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Police Cameras Bring Fines and Trust

By Roland Oliphant

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A truck on Yaroslavskoye Shosse whizzing under some of the 64 speed cameras installed in Moscow. Police cars will also get cameras — to stop bribery. **Vladimir Filonov**

Motorists groups and police have welcomed the planned installation of video recording equipment in traffic police vehicles as a means of protecting themselves from each other.

The Moscow traffic police announced a plan earlier this month to install cameras in every patrol vehicle by the end of the year.

But unlike the forward-facing cameras that have created classic voyeuristic viewing of police chases in the United States, these will be facing inward — at the driver and passenger. It is a common practice that motorists who are pulled over are invited to sit in the police car while the alleged infraction is discussed and resolved.

Patrol officers will be unable to turn the camera off or see what has been recorded, leading consumer groups to characterize the new equipment as an ally in their ongoing battle against corrupt traffic cops.

Repeated calls to the traffic police went unanswered this week. But Valery, a traffic cop of 15 years, said the cameras would actually come as a relief to his hard-pressed colleagues in their struggle with abusive drivers.

"There are more and more argumentative drivers who try to get out of the consequences of their bad driving by making a scandal. When they see the cameras looking at them in the cars, they are more likely to behave," he told The Moscow Times.

"The cameras will help create public trust in us," he added.

More Uses for the Lens

The on-board cameras follow the widespread introduction of speed cameras overlooking Moscow's streets at the beginning of this month — a move heralded by senior officers as a crackdown on the city's insanely aggressive driving habits.

Police chiefs are so enamored with the power of photography that they also have plans to unleash a roving fleet of 10 camera cars to photograph parking violations.

So could the lens be the answer to many of the capital's traffic problems?

Videos posted on YouTube showing confrontations with irate policemen — occasionally including the drivers of official Mercedes equipped with flashing lights — have become a central tool in the arsenal of drivers' rights groups like the Blue Buckets.

Earlier this year the Moscow police were forced to open an internal investigation after a man posted a video of an altercation with a traffic policeman who he said had threatened him and his wife with a gun — an incident that began with the passing of a motorcade with flashing lights.

"They will be a means to combat corruption on the roads only if there is a proper reform of the Interior Ministry. And we have in the [newly renamed] police the same people who took bribes when they were the militia. Nothing will change. Whoever took before will continue to take," Viktor Pokhmelkin, of the Movement of Russian Motorists, told Gazeta.ru.

Safety or Money?

Motorists here and around the world, in countries where speed cameras have been in place for some time, especially resent the devices since they suspect them of merely being a means for police and local authorities to raise revenue.

"I'm familiar with that opinion," said Mikhail Blinkin, chief scientist of the Scientific Research Institute for Transportation and Traffic Management. "But speed cameras are, in principle, a good thing, and any major city needs them," he added.

Like Pokhmelkin, Blinkin believes that the real issue is in how the technology will be used. "If the cameras are part of a wide-ranging adoption of new technology and ways of policing traffic, I'd only welcome it. But if they're just used to complement our traditional system based on cops on the streets, it will have less impact," he said.

That traditional system has come under a withering attack from Alexander Shumsky, head of the Moscow Center for Combating Traffic Jams, an independent think tank devoted to the struggle against the many-headed hydra of congestion in the capital.

Shumsky describes the current network of stationary police posts, where officers flag down cars, as "serving only to provide convenient places to seize money" and slow traffic. He claims that a high-placed source in the traffic police has told him that only five in every 3 million motorists stopped at stationary posts are guilty of a serious crime or traffic violation.

"The police basically want to make a complete switch from stationary points to cameras because the current system is inefficient," he told The Moscow Times by phone. "So yes, I'm in favor."

Moscow is lagging behind other regions, Shumsky said. The Ulyanovsk region has already eliminated 90 percent of its stationary police posts, while the Krasnodar region has shed 75 percent.

There are 64 cameras on the roads at the moment, mostly on the Third Ring Road and along the main arterial roads leading into the city.

That number is set to grow to 200 over the next two years.

Police say the cameras, which finally went into operation on Oct. 1, following a trial period, caught more than 2,000 drivers speeding and doing other illegal things in the first five days of operation alone — leading to fines totaling almost 800,000 rubles ($25,000).

Clever Criminals

But the ingenious and the unscrupulous were quick to find a way to turn this latest road enforcement initiative to their own advantage.

Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported last week that police have seen a surge of shifty characters who seek out cars that are the same model and color as their own, and then replicate the unknowing victim's license plate.

The result is that the innocent driver will be on the receiving end of any fines — diligently written up almost immediately by a controller at the police's new Center for Automated Detection of Administrative Legal Violations — known by the Russian acronym, TsAFAP — who has verified the infraction the automated cameras have flagged, which was committed by the imposter.

The paper said the police had dedicated a new unit to fighting license plate identity theft.

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