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Medvedev Motorist 'Megafine' Spurs Disdain

By Roland Oliphant

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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev recording the video blog clip Thursday. **Alexander Astafyev**

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was showered by a wave of ridicule and negative public sentiment on Monday following a weekend tirade against bad driving.

The backlash kicked off on Saturday when Medvedev used the latest entry on his video blog to call for a crackdown on the country's notoriously lax attitude to driving rules by setting traffic violation fines higher than the average annual wage.

The video featured a leather-clad Dmitry Medvedev disembarking from an SUV to deliver a lecture on the dire state of the country's road safety record.

"Some 28,000 people have been killed on the roads in the past year alone," the prime minister said in the blog posting.

To tackle this grim statistic, he added, drivers who don't respect traffic lights and speed limits

must be punished.

Drunk drivers who seriously injure two or more people should face five to 15 years in prison; reckless drivers should have their cars temporarily confiscated; and drivers who speed, run red lights or drive in the oncoming lane should face more serious fines, he said.

"These fines should be differentiated on individual specifics. For example, for Moscow and St. Petersburg [the fines] could be up to 500,000 rubles ($15,600), for other regions 250,000 rubles," Medvedev said to the camera.

Critics immediately argued that the "megafine" would be impossible for many people to pay and would give corrupt police officers the perfect leverage to extract larger but relatively more affordable bribes.

"Who outside of Rublyovka does he think has that much money? I've never seen that kind of money in my life," one Muscovite caller to the Ekho Moskvy radio station complained.

According to the State Statistics Service, the average monthly income was 20,700 rubles in 2011 — meaning the average Russian earns 248,400 rubles a year.

The current fine for running a red light is 1,000 rubles.

Even those who would have little trouble paying such a fine weighed in. Billionaire and former presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov wrote on a blog post Saturday that Medvedev was obviously "disturbed by the growth of incomes" of ordinary Russians, and had therefore come up with a "new method to strip them of their honestly earned money."

"I suggest a bill to charge only Medvedev 500,000 rubles, every time he runs red lights, enters the oncoming lane or blocks traffic, making us all suffer for hours in traffic jams," the tycoon and one-time presidential candidate said.

Others argued that the differentiation of fines by region — a nod to the comparative wealth of Moscow and St. Petersburg — would be a violation of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law.

Medvedev quickly back-pedaled, writing on Twitter that the half-a-million fine would only apply to drunk drivers.

"I'm most surprised by comments like 'such a fine would be difficult to pay.' Maybe it'd be easier just not to drive drunk?" he wrote on his Facebook page.

But even Kremlin allies joined the chorus of disdain. Deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee on Constitutional Legislation Vyacheslav Lysakov, a key figure in the pro-Putin All-Russia People's Front who has backed a flurry of road safety legislation, told RIA-Novosti that the idea would be "inadequate," without clear criteria written into law.

Lysakov has suggested introducing a Western-style points system for traffic violations, so that habitual offenders would be more severely punished.

He is also pushing to change the law so driving with trace amounts of alcohol in the blood will

not be criminalized — overturning a zero-tolerance policy Medvedev introduced as president.

While some challenged the idea of a megafine, others seemed to take umbrage at the prime minister's choice of props: a flashy motor vehicle and a shiny leather hoodie.

"Perhaps he just wanted to make a popular decision that would be cheered by the electorate ... [and] the appearance of the prime minister in a leather jacket in a luxury SUV would strengthen positive emotions," Kommersant FM said.

Political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko was less charitable. "The only thing missing was the music from [2003 gangster road movie] Boomer. He shows up in a black BMW X5, the most gangster car there is, in a black leather jacket," he said on TV Rain. "I think it's simply an image disaster. You can't do that," he added.

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