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Anti-Smoking Movement Raids Moscow Train Station

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Smokers light up by a doorway despite a prominent “No Smoking” sign.

Moscow’s train stations have been transformed in recent years but some things remain the same: the stress of setting off on a long distance journey. Passengers get nervous, and what do they do when they get nervous? They smoke.

And they smoke where it is now forbidden.

Go to Yaroslavsky Station and you will see them smoke by the station entrance, close to a sign with a cigarette packet crossed out and the words “Attention! From July 1, Federal Law No. 15: “On the protection of citizens health from the effects of tobacco smoke and from the consequences of tobacco use” came into force. Smoking by the station is forbidden. Use the specially equipped places for smoking.”

It is six in the evening at Yaroslavsky Station and Mikhail Lazutin, head of an anti-tobacco

movement turns up. Young, solidly built Lazutin, 18, is accompanied by a tiny girl, Sveta, holding a video camera.

“One more person will come,” promises Lazutin, “with a spray. That’s a necessity for a raid. If they do not put out the cigarette after we ask them to, we will put it out ourselves with the spray. We used to spray air freshener but now we decided to use plain water.”

“Are you not afraid of being taken to court?”

“For what?” asked a surprised Lazutin, “We are not spraying them in the face. Only on the cigarette, when a person’s hand drops down.”

“What if you ruin someone’s clothes? Cause psychological damage? It is hooliganism.”

“Let them take us to court,” said Lazutin, waving his hand dismissively, “If they can prove it.”

A month ago, Lazutin, 18, stood at a bus stop where there was a group of men smoking and some old women not smoking. He had a brainwave and started filming one man on his mobile phone, whilst telling him that it was not right that he was smoking in a public place. He avoided a fight but only because a bus arrived to save him.

Nevertheless, Lazutin decided to organize a movement against smoking in public places, which he called “Lev Protiv” or “Leo Against” — the Leo comes from Lazutin’s zodiac sign. Together with friends, he spent a month wandering Moscow’s public spaces with a video camera demanding that smokers follow the new law.

Once Nikita, the activist with the spray turned up, the three went off to look for smokers breaking the law. They found their first victim / reprobate smoker under the departure and arrivals board at the entrance to the train station.

“Excuse us for bothering you, we are the movement against smoking,” Lazutin said, “You are standing under the sign saying “Smoking is forbidden.” You are breaking a federal law. Please put out the cigarette and move on to the place where you can smoke.”

The passenger took a glance at the well-developed shoulders of Lazutin, the video camera of Sveta and dutifully put the cigarette in the bin. Others asked for the number of the law but the majority asked where can you smoke legally. It is not easy to find a place to smoke at the station. There are no directions, apart from a difficult-to-see arrow on the sign.

The raid on smokers continues. By a fountain, a group of homeless get excited and make jokes when they see the three head toward them, especially when they see the spray. Lazutin, however, fails to see the funny side and asks them to stop smoking.

“This is also a public place and apart from that it is also a monument — a cultural object,” he explained.

“Two-thousand years ago Jesus allowed us to drink wine,” said one philosopher with a face the color of a brick. “And smoking he also, by the way, did not ban. Who are you to be against Jesus.”

“It is not us but Federal Law No. 15 which was signed by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin,” replied Lazutin.

A guard in a Russian Railways uniform walks over and asks Sveta if she has permission to film there. Lazutin explains: the head of the train station knows about the raid, as do the police.

The guard instantly knows what to do, scolding the homeless and clearing the smokers away from the fountain.

“We told the police right away,” explained Lazutin. “They were only glad that we were helping them. And they also help us as everyone reacts differently. For every hundred normal people, there is one wild one. I was once hit in the face. I hit him back. He tried again. He was calmed down.”

“Leo Against” have conducted 21 raids so far in June, mainly in train stations. More people smoke at trains stations, said Lazutin and if they stop people smoking there, then it will help change the habit of smoking in other public places. The raids last for two hours and between three and 25 people take part in them.

At that point, Alexander Arzhashchev from the transport police joins the raid. “I have come to help the lads,” he said.

One unhappy smoker standing by the entrance to the train station soon finds himself face to face with Arzhashchev. “Violation of the federal law,” Arzhashchev said, with visible satisfaction and he takes off the man to fill out paper work for his offense.

Later, the activists surround an old man standing not far from the ticket office and tell him to move.

“I will not go,” he said, “The law says that you can stand 15 meters from the train station.”

“This is a public place,” insists Lazutin.

The man smokes in silence. Lazutin takes the sprinkler and sends a jet of water toward the smoker’s hand. He veers away. His legs are shaking, his cheeks are twitching but he stays. It is a matter of principle.

“Show us your documents, sir,” said officer Arzhashchev.

”Show yours first,” the smoker responded.

“You are breaking the law. This is vigilantism,” said the man, whose body is shaking all over. “I am calling the police.” With shaking hands he pulls out a phone, rings 112, the number for the police, and listens for a long time. “Nobody is answering.”

He has his hand on his heart as if in pain. The policeman takes him off to the station.

A gloomy gray mustached man with a gold signet ring looks at the activists, turns away and puffs a smoke ring into the air.

“You are by the entrance. Smoking is forbidden here,” said Lazutin, “There is a special place

for smokers."

"Where is it?" asked gray mustache.

"Not here, that's for sure."

The man responds with an old Russian phrase often heard at train stations and Lazutin responds by spraying him.

"What are you doing, you fool?!" said the man moving toward Lazutin, who quickly skips away.

"Don't be so disrespectful. You've stained my shirt. ... I will stuff that cigarette butt where the sun don't shine," he threatens.

"Will you put out the cigarette," asks Lazutin and sprays the man one more time.

Surprisingly, no fight breaks out. Instead, the man damns the activists with some choice words and moves away to the smoking area.

"I told him immediately that it was there," said a visibly vexed Lazutin.

"You didn't tell him," I said.

"What are you on about," said Lazutin with surprise. "Sveta, did you film it? Give me the camera to take a look."

"You didn't say it. You didn't say it," said Nikita, the activist."Everyone can forget something. We are also people, aren't we?"

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