

# Russia opens criminal probe after sulphurous pong hits Moscow

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Russia launched a criminal probe Wednesday after a strong whiff of sulphur spread across Moscow this week, with an oil refinery located inside the city limits suspected of emitting toxic fumes.

Moscow police opened a [criminal investigation](#) into the emission of pollutants after the foul odour enveloped the capital on Monday, with concerned residents flooding the authorities with complaints and officials scrambling to locate the cause.

City prosecutors said checks were continuing into a Moscow [oil refinery](#) after air samples taken around it found levels of several chemicals up to 30 times over safe limits.

Under Russian criminal law, emitting pollutants is punishable only by a fine of up to 80,000 rubles (\$1,725) or a three-month jail term.

Checks of the air around the refinery in southeastern Moscow, which is a major producer of petrol, on Monday found "concentrations of pollutants that many times exceeded the permitted limits," Russia's natural resources ministry said.

Tests found levels of isopropylbenzene, a compound used in fuel, up to 30 times the maximum safe concentration, while levels of several other chemicals, xylol and propionaldehyde, were also far above permissible limits.

The ministry said it was seeking to establish whether the chemicals caused the stench that alarmed Muscovites.

Gazprom Neft, the Gazprom subsidiary runs the refinery, denied it caused the smell or emitted the chemicals.

The [refinery](#) could be closed down for up to 90 days over its lack of an emissions permit, Kommersant business daily reported, citing the deputy head of state environmental watchdog Amirkhan Amirkhanov.

But Gazprom Neft said it did not need a permit for emissions until next year since Russian legislation has not yet defined the safe levels for certain groups of chemicals.

Snarled traffic and the remnants of Soviet-era heavy industry create a veil of pollution that hangs over Moscow and is visible on clear days.

It is rare for any company to be seriously punished for causing environmental damage.

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