The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New Traffic Reduction Measures in Works

By Roland Oliphant

February 14, 2012



Drivers' advocacy groups say road tolls and fuel duties being considered are unfair and certain to stir discontent. **Denis Grishkin**

Drivers groups have reacted with anger to a radical Transportation Ministry plan that proposes making driving more expensive in a bid to lower the burden on Russia's overcrowded roads.

The ministry's draft legal proposals include temporarily restricting access or imposing congestion charges or road tolls on overcrowded sections of road. Other options could include jacking up the price of petrol by 7 to 8 rubles (23 to 27 cents) on the liter, Vedomosti reported Tuesday.

"The answer is build more roads — not stop people using them," said Sergei Udalov of the Avtostat research agency.

Alexander Shumsky, head of the Moscow Center for Fighting Traffic Jams, a motorists' advocacy group and think tank, endorsed parking charges as an "effective tool" for dealing with the problem but dismissed the idea of congestion zones or raising fuel duty as unjust.

"We're talking about instruments that could be used to deal with the problem. But road users already pay a great deal of tax — they should not face increased charges for using roads they are already paying for," Shumsky told The Moscow Times.

A London-style congestion charge has been periodically considered by the Moscow city government since Yury Luzhkov's time in office, but rejected because of widespread opposition to any move that hints at restricting road access.

A proposal floated by the United Russia faction in the Moscow City Duma to ban cars using petrol lower than Euro Grade 3 from the city center has met with similar opprobrium.

The Transportation Ministry has calculated that overloaded roads cost the economy between 4 trillion and 5 trillion rubles a year — equivalent to between 7 percent and 9 percent of gross domestic product.

Meanwhile, motorists may be about to win another victory, overturning a zero-tolerance policy on drunk driving that came into force in August 2010.

Drivers' groups have complained that drivers can be criminalized by traces of alcohol that occur in the body naturally, or from drinking *kefir*, a fermented yogurt drink.

Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who raised the issue at a closed session of the commission on road safety Monday, hinted that any revocation of the law would be accompanied by a tightening of rules for repeat offenders, however, telling the meeting that there would be no "liberalization" on the issue, according to an Interior Ministry press release.

The zero-tolerance policy is the latest Medvedev-era initiative that Putin seems to be preparing to scrap ahead of the election on March 4.

Earlier this month, he publicly proposed revoking Medvedev's abandonment of the annual wintertime clock change, which has come under attack for forcing people to begin the day in darkness.

There were 199,868 road accidents in Russia in 2011 — up 0.2 percent on 2011, according to traffic police statistics.

Drivers under the influence of drugs or alcohol accounted for 12,200 accidents in 2011, up 3.4 percent on 2010. Accidents caused by drunk driving fell nearly 4 percent in 2010 to 11,845 accidents.

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