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Onishchenko: Kefir and Cars Don't Mix

By Roland Oliphant

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Traffic police said they knew of no instances of accidents being caused by the popular fermented yogurt drink. **Denis Grishkin**

Drivers who think they scrupulously avoid a drink before getting behind the wheel may nonetheless be endangering the lives of others — if they have been drinking yogurt, the country's chief health inspector said.

This week, the head of the consumer watchdog, Gennady Onishchenko, warned that kefir, the traditional, slightly fermented yogurt drink, could cause car crashes.

"If you love kefir, then choose: Either drink kefir or drive," he said during a Public Chamber hearing on drunk driving earlier this week.

Traffic police dismissed Onishchenko's warning, saying Thursday that they were not aware "of a single accident caused by kefir," Izvestia reported.

Dairy manufacturers hit back too.

"To register anything on a breath test, you'd have to down a liter of kefir immediately before getting behind the wheel," said Andrei Danilenko, of the National Union of Milk Producers.

This is not the first time the innocuous drink has run afoul of prohibitionists.

Strict new laws on retail alcohol sales introduced earlier this year threatened to require dairies producing kefir to seek the same licensing and pay the same excise charges as brewers and distillers.

Only a last-minute intervention by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to remove the yogurt drink from the list of substances classified as alcoholic kept it on store shelves and on sale to people under age 18.

Onishchenko's comments come as lawmakers consider a bill to drastically raise punishments for drunk driving. Legislators are also weighing a change from zero tolerance to a law that allows drivers to have up to 0.2 parts per million of alcohol in the bloodstream.

Drunk drivers are responsible for car crashes that claim about 30,000 lives nationwide each year. It was drunk driver who caused the crash that killed actress Marina Golub earlier this week, media outlets reported Wednesday.

Medvedev has hinted that he will oppose an end to zero tolerance on the grounds that it would encourage drivers to take a chance rather than play it safe.

A survey by the state-owned VTsIOM pollster published Wednesday found that 85 percent of respondents favor proposals to equate drunk driving that leads to death with homicide and to raise the maximum sentence for such crimes from 8 to 15 years.

Other proposals being considered include raising fines for drunk driving to the approximate value of a new car, whether an accident occurs or not.

Vladimir Ligin, chairman of the State Duma's Committee on Constitutional Law said Wednesday that the blood-alcohol question had not yet been settled, and he added that the final drafts of revised drunk-driving laws should be ready by the beginning of next week.

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