

Moscow Traffic Police Chief Has Holy Streak

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Moscow's new traffic police chief may offer a dose of piety to the force after maintaining strong ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and even inviting priests to go on police patrols at his previous job.

Orthodox clergymen urged drivers to stick to the traffic rules during Alexander Ilyin's tenure as traffic police chief of the Yaroslavl region, an Orthodox church official from Yaroslavl said by telephone Monday.

Priests were also invited to instruct traffic police officers about responsible and God-abiding behavior, and they blessed newly issued driver's licenses, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

"Of course, police officers attended [lectures] because their superiors told them to, but their attitude was very positive," he said.

In 2007, Ilyin asked priests to bless the stretch of the Moscow–Arkhangelsk highway that runs through Yaroslavl. He said the road was dangerous, with 70 people killed in traffic accidents in 2006.

“The traffic situation in Yaroslavl has improved for the better, thanks to our efforts,” said the Orthodox official, himself a driver.

Whatever Ilyin's methods, his work in Yaroslavl appears to have been a success. The number of road fatalities dropped from 426 people in 2007 to 231 last year, according to official statistics.

Sergei Terekhin, head of the Yaroslavl branch of the Federation of Car Owners, said Ilyin maintained a “good working relationship” with drivers and even initiated a campaign against corrupt traffic police officers.

“He was willing to hear out our problems and carefully took them into account,” Terekhin said by phone.

Ilyin, however, did not complete his 13-year stint in Yaroslavl without scandal. Last April, he faced public backlash after his Toyota sedan collided with a Volvo on the road. No one was injured, and the cars were only slightly damaged. Media reports said the Toyota was driving in the wrong lane, but local traffic police nevertheless blamed the Volvo driver for the accident.

Ilyin, 48, was appointed to head Moscow traffic police by President Dmitry Medvedev on Saturday. He replaced Sergei Kazantsev, 58, who held the job since 2001.

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