

Corruption on the road: A case study of Russian traffic police☆



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ABSTRACT

Motorists deal with traffic police officers on a daily basis. In Russia, the operations of the traffic police are not transparent. Mass surveys show that contacts with traffic police officers represent a key source of corruption in this country. This article discusses the links between corruption in the traffic police and road safety. Corruption in the traffic police has a positive impact on road safety in Russia, a middle-income country. It suppresses economic growth and thus reduces the intensity of road use. In the current situation, Russian motorists have no incentive for fighting corruption: constantly growing fines and penalties for traffic offences increase the attractiveness of paying bribes compared to individual and/or collective protests. A vicious circle emerges as a result: corruption becomes self-sustainable. The official statistical data and results of a nationally representative sociological survey provide the data for the analysis. An instrumental variables analysis and multiple regression modelling are used in this study.

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1. Introduction

Driving is a source of health risks throughout the world. The risks of injury or death in road accidents tend to be particularly high in some countries. For instance, the road fatality rate in Russia in 2004 was two times higher than the average for the European Union, 23.9 deaths per 100,000 population compared to 11.8 deaths [38,10]. More recent figures suggest that the gap in road safety remains wide: the 2012 road fatality rates varied from 2.9 in Norway, to 3 in Sweden and Denmark, to 19.6 in Russia and 23.6 in Malaysia [22].

A popular strategy for making roads safer involves the imposition of heavy penalties for the violation of traffic laws and regulations. This approach is based on economic reasoning: it is intended to limit the unsafe behaviors of motorists and pedestrians on the road by increasing the cost of traffic offences. In Russia, a series of tighter measures went into force in 2008, and these policies have been updated almost every year since then.

However, attempts to enhance road safety by heavily penalizing traffic infractions do not always succeed. Their outcome depends on several intervening variables, including the consistency and uniformity of traffic law enforcement. If enforcement is selective, which is characteristic of counties with a high degree of corruption in the public service

system, then the traffic police officers may view the harsh penalties as an opportunity for soliciting or accepting bribes from the motorists who fail to comply with the traffic regulations (and the stricter these regulations are, the more difficult it is to respect their requirements). As M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, a 19th-century Russian writer, reportedly observed, the harshness of Russian laws is mitigated by the fact that respecting them is optional. Corruption leads to the eventual transformation of the traffic regulations as a tool for enhancing road safety into a means for capturing rents.

Russia has one of the most corrupt public services in the world. In 2014, Transparency International gave this country a score of 27 (out of 100) when calculating its corruption perception indexes (the lower the score, the higher the level of corruption) [35]. Only 40 countries out of 174 had lower scores than Russia. Furthermore, Russia's traffic police (*Gosudarstvennaya Inspektsiya Bezopasnosti Dorozhnogo Dvizheniya*, the Main Directorate for Road Traffic Safety of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, GIBDD) is consistently perceived by the population as the most corrupt government body in this country [28]. In other words, the perceived extent of corruption in the operations of Russia's traffic police exceeds what is considered to be a "norm" in a country with one of the highest levels of corruption in the world.

The research problem addressed in this article is to explore how corruption affects road safety. The situation on Russian roads provides good material for a case study taking into consideration the widespread corruption in this country. The recent (2008 and later) changes in traffic regulations serve to highlight the problematic nature of the connections between corruption and road safety: heavy penalties eventually

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strengthen incentives to avoid enforcement on a case-by-case basis and make corruption self-sustainable.

2. Elements of a theory of corruption on the roads

The economic theory of crime and punishment, an integral part of law and economics, suggests that the application of harsher penalties in the case of traffic offences enhances road safety. Curiously enough, the economic theory of crime and punishment had its origins in a traffic infraction. Becker got the idea that crime should not pay, i.e., the expected utility of committing a crime minus the expected (dis)utility of being caught and punished must always be negative, when deciding to park illegally. “I calculated the likelihood of getting a ticket, the size of the penalty, and the cost of putting the car in a lot. I decided it paid to take the risk and to park on the street” [5: 389]. If the fine and the probability of getting the ticket had been greater, Becker would have chosen a legal way to park (but eventually missed the opportunity to gain this valuable insight).

Law and economics use the model of rational choice to explain deviant behavior and offer solutions as to how to reduce its scope. Namely, a rational individual will not commit a crime/infraction if he/she gains more by following the rules. “The basic function of the law, in an economic perspective, is to alter incentives” [26: 189]. Namely, the motorist will be motivated to comply with the traffic regulations not because of any humanistic considerations, but because unsafe driving becomes too costly. From this point of view, harsher penalties and the increased probability of sanctioning the offenders will result in safer roads. Examples of applying this logic to practice abound. Governments of various countries, both developed [19,20] and developing [3,33], seek a solution to the problem of road safety by introducing more severe sanctions for traffic offences and their more certain detection.

Russia is no exception in this respect. The Russian government also increases penalties for unsafe driving, allows the automatic detection of most road traffic offences with the help of traffic enforcement cameras (without even informing the motorists of their operation) and extends their network. The traffic police officers have the discretionary power to record road traffic and their interactions with the motorists either automatically or manually [9]. For instance, the penalty for driving with an alcohol breath concentration exceeding the permitted level (0.15 mg per liter of breath) in Russia is one of the highest in the world: 30,000 rubles (\$977US on November 15, 2013 when this most recent regulation was adopted¹) or detention for up to 15 days or 100–200 h of compulsory work, in keeping with Article 12.7.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

In order to demonstrate the existence of a causal relationship in this case between road safety and the expected (dis)utility of being caught and punished for traffic offences, the researcher has to control for the impact of other variables affecting road safety. The level of corruption is one. In 2012, the level of perceived corruption in a country was negatively associated with the number of people killed in road accidents in this country ($r = -0.675$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 38$ [22,35]).²

Rose-Ackerman [31: 301] defines corruption as “the misuse of public power for private or political gain, recognizing that ‘misuse’ must be defined in terms of some standard.” Defined in this way, corruption involves breaking a norm, legal or moral [15]. A breach of a norm by a state representative responsible for the enforcement of the traffic laws and regulations is particularly relevant. The size of a penalty is as important as the certainty of its uniform and certain administration. The more severe the law, the more its application and enforcement tend to be

consequential. A selective and/or unjust application of a severe penalty distorts the motorists’ incentives: instead of attempting to drive more safely, they may hope to get preferential treatment by bribing the traffic police officer, building useful connections in their environment, offering some services in exchange or influencing their superiors.

In the case of the traffic police, departures from the prescribed conduct can take various forms. To start with, traffic policemen are expected to comply with the traffic laws and regulations themselves [30]. If they do not comply, then other motorists will tend to consider safe driving as optional and not mandatory. The traffic police may also enforce the traffic laws and regulations differently depending on the offender’s social status. A lenient standard is applied to “useful,” “well connected” individuals and those who can afford to buy “indulgences,” i.e., pay bribes. The other motorists are subjected to the full force of the law.

Bribes do not always take a monetary form: the traffic police officers may be interested in services offered by the offender or simply in maintaining their reputation as “good citizens” in a local community [41]. In some countries, including Russia, particular license plates serve to signal the privileged status of the car’s user. For instance, high-ranked state officials and individuals working in law enforcement (the police, special services, etc.) have such plates. They may also have other “signaling devices,” such as emergency warning lights. The proliferation of distinctive license plates and emergency warning lights sometimes causes irritation and eventual protests on the part of motorists with no such privileges [2,8]. Furthermore, emergency warning lights and license plates suggesting a car user’s privileged status can eventually be bought illegally from the traffic police. This practice is also a form of corruption [36].

The extant literature on corruption and road safety emphasizes the importance of uniformity in the enforcement of traffic laws and regulations. Corruption undermines road safety in both developed [38] and developing countries [27]. However, if one takes into account the indirect effect of corruption, then the picture becomes murkier. Economists know that corruption slows economic growth. Economic growth, in turn, creates conditions for the intensification of road traffic and, hence, eventually decreases road safety. Hua et al. [16] analysed both direct (via the non-uniform implementation of safety regulations) and indirect (via per capita income) effects of corruption on road safety. They found that the total effect of corruption on road safety tends to be positive in the low- and middle-income countries (per capita income levels of \$38,248 and less) and negative in high-income countries. Paradoxically, corruption might make roads safer at the early stages of economic development by suppressing economic growth. The first research question addressed in this paper is *whether corruption affects road safety in Russia*, a middle-income country (in 2013 Russia’s adjusted net national income per capita in current US\$ was \$11,638 [40]), namely, *whether corruption undermines or enhances road safety in this country*. A formal hypothesis associated with this question (H_1) predicts that corruption tends to be positively associated with road safety in Russia.

An individual, who is subject to corrupt power, has two options: either to accept the existing situation or to resist. Law and economics predict that one has incentives to choose the second course of action if corruption involves significant costs, i.e., if the individual, who faces an official abusing power, incurs a net loss. “The costs of punishing any sort of victimless crime are great” [26: 187]. The use of economic thinking to explain individual or mass mobilization against corruption has a rationale under the circumstances: members of the upper middle class and the rich have better chances of owning a car. Compared to others, their behavior tends to be more calculating and utilitarian [43].

Bribery does not always contradict the interests of the people who face the officials abusing power. Several configurations are possible: the official gains and the other party loses (as predicted by the “tollbooth hypothesis” [7,21]), the official loses and the other party wins (regulatory capture theory examines this case [34]), and both parties involved win, however unequal their gains might be. Depending on the circumstances, either the motorist or the traffic police officer may

¹ A regulation, stipulating that the zero quantity of alcohol per litre of breath was mandatory, existed previously, in 2010–2013.

² Calculations by the author. Since Transparency International uses the inverted scale to assess the perceived corruption (1 refers to the most corrupt government, 10 – to the least corrupt), the more transparent a country’s government is, the fewer motor vehicle crash deaths it has.

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