connections to six population centers that do not currently have such access to the region's main roads.

Whether this program will receive funding is uncertain, but unless Russia invests in such projects now, Malykh and other officials make clear, it will face even more serious problems with transportation and a transportation-dependent economy in the future than it does now, however successful the public relations efforts of the powers that be at the center may appear.

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