

Russian dashcams digital guardian angels for drivers

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A mini camera sits on a dashboard of a car in Moscow, March 12, 2013. Mini video cameras - dubbed dashcams - have been growing in popularity in Russia as drivers fix them to their windshields as an insurance against erratic road users, corrupt traffic police and the arbitrary justice that is still prevalent here.

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Minutes after the [space rock](#) entered the atmosphere and struck near the city of Chelyabinsk on February 15, leaving a spectacular glow in the morning sky, hundreds of dashcam films hit the internet.

For days, millions of people entertained themselves watching the meteor disrupt the morning commutes of Chelyabinsk residents who observed its passage across the sky with impressive nonchalance. Most cursed in surprise, then kept on driving.

The meteor's dashcam debut revealed an entire internet meme of films capturing bizarre episodes on Russia's roads, from hair-raising near-misses to the sudden appearance of tanks and fighter jets on the highway, and even dozens of cows falling out of a truck into [oncoming traffic](#).

According to Euroset, an electronics distributor, sales of dashcams, nonexistent in Russia just a few years ago, have grown to 1.5 million in 2012, a fivefold increase on the previous year.

"Some people buy these cameras to get a bit of glory, since some videos get millions of views," said Pavel Volkov, head of Euroset's portable electronics department.

But the main reason for their popularity is that people "hope to have evidence in case of a disagreement on the road," he told AFP.

In Russia, where poor road quality and a relaxed attitude to traffic laws contribute to a very high accident rate, dashcams are one way to ensure a fair investigation in the event of a crash.

Police are known to arbitrarily prosecute drivers without sufficient political weight or money.

"It's a way of keeping a peace of mind, to protect yourself from people who want to falsely accuse you of causing an accident," explained Sergei Zaitsev, a sales manager in another electronics chain MVideo.

"Or, in a case where the police don't, let's say, follow the rules," he continued with a smile.

Moscow resident Alexei Drozdov learned of their usefulness from experience.



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When his motorcycle was hit by another car on an intersection, the driver at fault accused him of running a red light. Little did he know that Drozdov had a camera attached to his neck.

The footage was indisputable. "It was clear that I passed on green and had priority. So the other driver was named responsible," said Drozdov, who ended up saving \$1,000 dollars in repair bills, all thanks to a device that costs about \$100.

Another time, when a traffic policeman accused Drozdov of running a red light, he suggested they take a look at the film footage. Drozdov had thought that the policeman might threaten him with a ticket, in the hope of receiving a cash bribe to let him off. Once he pointed out the camera, however, the matter went no further.

Dashcams have also exposed government officials breaking road rules and abusing their right to use special blue flashing lights, known as migalkas, to force their way through traffic.

Recently some lawmakers in the State Duma caused a minor scandal by proposing to ban dashcam use - but it appears unlikely their idea will gain any traction.

Commentators say that the popularity of the cameras speaks volumes about public confidence in the rule of law in Russian society.

"People have the impression that when they get into a traffic accident the police will not be capable of determining the responsible party, instead punishing the person with less political weight or who offers the smaller bribe," said Konstantin Sonin, vice rector of New Economic School in Moscow.

"There's a reason why people don't buy these cameras in Europe and the

United States," he said.

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