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After Rash of Accidents, Authorities Target Driving Schools

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Proposed amendments to a law on traffic safety currently being considered in the State Duma would prohibit studying for the exams outside of a driving school as well as distance and accelerated learning programs. **Igor Tabakov**

Major traffic accidents are no rarity on Moscow's roads, but a string of particularly horrific crashes in recent months have forced authorities to search for remedies.

Last week, three people were killed when a woman with a long history of traffic violations rammed her Honda SUV into a bus stop in northern Moscow. In a similar crash in late September, a drunk man driving a Toyota killed a family of five orphaned teenagers, their guardian and her husband at a bus stop on Minskaya Ulitsa in the city's southwest.

There is already zero tolerance on drunk driving, a policy that is actively enforced — over the weekend, over 400 people were cited for drinking behind the wheel in a raid by Moscow traffic police. And Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev recently proposed hiking fines for traffic

violations to $16,000. (See story, Page 1.)

While those measures seek to address the current woes, the authorities are also looking to reform institutions that could have a formative effect on future motorists: driving schools.

Federal prosecutors have conducted a series of checks of driving schools, and proposed legislation would close a loophole that allows prospective drivers to skip an educational course before getting their licenses.

But critics say fixing problems at driving schools will not bring results until corruption in the traffic police is eliminated and other legal norms are changed.

The checks conducted by the Prosecutor General's Office revealed legal violations at schools including the absence of defined programs of study and class schedules, a lack of necessary course materials, and schools operating without proper licenses.

"We are seeing a boom in such schools, with new legislation on licensing making it possible to open a driving school in one region and subsidiaries in others that are completely beyond the control [of the authorities]," said Tatyana Shutyleva, head of the Interregional Driving Schools Association, which creates driver training programs and provides equipment for schools. The association works with over 7,000 institutions nationwide.

There are around 8,000 driving schools in Russia that teach up to 2.5 million students at any given time, said Dmitry Zheltenkov, the deputy head of the federal traffic police department in charge of drivers' exams, at a roundtable last week.

The traffic police have proposed a number of measures that are supposed to make training at driving schools more sophisticated and to toughen rules for both instructors and students.

The Prosecutor General's Office said in a Nov. 13 statement that the number of accidents caused by novice drivers, defined as those with three or fewer years experience on the road, went up by more than 10 percent last year. The statement blamed problems at driving schools for the increase.

As a result of the checks, federal prosecutors ordered their regional counterparts to increase oversight of driving schools and singled out the governmental bodies responsible for licensing the schools, which are branches of the Education and Science Ministry.

The number of road accidents in Russia has remained steady in recent years, while the number of fatalities has gone up, according to police statistics.

In 2011, the overall number of accidents rose barely at all compared to 2010, remaining at just under 200,000, while the number of fatalities went up by about 1,400 — 27,953 deaths in 2011 compared to 26,567 in 2010. There were roughly the same number of injured, about 250,000.

According to police statistics for the first 10 months of 2012, the number of accidents is on pace to go up by about 5,000 compared to 2011, while the number of fatalities is on pace to decrease by about 150.

Gap in Legislation

Under current law, ordinary drivers are not always required to pass a driver's education course to obtain a license.

Although the traffic police website says that a person seeking a driver's license must have a certificate from a driving school, Shutyleva said the document is not in fact obligatory for some classes of driver.

A government ordinance on driving exams states that a person must be trained before passing the two required exams by the traffic police, but makes an exception for categories A and B drivers — those who drive motorcycles and light vehicles — who are allowed to prepare for the exams on their own instead of in a school.

"This is a deep legal collision and a loophole for drivers," Shutyleva said.

Of the millions of people who receive driver's licenses in Moscow, the vast majority of them apply for category B, and around 20 percent of them are not trained at driving schools at all, Shutyleva estimated.

Proposed amendments to a law on traffic safety currently being considered in the State Duma would prohibit studying for the exams outside of a driving school as well as distance and accelerated learning programs.

But experts say the amendments are unlikely to be passed soon, since they depend in part on pending education reforms.

Improving Training

Shutyleva said a typical driver's education course takes 2 1/2 to 3 months, with just over 100 hours of theory and about 50 hours of driving practice. The average price for such a course in Moscow is around 30,000 rubles ($970), she said.

The theoretical training usually consists of lectures on driving regulations and the parts of a car and discussions of possible road situations with an instructor. Some schools also provide information on traffic laws and teach first aid basics. Students often analyze questions that could appear on the theoretical part of the traffic police exam.

Not on the official programs of study are certain pieces of advice instructors have been known to give their students, such as never to wear your seat belt — because with it on, you cannot jump free of the car in an accident, or so the folk wisdom goes.

Zheltenkov said the traffic police will enact a set of measures aimed at improving driver's education programs independent of legislative efforts.

He said an initiative to improve exam procedures had been drawn up and would be approved in the coming months.

"We'll divide the study process into several parts and introduce a report card for students,"

Zheltenkov said. “At the end of each part, the driving student will be required to pass an exam, and if the exam is failed, the student will not allowed to proceed to the next stage,” he said.

Driving school students will be allowed to get behind the wheel for practice driving only after a theoretical exam is passed at the school, he said.

Corruption Eliminated?

A notorious problem within the traffic police is the ability of anyone with enough money to buy a driver’s license without passing any exams at all.

Alexander Byrka, head of the Moscow region school Avtopilot, which trains more than 2,000 drivers of various categories every year, said corruption is on the rise.

“If several years ago 70 percent of those who passed exams at the traffic police did so without paying a bribe, now only 10 percent of candidates pass the exam,” he estimated.

For obvious reasons, these figures were impossible to verify.

You can also obtain a license without any interaction with the traffic police at all, according to many websites that advertise the service.

A woman who picked up the phone at a company called VIP Prava, or VIP License, said a driver’s license could be bought for 20,000 rubles and would be ready within a week. The woman said all that was needed was a copy of one’s passport and a few photos, which a courier would pick up.

But Shutyleva said corruption could disappear with the new legislation — and law enforcement officials claimed that it barely exists at all even now.

The loophole allowing students to prepare for the driver’s license exams on their own is a big cause of corruption, Shutyleva said.

Zheltenkov insisted that there was no evidence at the moment to support claims of corruption in the system.

“There is a division within the traffic police that deals with complaints, but it hasn’t received any complaints about corruption,” he said.

“While this issue continually appears in the press, we can’t understand whether it’s some kind of PR campaign or whether there really are serious contradictions in the work of different divisions of the traffic police,” he said.

“There must be witnesses and precise facts — then certain measures may be taken.”

He added that 99 percent of traffic police examiners had been replaced in recent years, which he said has made it virtually impossible to buy a license.

Prosecutors have no plans to undertake urgent measures to fight bribery either.

“I wouldn’t say that paying attention to the work of the State Automobile Inspectorate is a priority goal of fighting corruption in government bodies,” said Oleg Alexandrov, senior prosecutor in the traffic safety division of the Prosecutor General’s Office, at the roundtable.

Mikhail Blinkin, a transportation expert who writes a column for Russian Forbes, said there was a general deficiency in the legal code when it comes to road accidents.

He pointed to the accident on Minskaya Ulitsa in September that killed seven people, mocking the fact that the driver who caused the crash was charged with manslaughter, which is defined under Russian law as causing someone’s death due to “carelessness.” The charge faced by that driver carries a sentence of up to nine years in prison; he faces multiple counts.

As a result, Blinkin said, changes to legislation related to driving schools will have little effect.

“Driving schools can’t be the reason for the fact that 10 to 15 times more people die in Russia per 10,000 cars than in Western countries,” he said.

“Basic things don’t work — that is the problem.”

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