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A Russian Rich Kid's Joyride to Jail

By Eva Hartog

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The son of LUKoil's vice president, Ruslan Shamsuarov, is led to a police car on May 28. Six days earlier he was involved in a five-hour car chase across town.

When the son of a top Russian oil executive recorded a multi-hour chase with Russian traffic police, he thought it would bring him social media stardom.

Instead, Ruslan Shamsuarov has become something akin to a national villain. A week after the event, on May 28, he was detained by OMON special forces officers and escorted from an elite hospital in central Moscow. He was dressed in a slick black-and-white suit — not exactly the outfit you would expect from a 20-year-old. Then again, not every 20-year-old's father is the vice president of LUKoil, Russia's second-largest oil producer.

Shamsuarov's publicized detention comes at a time when cracking down on the privileged and their offspring is becoming politically expedient as Russia's crisis bites.

Several days before Shamsuarov's arrest, Moscow's police chief Anatoly Yakunin declared war on Russia's "golden youth" — children who inherited not only riches from their successful

parents, but also a sense of entitlement. In a video of his speech on the Interior Ministry's website, Yakunin declared a zero-tolerance policy on "those who don't give a damn about Muscovites and their safety [...] They think money can buy them everything and everyone."

That speech came days after footage appeared online of a five-hour chase between Shamsuarov's Mercedes-Benz G-Class and traffic police. Shamsuarov and his friends had been driving home after a club night when traffic police flagged them for speeding. Instead of pulling over, the driver, Shamsuarov's friend, hit the accelerator amid jeering from his fellow passengers. For five hours, the flashy jeep outmaneuvered six police cars as it sped through the still-deserted Moscow streets. It whizzed past crosswalks, made sudden U-turns on an island of grass between road lanes, and at one point, even jumped a sidewalk and drove into a park.

The chase ended when the group was apprehended by traffic police. The driver was handed a paltry fine of 5,000 rubles ($75) — much to Shamsuarov's amusement. "What are they going to do to us? Nothing!" he joked.

The whole incident could have ended there, had Shamsuarov not live-streamed the incident and his mocking reaction through the Periscope app. The footage caught the attention of social media — but Russian law enforcement was also watching. From what followed, they were clearly unamused.

Put on the spot, Moscow's police chief responded with unusual aggression. The Interior Ministry video shows Yakunin barking at his staff to come up with tougher charges. According to the pro-Kremlin tabloid Life.ru, Shamsuarov's father Azat tried to strike a deal the old way, telling authorities to forget "the small misunderstanding." But in response, the police sent over the National Guard to fetch his son.

Ostentatious rich kids can count on little sympathy from ordinary Russians, says Natalia Zorkaya from the independent pollster Levada Center. A legacy of Soviet times, Russians still foster a deep sense of distrust toward the rich and the crisis isn't helping.

There may well be electoral advantages for ruling parties to be gained ahead of parliamentary elections in September. Making use of the wave of popular anger at the incident, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin took the question of how to punish the reckless driver and his friends to social media. "Is an administrative sanction enough for the arrogant rich kids in their Mercedes, or should they be given stricter punishment?" he asked.

As the news snowballed, calls for more creative forms of retribution poured in. "You can't just adopt a law saying: Children of rich parents should behave themselves properly," the pro-Kremlin commentator Sergei Markov told The Moscow Times. He is among those who have publicly called for Shamsuarov's father to be sacked, and joined a social media-led boycott of LUKoil gas stations. "It will be a good example for other parents," he said.

The battle against the culture of privilege can only go so far up the food chain, says analyst Dmitry Oreshkin. "The son of the vice-president of LUKoil is small fish," he says. "Even then, at some point they'll draw a line under it."

Others suggested that the new zealousness of law enforcement had a dangerous side. "This is

not about the equality of all before the law," prominent human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov wrote on the Slon.ru website. "It is more like an active exploitation of hatred toward the rich [...] combined with a manipulation of the Criminal Code, it makes for a very dangerous cocktail."

And Chikov has received support from an unexpected source — the Moscow prosecutor's office.

"If you consider the law to be incomplete, change it. But that falls within the sphere of the legislature, not law enforcement," Moscow prosecutor Vladimir Churikov was cited as saying by the Interfax news agency. The prosecutor was reacting to an announcement by the Investigative Committee on Tuesday that it had launched a criminal investigation on charges of hooliganism against the driver and his three passengers. Prosecutors had twice before closed the criminal case after finding insufficient evidence of hooliganism, a charge that carries a maximum sentence of seven years in prison.

LUKoil remains by far the largest Russian oil company still in private hands. Some have speculated that the focus on Shamsuarov — who wasn't behind the wheel — could be part of an attempt to squeeze the company out of a market hard hit by weak oil prices.

Meanwhile, the offending Periscope account has been deleted. But Shamsuarov's videos continue to circulate online. Pro-Kremlin media monitor his every move, even while being kept in a detention center — reporting on his diet, visitors and the identity of his cellmates. It is a level of stardom the young man couldn't have predicted and most likely doesn't want.

"Do you regret it?" a journalist asked him following his detention. With not a trace left of the youthful boisterousness of his video, Shamsuarov's response was deadly serious.

"Of course I do," he said.

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