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Moscow Metro Needs a Break

By Alexander Panin

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A crush to get out of Park Pobedy metro station. **Denis Abramov**

Overcrowded, run-down and underfinanced, the Moscow metro has seen a series of breakdowns this year — including serious delays on Thursday — that have resulted in alarming news reports and consumer rights advocates calling for a thorough investigation.

A malfunctioning train between Novogireyevo and Novokosino stations on the Yellow Line was moving at a reduced speed during morning rush hour, delaying other trains. It was taken off the line and normal commuter service resumed soon after 10 a.m., a spokesman for the metro said, Interfax reported.

But then delays were reported later the same day on the Lyublinskaya Light Green line. Normal service was eventually restored.

On Thursday, co-chairman of Russia's consumer union Vladimir Slepak, speaking before members of the Public Chamber, said the breakdowns of the metro in recent months should serve as grounds for a serious investigation.

"These cases cannot be justified as minor malfunctions. They are major accidents because the effects of such incidents grow exponentially, resulting in people being clogged at platforms by the thousands, increased intervals and delays that can be as long as 40 minutes," Slepak said.

His ire comes after repeated incidents this year, despite an ongoing unprecedented program to improve and extend the Moscow metro and to replace old rolling stock with new trains.

At the end of September, trains were delayed on two other lines, in part caused by technical problems with the rolling stock.

In July, there were reports of smoke filling a train car. The reason behind this, revealed later, was a jammed brake system.

The biggest accident this year happened in June when dozens of people were hospitalized with smoke inhalation after a fire broke out in the tunnel connecting the Okhotny Ryad and Biblioteka Imeni Lenina metro stations. The incident caused a major interruption of service on the busy Dark Gray Line and evacuation of about 4,500 people.

The Public Chamber at the time called for metro management to report on the causes of frequent malfunctions.

The situation has led to a plethora of lawsuits coming from other consumer advocates.

At the end of September the Moscow Court held a first hearing on a lawsuit filed by the consumer rights protection community that claimed that the Moscow metro had violated ecological norms. The lawsuit said that train compartments were too noisy and too hot because some had no air conditioning and that people had to open windows for ventilation.

According to the rights group, 182 consumers complained of the poor quality of service on the Moscow metro since the beginning of the year, while there were only 71 such complaints filed in 2012.

"We went to court with the ecological issues because people felt that a refund on the ticket and a 1,000 ruble compensation, which would be a typical ruling on a late train case, would not be worth going through all the court procedures," said Oleg Frolov, a lawyer for the Consumer Rights Protection Community.

Making claims about ecological deficiencies is better since it is not necessary to point out specific victims of violations, but it is a way to make the metro management do its job better, the lawyer said.

The prosecutor's office uncovered similar violations in 2010, prior to the ousting of the previous metro chief, Dmitry Gayev, who left his position in early 2011.

Three years ago the prosecutors said that the level of noise in Moscow metro cars was 30 percent higher than acceptable standards and that the temperature was 50 percent higher.

Gayev's successor, metro chief Ivan Besedin denied the accusations, at least as far as the technical state of his rolling stock was concerned.

As of the first nine months of 2013, the repair plan for train cars and train equipment has been 100 percent complete, Besedin said.

"We look into each malfunction case, determine the causes and take the necessary action," he said. "We are open for cooperation with experts since passenger safety is our top priority."

At the same time, the metro denied the petition of the consumer rights protection community presented at the last court hearing to conduct an ecological review of the subway.

The Moscow metro faces problems because most of the money it has goes to build new lines and replace existing rolling stock, and there is less of it left to finance current repairs, said Anatoly Fedorenko, a professor of the logistics faculty of the Higher School of Economics. "The same was true for power grids when we started experiencing blackouts," he said.

Another reason is that the Moscow metro is overloaded, and there is not enough time to do preventative maintenance in the nighttime interval it is not in service, other experts said.

"The number of passengers carried by the Moscow metro during rush hours is close to a world record. And there is such an issue as maintenance duty gaps," said Mikhail Blinkin, head of the Transport and Road Research Institute.

"Some subways in the world can afford to stop service on whole lines during the day for repairs while the Moscow metro does all work at night, closing late and opening early," he said. "Despite all the new ongoing construction, the subway has not become any younger, while the time left for daily repairs has become shorter."

According to the data provided by the Moscow metro, it carried more than 200 million passengers last month alone. With a daily average of 6.9 million riders, the record high was on September 25 when more than 8.5 million passengers went underground to move about the city.

In comparison, the New York subway carries 4.5 million passengers daily, while the London underground sees 3.5 million riders every day.

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