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Gas Delivery Startups Hit Russian Market

By Reuters

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City dwellers in Russia can now add gas to their online shopping, as two startups offer fuel delivery direct to a parked car.

Such services are already available in North America and Europe, but may have special appeal in Russia given the country's particularly harsh winters.

Toplivo v Bak, which translates as "Fuel to the Tank", and another company called Pump will come and fill up a car's fuel tank at the curbside on receipt of an order via a smartphone app — even if the owner is not there.

The services are available in four cities — Moscow, St. Petersburg, Sochi and Krasnodar.

The companies are riding the trend for on-demand delivery of goods pioneered by U.S. companies such as Uber and Amazon via smartphone technology, which is taking off in Russian cities.

"You can call it 'Uberization,'" said Alina Kovalevich, general director of Toplivo v Bak. "We see it with taxis and food delivery, in various sectors."

If a registered user of one of the services is running low on fuel, they tap an order into their smartphone which transmits the location of their vehicle.

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The order is received electronically by a courier driving a small van with a fuel tank attached, containing petrol or diesel. When the courier arrives at the car, he pulls a fuel nozzle out of the van and inserts it into the gas tank to fill up the car and then drives on to the next customer.

If the customer leaves the fuel tank cap unlocked, the vehicle can be refueled without any need for them to be present. However, not all customers take up that option.

"People are afraid that if they leave the cap open, someone will pour sugar into the tank, siphon off gas, or do something else," said Boris Zhidovlenkov, executive director of Toplivo v Bak. It began offering its service in 2017, a year after Pump.

Most of Toplivo v Bak and Pump's business comes from refueling vehicles operated by car-sharing companies, while the rest of their customers are private car owners.

The services are not yet major players in Russia's fuel market. Between them, they deliver between 16,000 and 18,000 liters of fuel per day, which is about the same amount a single fuel station would sell in a day.

But they have plans to grow, with the help of technology. The technology already exists for vehicles to send an automated message when they need refuelling, and there are fuel caps that can be unlocked with a code the owner can share with the refueling company.

"Once they've joined the service, the customer can simply forget what a fuel station is," said Kovalevich.

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