

Better to Be a Car Than a Man

By [Maxim Trudolyubov](#)

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Drivers definitely have a better time of it in Moscow than pedestrians. A number of locations can only be reached by car, and vehicles can simply stop wherever they please. Even if a driver parks in the middle of the right lane to leisurely read a book, other drivers are tolerant because they do the same thing as well. Cars are respected: Touching or pushing them is off-limits.

But the moment you become a pedestrian, you must weave your way through a maze of cars, breathe noxious fumes, and jostle and argue with other unfortunates who must also make their way through the city on foot. A pedestrian is a miserable creature — someone who has “fallen” from his car or, worse yet, never owned one.

Over the past 20 years, Moscow has changed from a city of pedestrians and public transportation into a metropolis where the car is king. Every possible form of social and economic pressure has been used to squeeze out city buses, trams and foot traffic and to accommodate ever-greater numbers of cars. And it was the lack, rather than the existence, of a deliberate policy that caused the problem. By the 1990s, public transportation had become government-subsidized and a less prestigious way to get around. For example, without

special express lanes, trolleybuses became entangled in the same traffic jams as cars, eliminating any advantage to riding them. Tram lines were removed altogether because they interfered with automobile traffic.

At the same time, automobile use has been encouraged rather than discouraged. In effect, it continues to be subsidized. Because tax revenues fall short of budgetary outlays for road construction and maintenance, car owners do not fully pay for the roads. What's more, the use and parking of prestigious corporate vehicles is generally unregulated and free. The construction of new office buildings is never accompanied by an increase in the carrying capacity of the roads serving it. No incentives are offered to use new, more efficient cars with lower emissions. Even the transition to cleaner-burning gasoline is progressing slowly.

The joy of personal mobility — that is, automobile ownership — has completely eclipsed the value of community life.

But the joy of car ownership has long ceased being a joy and has instead become a burden, with traffic jams causing frequent delays, smog and even clogged sidewalks. We have created an environment that is environmentally, socially and economically harmful.

The good news is that many cities around the world have shown that the situation can be changed. The keys are political willpower and effort. The tasks are many: reintroduce trams, dedicate lanes for trolleys, buses and possibly taxis, create a coordinated system of public transportation, charge parking fees, consider introducing toll roads, and reinstate and increase road taxes.

In his book “Transportation for Livable Cities,” author Vukan R. Vuchic spells out the details of how this is possible. It is important to understand that many cities have successfully overcome similar impasses. It has required a complex and well-considered policy, knowledge, experience and, of course, integrity in execution. But if the most that the new Moscow leadership can envision is to replace aging sidewalk asphalt in the city center with attractive tiles, there is little hope that more far-reaching proposals will ever be heard.

Maxim Trudolyubov is opinion page editor of Vedomosti, where this comment appeared.

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