

Muscovites Getting Used to Paid Parking

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November 10, 2012



A paid-parking sign on Ulitsa Petrovka, where drivers have had to pay 50 rubles per hour since the city's pilot project was introduced on Nov. 1. **Igor Tabakov**

Yelena, a freelance consultant who lives in central Moscow, was trying to get the hang of the city's first automated paid-parking system. And it wasn't exactly going to plan.

The text message she sent based on the instructions of the friendly orange-jacketed volunteer who was explaining to baffled drivers how the new system works was promptly declined by the supposedly automated system.

After a little shuffling around, she managed to pay her 100 rubles (\$3) for two hours, using a credit card at a newly installed payment terminal not far from Dmitrovsky Pereulok, where she had parked on Friday afternoon.

Drivers in the capital who want to park on 21 streets in a small wedge of the city center around Ulitsa Bolshaya Dmitrovka, Ulitsa Petrovka and Ulitsa Kuznetsky Most have been obligated to pay 50 rubles an hour since Nov. 1.

The pilot project is the city's first attempt to get parking revenue without human intervention and is a tentative step toward discouraging drivers from bringing their cars into the overcrowded city center.

There have been periods in the past when attendants roamed sidewalks collecting fees for parking, but the approach was open to abuse, and City Hall frequently did not receive the returns it expected.

The project has already generated more than 700,000 rubles: about 434,000 rubles via SMS payments and about 300,000 rubles from prepaid cards, Sergei Marinichev, the administrative director of Moscow Parking Places, the company City Hall set up to run the endeavor, said at a news conference Friday.

The idea is simple: If drivers know they have to pay to park, they will be less likely to bring their cars into the city center, and if they do drive in, they are likely to spend less time on the crowded streets.

In the two years since then—President Dmitry Medvedev tasked incoming Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin with reducing the capital's legendary traffic jams, the situation on the streets has gotten worse.

Figures published last week by Geolife, a think tank, revealed that average speeds on the capital's roads are decreasing at a rate of 5 percent per year and on some streets by as much as 15 percent.

The solution is, at least theoretically, tech-friendly. The supposedly easiest ways to pay are to send a text message with the license-plate number and the code of the parking zone or to use one of the handful of prepaid terminals, which take credit cards and cash.

But there are teething problems. Some drivers have had their SMS message rejected, and as Marinichev acknowledged, several of the terminals refused to process credit cards during the past week.

Earlier in the trial, a failure of the cell-phone network forced drivers into long lines to use one of the few payment terminals, and many complained that no instructions for using the terminals were available.

Others complained of overzealous traffic inspectors roaming the streets looking for drivers to fine the 2,500 rubles for nonpayment.

But Marinichev insisted that the project has been moderately successful thus far, easing traffic loads on the streets where the rules were in play by an average 2 percent, and even 4 percent on the first day. He did not explain how he came up with those figures.

While Marinichev stressed that such systems have worked in other cities, such as Paris and New York, he cannot escape the fact that this is new ground for Moscow.

Accordingly, the authorities have had to tread carefully. There were public meetings with local residents before the experiment began, and City Hall even sent a small army of volunteers in bright-orange jackets whose job is to explain to drivers that they have to pay and to

instruct them how to carry out the transaction.

"The reaction? Varied," said Georgy, a 27-year-old volunteer who has been doing shifts near the General Prosecutor's Office on Ulitsa Petrovka for more than a week. "Some think it is a good idea; they think it will cut congestion. Others have different opinions."

Asked if anyone had expressed anger, he laughed and said "yes, and not only that."

The project has faced particular hostility from downtown residents asked to pay the standard rate for parking outside their own apartments.

Leonid Antonov, a city-center resident who started a campaign to create special rates for people living in the zones, has accused City Hall of "holding citizens hostage."

But others are more appreciative of the initiative. Once she had shrugged off the difficulties she encountered in her first attempt to pay, Yelena, the consultant, expressed unequivocal support for the measure.

"Having lived in Switzerland for several years, I am used to a normal parking regime and being able to find a place to park," she said. "This will encourage people not to leave their cars in one place for so long. And the price is absolutely fine."

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