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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Number of Officials With Road Perks to Be Slashed

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Tuesday pledged to cut traffic privileges for officials, who routinely bypass Moscow's notorious traffic jams by ignoring basic rules of the road and even driving into oncoming lanes.

In an attempt to appease growing discontent with Russian bureaucrats and bigwigs, Putin promised to make a "drastic cut" in the number of officials entitled to traffic privileges to "a few dozens," Russian news agencies reported.

Traffic in Moscow gets routinely stopped every day to clear the road for the speeding motorcades carrying Putin, President Dmitry Medvedev and even visiting foreign dignitaries. Roads can be closed for as long as an hour in anticipation of the motorcade to flash past.

There are currently nearly 890 officials in Moscow who keep blue flashing lights on their vehicles, allowing them to ignore traffic rules. The expected cut would not affect Putin himself and a few other top officials.

The blue flashing lights have become a metaphor for corrupt officials abusing their powers. Activists have over the recent years named and shamed scores of officials and top executives for using the privileges that they're not even entitled to.

Road accidents involving cars with special privileges have caused public outrage in recent years. A deadly collision in Moscow's southwest in 2010 when a car of a top oil executive killed two female passengers in a car in an oncoming lane led to a boycott of the oil company's gas stations. The oil executive was cleared of charges, but activists insisted that he jumped into the oncoming lane.

Meanwhile, Medvedev on Tuesday warned of increased violence in North Caucasus ahead of the presidential vote.

Medvedev said insurgents could use the March vote to increase the pressure on Russian authorities and asked officials at the Federal Security Service to be vigilant and prevent "insurgents' provocations."

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