

## LETTER FROM MOSCOW

## STUCK

*The meaning of the city's traffic nightmare.*

BY KEITH GESSEN

Moscow's terrible traffic has been infamous for a while now, but in the past year it has come to feel like an existential threat. The first snowfall of last winter, in early December, paralyzed the city. Andrey Kolesnikov, the Kremlin correspondent for *Kommersant* and probably the best-known print journalist in the country, was unable to reach the air-

ally to own a good chunk of the city, reacted decisively: he blamed the meteorologists. They had underestimated the snowfall. If they didn't start forecasting better, there would be trouble. In the following months, though, snow wreaked havoc on the city whenever it fell. In three separate instances, drivers of snow-clearing vehicles were shot at when they

traffic. Especially infuriating was the Mercedes itself, a black S-500 with a siren: for years, these besiered black Mercedeses had been running red lights, using the emergency lane, and otherwise tyrannizing other drivers. Some of them technically had the right to do all this, since they belonged to one of the federal security agencies in Moscow, or to Duma deputies, or to Putin; but a large number simply belonged to wealthy and well-connected individuals. Now they were killing people. Within days of the accident, the young rapper Noize MC recorded a furious song, "Mercedes S-666," in which he ventriloquized the innocuous-looking Lukoil vice-president as Satan: "All those satanic costumes, that's just tomfoolery. / Dressing up like that



*The cars that wait in endless lines on crowded Moscow streets recall the people who used to wait in endless lines outside Moscow stores.*

port in time to leave with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for Nizhny Tagil. Instead of detailing Putin's manly adventures in the metallurgical capital of the Urals, Kolesnikov's column the next day described his own epic, failed journey to the airport. The traffic-analysis center at Yandex, the country's leading online search engine, reported a record-breaking worst-possible rating of 10 for six straight hours. That night, a popular anti-Kremlin blogger, making his way along the river in the center of town, encountered an ambulance driver standing outside his vehicle throwing snowballs lazily off the embankment; he'd been in traffic so long, he explained, that his patient was now dead.

Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who takes everything that happens in the city very personally, perhaps because over the years he and his wife have come person-

ally collided with other vehicles; one of the drivers, shot by an off-duty police officer, died. Even without snow, the movement of cars through the circular maze of Moscow was incredibly frustrating. During rush hour on an overcast, slippery day in late February, the luxury Mercedes of a vice-president of Lukoil, the country's largest oil company, collided at high speed with a small Citroën. The occupants of the Mercedes escaped with superficial injuries; the Citroën crumpled like a paper bag, and the driver and her daughter-in-law—both doctors—were killed.

The accident exploded into scandal. The police claimed that the Citroën was at fault, but automobile activists quickly found witnesses who said that the Mercedes had crossed over into the central emergency lane reserved for ambulances and police cars, and then into oncoming

they'll never look like me. . . . I'm working here on a whole other level. / I've got a suitcase full of cash to get me out of trouble." The song's chorus expressed the class conflict at the heart of the matter: "Get out of my way, filthy peasants. / There's a patrician on the road."

On a Monday morning a month later, two young women from the Caucasus set off bombs during rush hour in the center of the city. The first blew herself up at Lubyanka, the metro station just beneath the headquarters of the Federal Security Service, and the other did so at a nearby stop, forty minutes later. Emergency services reacted rapidly, and since there could be no question of ambulances making it through traffic from the site of the bombings to the hospital, the badly wounded were helicoptered out. Given the forty-minute gap between the explosions, however, the press began to won-

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der why the metro hadn't been evacuated directly after the first bomb. The response from a metro spokesman was immediate. "You have no idea what would have happened if we'd closed down an entire branch of the system," he said. The city was so crowded, its functioning so tenuous, that it was better to risk another explosion than closing off an artery. "The city is on the brink of transportational collapse," Mikhail Blinkin, a traffic expert, told me. "Moscow will simply cease to function as a city. You and I will be living in different cities. Some people will live in one neighborhood, and others will live in a different neighborhood, and that will be fine, except they won't be able to get from one neighborhood to the other."

I first noticed the extent of the Moscow traffic problem in the spring of 2007, while drinking a coffee at the Coffee Bean, on Sretenka, just up the street from the Lubyanka and around the corner from the Lukoil headquarters. It used to be that you couldn't get a coffee in Moscow for love or money, so I didn't mind that it wasn't good coffee and that it cost four dollars. That is to say, I minded, but what could I do? So there I sat, sipping my four-dollar coffee and looking out the window, when suddenly my sister appeared in front of the coffee shop and stopped, trapped in traffic. She had recently bought a navy-blue Honda Element, which looks like a motorized version of Fred Flintstone's car, with the driver sitting curiously upright. Farther ahead, Sretenka intersected the giant Garden Ring Road, which runs around the Kremlin at a radius of about a mile and a half and marks the border of the historic city center. For much of its length, it is twelve lanes wide; at certain points, it's eighteen. Still, it is often clogged. At the Sretenka-Garden Ring intersection, a police officer hand-operates the light to try to ease traffic, to no avail. So there was my sister, just twenty feet away from me, sitting down as I was, almost as if she were at another table. The moment extended in time; I sipped my coffee. When, eventually, the light changed and my sister moved forward a few car lengths, it was as if she had merely moved to another table. If the coffee were cheaper, I would have brought her one.

Several generations, even several cen-

turies, had brought the city to this point. Its early rulers built Moscow as a concentric series of walled forts, with the Kremlin at the center. After the government abandoned Moscow in favor of St. Petersburg, in the early eighteenth century, the old capital developed haphazardly, like an enormous bazaar. In the post-revolutionary age, when the Bolsheviks moved the government back to Moscow to get farther away from the Germans, various fantasies emerged to reverse all this: avant-gardists imagined a socialist Moscow of clean right angles; others proposed simply abandoning the city. Many believed that the Kremlin, a church-laden symbol of medieval tyranny at the heart of the city, should be deemphasized, or worse. By the time the Soviets were ready to do anything about it, Joseph Stalin was in charge, and under him the medieval character of Moscow was not fundamentally altered. Instead, the Stalinists built gigantic avenues that ran in all directions from the Kremlin like rays from the sun. There were few cars around to fill these avenues, but they provided a fine, broad line of sight for Soviet leaders during military parades.

Then came capitalism. The registration laws that had made it almost impossible to move to Moscow during Soviet times ceased to be enforced, and meanwhile chaos, de-industrialization, and ethnic violence roamed the peripheries of the empire. Very soon it became clear that what Moscow had lost in political authority it had gained, and then some, in economic authority. By the end of the nineteen-nineties, there were more people in Moscow from all over the former Soviet Union than there had been when the Soviet Union was a single state. People from rural Russia, the Central Asian states, and Ukraine came to escape poverty; people from the Caucasus came to escape the war.

All of them wanted cars. The city's plan with regard to this was not to have a plan at all. Planning was for socialists; under capitalism, the market would figure things out. In the post-Soviet years, Moscow filled up, first with kiosks, and flimsy freestanding grocery stores, and little old ladies selling socks. Eventually, these were replaced by office buildings and megastores and even luxury condominiums; the spaces once reserved for new roads or metro stations were

given over to construction. Blinkin recalls a commission that he received from the Soviet government, only months before its collapse, to project the rate of automobile growth over the next twenty-five years. "We knew the trajectory of automobilization in many countries of the world, and so we predicted exactly what happened," he says. What happened was that the number of cars in Moscow went from sixty per thousand residents in 1991 to three hundred and fifty in 2009. "And we were very proud of ourselves for being so smart. Then, a while later, I met some guys who sold foreign cars, who'd done a marketing prognosis, and without any of our international analogues or models they just thought, Well, restrictions are down, you can buy foreign cars as well as Russian ones, and they predicted the same rate of growth as we had! These car dealers predicted it." Blinkin was dismissive of the car dealers, but in the early nineteen-nineties they included some of the most brilliant minds in the country. The first great post-Soviet fortune, after all, was made not from oil or gas or nickel: that came later. It was made when Boris Berezovsky, a mathematician and game theorist, started selling cars.

Last spring, Mayor Luzhkov fired the head of the city's transportation department. Weeks earlier, the deposed chief had, like the three men who preceded him over the previous seven years, been harshly criticized for his failure to solve the traffic crisis. There are many problems that Luzhkov pretends not to know about, but traffic is not among them. In fact, it sometimes seems as if the Mayor thinks of nothing else. Whenever he goes abroad, he returns with a magical fix for the problem; whenever he has money to spare, he builds roads and digs tunnels. He has waged a relentless war against traffic lights—"He has a childlike notion that if he could just get rid of all the traffic lights everything would be fine," Blinkin says—and on one central stretch running from the Kremlin almost all the way, but not quite, to Sheremetyevo Airport, outside town, he has just about eliminated them. He has turned numerous two-way streets into one-way streets and even proposed that the monstrous Garden Ring become one-way. Nothing helps. Muscovites continue to buy (and steal,

and salvage, and order on eBay in North America, and ship to Finland) more cars than Luzhkov can build roads to drive them on.

The wise move would have been to invest in public transportation, to build up the city's justly famous but sparse metro network and bring back the trams that killed the literary editor at the start of "The Master and Margarita"; instead, Luzhkov has been cool toward the metro and actively hostile to the trams. Public transportation is for losers. Instead, he spent billions to widen the Moscow Ring Road (a beltway around the city) and complete the construction of the fabled Third Ring Road, a freeway between the Garden Ring and the Moscow Ring, of which Muscovites had been talking since the nineteen-sixties. According to the traffic-analysis center at Yandex, the Third Ring is now the most clogged artery in the city. Luzhkov is unbowed: he has begun work on a Fourth Ring!

"No city has ever constructed itself out of congestion," the transportation expert Vulkan Vuchic, of the University of Pennsylvania, told me. "It's impossible." Vuchic visited Moscow in October and was depressed by what he saw, though also in a way impressed. "There are streets in the center that are four, five lanes wide in each direction," he said. "You'd think it'd be impossible for them to be congested, but they are congested."

In the past few years, visitors have often come to Russia to try to help. Last fall, I had lunch with Kiichiro Hatoyama, a traffic expert from Japan. As I learned later, Hatoyama is the son of Yukio Hatoyama, until recently the Prime Minister of Japan, but he was in Moscow in his capacity as a traffic engineer, to teach at Moscow State University. We ate at the Starlite Diner, a nineteen-nineties pro-American relic tucked into a small park, just off the Garden Ring. I wanted to know how a city with such vast avenues could have such awful traffic. Hatoyama raised three fingers.

"There are three main factors that determine a city's traffic," he said.

Finger 1: "Driver behavior." Do drivers care that if they enter an intersection before a light turns red there's a chance they'll get stuck and create gridlock? Russian drivers do not. Impatient, angry, they will seize whatever inch of road is

offered them. Russian drivers are jerks. Hatoyama put this differently. "Russian drivers lack foresight," he said.

Finger 2: The traffic system itself, that is to say the organization of the roads. Moscow's radial character puts it at a slight disadvantage compared with cities laid out on a grid, like New York, but the disadvantage need not be decisive: Tokyo is also a radial city. Hatoyama's main criticism of Moscow is the lack of left-turn possibilities.

Finger 3: The social system, which is always reflected on the roads. One night last summer, I was out late and took a cab home. The streets at that hour were empty. As the cabdriver and I made our way past Pushkin Square, we noticed a policeman sprinting ahead of us and then mounting a traffic booth at the corner. The light turned red. He emerged from the booth and sprinted to a booth at the next corner. "Someone's coming," my driver announced. We sat before the red light for several minutes. Everything was quiet. Then a motorcade of black Mercedeses and S.U.V.s appeared from the direction of the Kremlin, whizzed past us, and disappeared into the night. Ten seconds passed, and the light turned green. "It is a feudal structure," Hatoyama said of the privileges accorded Russia's elite in the traffic system. "It causes many problems." He had put down his three fingers and returned to his sandwich.

"Is there any other place that has that?" I asked. "Different rules for different drivers?"

Hatoyama chewed his sandwich slowly. When he answered, finally, with a single word, there was a certain satisfaction in his tone. "China," he said.

A few years ago, Moscow tried to institute paid parking in the city center. It was odd, after all, that one of the most expensive cities in the world should let you park for free. The authorities deployed men in orange vests to accept payment for parking on the street. Very quickly, fake parking men appeared, also in orange vests, and then the press reported that the real parking men were delivering only a portion of the parking revenues to the city. In the end, Mayor Luzhkov gave in to public pressure and cancelled paid parking on the city's streets.

Moscow is now a riot of parking.

Cars park in crosswalks, on traffic islands, in many of the quiet courtyards of the city center, in historic squares. Vuchic, of the University of Pennsylvania, compares it to Austria in the nineteen-seventies. "You would go to Salzburg to look at the Mozart statue," he said. "But you couldn't see it, because Salzburg was a big parking lot." The Austrians have since taken care of the problem, with zoning, signage, enforcement. In Moscow, things are getting worse. Throughout the city are signs indicating no-parking zones, but the rules are only occasionally enforced, and the fines are paltry. As a result, the Moscow pedestrian spends a lot of time scrambling over cars, or around them, sometimes being forced out into the street, even, because the cars have climbed onto the sidewalk.

Blinkin sees the parking troubles as a symbol of the city's general lack of a legal and planning culture. "Try that in Munich or Boston!" he says of parking on the sidewalk. For Blinkin, the author of a legendary paper titled "The Etiology and Pathogenesis of Moscow Traffic," there are profound social and structural issues preventing Moscow cars from moving. The broad avenues, for example, are good only for military parades. In New York, by contrast, there is an elegant two-tiered road system: street tier, on which pedestrians are primary and cars secondary, and freeway tier (the F.D.R. Drive, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway), where cars rule and there are no pedestrians at all. According to Blinkin, there isn't a single proper freeway in Moscow. Even the outermost ring, which should serve as a beltway for cars trying to bypass the city entirely, has, since its expansion a decade ago, sprouted dozens of shopping centers, each with several exits and entrances onto the highway. The proposed Fourth Ring is not going to solve any of this. "You can't just keep sending people in circles!" Blinkin exclaims. "They need to get off eventually, and then what?" The deeper problem—or, rather, the only way that the many deep problems can begin to be solved—is political: Luzhkov, who has been the ruler of Moscow for nearly twenty years now, needs to go.

Blinkin is a slim, energetic man in his early sixties with a bristly gray mustache.

He was trained in the prestigious math department of Moscow State University, but then, after underperforming on the final exam on the history of the Communist Party, could find work only at a research institute on traffic. "At first, I was disappointed," he told me. "But then I read some more and realized, Some very smart, respectable people have worked on this stuff." He spent nearly twenty years at two Soviet research institutes devoted to "urban planning," and in 1990 started a private think tank on traffic. Blinkin loves driving, and, when we first got in touch, owned a silver 1999 E-series Mercedes. But I could never get him to take me for a drive in it. "I'm taking the metro today," he'd say when I called. "You'd have to be an idiot to drive in these conditions."

In the past few years, as he has spoken out more and more, Blinkin has come to resemble a classic dissident—the Sakharov of traffic. Yet in a country where opposition figures are systematically shut out of the media, Blinkin has more exposure than he can handle. "During the past week, I've been on TV four times," he told me when we first met, "and I've lost count of how many print interviews." In the current political climate, traffic is a problem everyone is willing to discuss: the Kremlin-controlled media because it makes Luzhkov look bad; Luzhkov because he's obsessed with it. Vuchic, who was born in Belgrade, was amused to note that he'd been interviewed by the old Party mouthpiece *Izvestia*. "Never in my life did I think I'd be printed in *Izvestia*!" he said.

Like other major cities, Moscow has a traffic center, with banks of large monitors showing many of the city's intersections. Several dozen traffic officers keep an eye on the situation, calling their men in the traffic booths to let them know what they should do. I got a short tour of the facility earlier this year, and it was impressive. The huge monitors; the policemen in uniform before them; the traffic moving, or sitting still, as the policemen watched—it gave a measure of the megalopolis, made it seem a manageable thing. But this was in some sense an illusion: although the police can watch, they are helpless. My guide pointed out the monitor banks for the poorer southern and eastern areas of



*"As far as your bill is concerned, I've finally learned to say no."*

the city, which are said to have the heaviest traffic. "Are those the worst parts?" I asked him.

He considered this, not wanting, perhaps, to offend the southern and eastern routes. "It's *all* the worst part," he said at last.

The police's main competitor in the realm of traffic information is Yandex, which began monitoring traffic on its Web site in 2006 and in 2008 set up a separate "analytical center," Yandex Probki (*probka* means traffic jam). Yandex Probki issues periodic white papers on the state of traffic, and maintains a blog with interesting traffic highlights, but its main task is to keep perpetually updated a now iconic three-color street map of the city, showing real-time traffic flow on a number of routes. Above the map is a rating of the over-all traffic at that moment, from 1 ("The streets are clear") to 9 ("The city has stopped") and 10 ("You're better off on the metro"). Probki now has around half a million daily visitors in Moscow, putting it neck and neck with News and Images, with Weather just around the bend.

When I visited this past winter, Yandex occupied a low-slung modern office building behind the Kursk train station. Though in the center of town, it was too far to walk from the metro, and a white Yandex shuttle took me there. The tricolor Yandex Probki map played on a large plasma screen above the receptionist. Upstairs, one small room was given over to three men who represented the old guard of traffic-watching: as if in a miniature version of the traffic police center, they sat before computer monitors and kept track of nearly a hundred camera feeds from the streets of the city, swivelling the cameras where necessary to keep up with events, and checked what they saw against the big map. But the center has more sophisticated tools at its disposal. As Maria Laufer, the head of Yandex Maps, explained, setting up cameras all over the megalopolis would be prohibitively expensive. Other cities use sensors embedded in the pavement to measure traffic flow; in Moscow these have a hard time surviving both the weather and the road repairs the weather necessitates. So Yandex, Laufer said, came up with

“something like Communism—in the good sense of the word.” Her colleague Leonid Mednikov updated the formulation: “It’s a Wiki.” At first, drivers had sent information by phone or by text. As more and more drivers started using G.P.S.-enabled smartphones, Yandex asked them to download Yandex software onto their devices, so that information about their movements could be sent automatically to the Yandex servers. As the program grows, it is able to give an increasingly accurate and encompassing picture of the traffic situation at any given moment. While I was touring the office, it began to snow. Some time later, Mednikov entered the conference room, carrying his laptop before him like a lantern. “It’s at 10!” he announced of the traffic index. “It went from 5 to 10 in an hour and a half!” And so it was that the Yandex shuttle, making its way back to the metro with me as its only passenger, got stuck in traffic as it approached the Garden Ring.

In more poetic moments, Blinkin will invoke Julio Cortázar’s “Highway of the South,” a 1964 story about people stuck in a massive traffic jam on their way back into Paris after the weekend, stuck in it for so long that they begin to live in it. (“At first the girl in the Dauphine had insisted on keeping track of time,” the story begins, “though for the engineer in the Peugeot 404 it no longer held any importance.”) Hearing this, I recalled Vladimir Sorokin’s novella “The Queue,” from the era of the Brezhnev stagnation, which is also about a line—a line of people waiting to buy something (it’s never clear what, and they themselves do not know), the line so long, so complex, that they, too, begin to live in it.

We’ve been here before. The cars standing in endless lines on the crowded Moscow streets: they resemble nothing so much as the people who used to wait in endless lines outside the Moscow stores for Polish coats, Czech shoes, and, famously, toilet paper. Now, more comfortably, they wait for the light. They are willing to endure all manner of humiliation to keep driving. Recently, my friend Lyonya, a corporate lawyer,

was stopped by the police and accused of drunk driving, even though he hadn’t had a drop of alcohol in fifteen years. Another time, Lyonya found his car trapped in a courtyard where he’d parked, because its residents had put up a gate while he was gone; unable to find anyone to ask about it, Lyonya finally dismantled the gate with some tools he always keeps in his car.

Yet he continues to drive, and, driving with him in his long black Mercedes CL (“Comfort Leicht”), you can see why. The car is so intelligent, so solicitous, that it will not let you slam the doors entirely closed, for fear that you’ll hurt your fingers. It waits a little, letting you get to safety, and only then does it shut the door. You get a different perspective on things from Lyonya’s Mercedes. Outside, the city is filthy, muddy, filled with exhaust; the Mercedes rides smoothly, swaddling you in leather. The city is violent and chaotic and anti-democratic; in the Mercedes, you can listen to the liberals arguing, subtly, intelligently, on the last redoubt of independent Russian mass media, Ekho Moskvy. In Moscow, there are far worse places to be trapped.

Over the past few years, Moscow drivers have become one of the city’s most active social groups, organizing to eliminate the corrupt meter maids and lobbying for more roads. After the death of the two doctors in the collision with the Lukoil Mercedes, a group of drivers began attaching blue sand-box buckets to the roofs of their cars, in imitation of sirens, as a protest against the abuse of the siren by the city’s bankers and oil executives. It’s been one of the most successful civic actions in years. And it makes sense: “car owner” is the one social category that has actually been created in the past twenty years, as opposed to all the social categories that have been destroyed. Perhaps this is the emergence, finally, of a propertied, stakeholding—and frustrated, selfish, neurotic—middle class.

On the morning of the subway bombings in Moscow, the city was thrown into disarray; only the emergency services managed to get anywhere. Pho-

tographs of the subway platform taken just minutes after the explosion showed medics among the debris, crouching over the wounded. When Blinkin, writing on an anti-Kremlin Web site, praised the emergency response, the commenters turned on him. “I was also impressed by the speed,” one said, raising the old oppositionist dogma about a Kremlin conspiracy. “It seems they knew in advance what was going to happen, and where.”

I asked my friends at Yandex what the traffic was like that day. They answered in a detailed e-mail. “After the first explosion, at Lubyanka (7:56), traffic jams began to form gradually at the adjacent streets,” they wrote. “After the second explosion (8:36), congestion continued to increase and remained at a high level until 11 o’clock. By contrast, on a regular weekday congestion reaches its peak at 9 A.M. and then begins to drain off.”

The next two days were more congested than usual, as many people who usually took the metro decided to drive to work instead. But Moscow could not function this way forever. “By Thursday,” the Yandex analysts concluded, “the city had returned to normal.”

It was true. Before long, the papers were reporting that the sons of two Moscow bureaucrats had been involved in an altercation. The son of a city prefect was stuck in traffic in his Lexus; the son of a municipal notary officer was riding his bicycle, weaving through the traffic, when he accidentally nicked the Lexus. The son of the prefect got out of his car and pushed the notary’s son (a poli-sci student) to the ground. Humiliated, the notary’s son went off and found a baseball bat somewhere—whether at home or at a sporting-goods store, the reports hadn’t yet determined—and returned to find the prefect’s son *still stuck in traffic*. He began smashing the windows of the Lexus with the baseball bat. When the prefect’s son got out of the car again, the notary’s son hit him, too, breaking his hand. Moscow’s leading tabloid, *Life-News*, posted a photograph of the prefect’s son sporting a cast. A nice-looking young man, he was wearing a pink T-shirt that said “Dolce & Gabbana.” ♦



NEWYORKER.COM/VIDEO

A look at Moscow’s traffic problem.