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Moscow Traffic Ranked World's Worst

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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A traffic jam paralyzing downtown Moscow's 1st Brestskaya Ulitsa. **Vladimir Filonov**

Moscow has finally taken first place in an international rating, but it's in a category the authorities would like to be excluded from.

According to the Tom-Tom congestion index, which was released Thursday and is produced annually by the Dutch firm specializing in navigation products, Russia's capital is ahead of the other 160 cities around the world that were rated for road travel times.

On average, journey times in Moscow are 66 percent longer during off-peak periods, 106 percent longer during morning rush hours, and 138 percent longer during the evening peak period. The result is that a trip that should take one hour during peak periods actually takes 2 hours and 14 minutes on average, according to the report, which was made using advanced GPS tracking technology.

"Moscow authorities spend more money on road issues than any other city in the world, but the problem remains because solutions being offered are based on traditional Soviet

thinking," said Mikhail Blinkin, head of the Higher School of Economics' Road Research Center.

The city government plans to transform at least three Moscow thoroughfares — Leninsky Prospect, Prospect Vernadskogo and Michurinsky Prospect — into full-fledged highways by making some parts of them wider and removing traffic lights. Authorities believe this measure will help to increase traffic flow.

The decision produced public debate, with city residents opposing the idea because they don't want their homes to be close to colossal roadways, and analysts saying the initiative won't lead to a positive result but will make traffic jams even worse.

"Transforming streets into highways is pouring money down the drain; instead of several dispersed jams there will be one gigantic mess," Blinkin said.

There are more than four million cars in Moscow, and Blinkin said the number went up by 250,000 every year.

"Moscow authorities have announced various programs to try to improve traffic but the basic problem is that the basic infrastructure is not designed for the number of cars on the roads," said David Simons, founder and managing director of real estate developer Radius Group. Simmons has worked on logistics and warehouse operations in different countries, and said that traffic in Moscow was "certainly some of the worst in the world."

One measure introduced by City Hall is paid parking. The initiative is not welcome by many Muscovites, but traffic experts see it as an improvement.

"Moscow authorities are hostages of the situation in which people who bought cars can't use them because there are no roads and no parking places," said Pyotr Shkumatov, coordinator of the Blue Buckets motorist rights organization.

"Moscow has three times fewer roads than it should have according to urban standards, and people have to violate parking rules because there are no parking places," he said.

Shkumatov sees better interconnection between existing roads as the solution, rather than making some of them "separated super high speed highways."

Other Muscovites see driver behavior at the root of the problem.

"One of the causes of traffic jams is arrogant behavior of officials for whom some roads are simply closed when they go somewhere," said civil activist Yury Firsanov, who conducted a lone picket in front of the City Hall on Thursday with a poster that read "Roads are being constructed on our heads; I don't want to die. Mayor, secure my right for healthy environment."

At the peak of Firsanov's lone protest, part of Tverskaya Ulitsa was shut down to allow a motorcade of official cars to pass. Frustrated drivers began to lean on their horns after several minutes, filling the street with an angry din.

Firsanov is also upset by plans to increase the throughput of existing streets. "The situation

suddenly affected me directly when the government decided to create a highway next to my house," he said.

He was not the only one exercising his right to fee speech. On Tverskaya Ploshchad, a group of three young people held posters that read "Moscow needs new roads." Their leader, Vadim Shumel, who showed up without any poster, said he did not like the fact that some of the Moscow authorities' anti-congestion plans had been put on hold.

City Hall has delayed implementation of a Leninsky Prospect reconstruction project that was slated to start at the beginning of this year.

Real estate developer Simons said the authorities should concentrate their efforts on making more railway crossings, synchronizing traffic lights and changing the rules relating to car accident resolution. "The rules allow that vehicles involved in all non-injury causing accidents can be moved to the side of the road," he said, adding that creating more parking places was important since a lot of the traffic is created by haphazard parking.

Business leaders have consistently expressed dismay at Moscow's monster jams, including Goldman Sachs' Lloyd Blankfein, who told then-President Dmitry Medvedev on a visit in 2011 that traffic was a key barrier to the city's ambition to become a global financial hub.

But Simons said congestion was not an obstacle to foreign investment here.

"I firmly believe that the business environment has adapted and continues to adapt to the traffic situation," he said.

Cities With the Greatest Amount of Traffic Congestion in 2012

Based on GPS measurements, and calculated in terms of the percent of additional time spent on the road during an average journey versus how long the journey would take if traffic was flowing freely.

1. Moscow, Russia (66%)

2. Istanbul, Turkey (55%)

3. Warsaw, Poland (42%)

4. Marseille, France (40%)

5. Palermo, Italy (39%)

6. Los Angeles, California (33%)

7. Sidney, Australia (33%)

8. Stuttgart, Germany (33%)

9. Paris, France (33%)

10. Rome, Italy (33%)

Source: TomTom navigation systems

Contact the author at e.kravtsova@imedia.ru

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