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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Overall Exports and Vehicle Imports Up

By Roland Oliphant

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Sales of new cars were up 15 percent year on year for January to May, adding more traffic to an already congested capital. **Sergei Porter**

Car imports surged 16 percent in the first four months of this year, according to customs service figures, reflecting continued recovery in the auto market.

Total sales of new cars were up 11 percent in May and 15 percent year on year for January to May, the Association of European Businesses reported Friday.

Joerg Schreiber, chairman of the AEB Automobile Manufacturers Committee, called the growth "healthy" and "consistent with earlier expectations."

"The pace of growth is becoming less pronounced, reflecting the robust volume base the market reached last year with the help of the now-absent government stimuli to the retail sector," he said in comments released by the association Friday, referring to the "cash for clunkers" scheme that provided rebates to buyers of domestically made cars in 2010 and 2011.

But he warned that the main threat to growth came from “external developments on a global economic scale,” a reference to the potential impact of a deteriorating economic climate on Russian consumer confidence.

Russians bought 2.6 million cars and light vehicles in 2011.

AEB has forecast sales of 2.85 million in 2012, just below the pre-crisis level of 2.9 million.

Although all of the top 10 best-selling models so far are locally produced, sales of domestic vehicles took a hit in the first five months of the year, with sales of Avtovaz’s iconic Lada brand falling 13 percent to 205,700 in January to May.

Vaz’s partner, Renault, has been the most popular foreign brand in Russia so far this year, seeing sales jump 28 percent versus the same period last year to 75,720.

Chevrolet, the second-most-popular brand, sold 74,788.

Russia imported 324,200 cars worth a total of $6.682 billion in the first four months of the year versus 280,400 for $5.383 billion in the same period last year, a 15.6 percent increase, the customs service said, Interfax reported.

Imports of non-CIS vehicles led the way, growing 20 percent to 293,800. There was a particularly large spike in imports of trucks, which soared 36.4 percent to 31,800.

The service said that the country’s total foreign trade surplus increased by 18 percent year on year to $82.1 billion in January-April 2012.

Russia exported $175.7 billion worth of goods and commodities in the first four months of the year and imported $93.7 billion, up 14.7 and 9.6 percent, respectively. Three-quarters of all exports were fuel or energy products.

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