

Pedal power sways Muscovites despite perils

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Two years ago, Luiza Nesterova would never have dreamt of cycling to work in Russia's capital. But now she bikes everywhere, undeterred by busy roads that are still a battleground for cyclists.

In the city of 12 million, biking round snarled streets seems to make perfect sense, but Moscow "isn't an easy city for cyclists," admits 30-year-old Nesterova, a consultant in a finance company.

Uncrossable highways filled with speeding cars cut through the centre, drivers are oblivious to cyclists and, for over half the year, the city is smothered in snow and ice.

Every day—winter or summer—Nesterova gets on her pale green bike, undaunted, and rides for more than five kilometres (3 miles) along very busy roads with no cycle lanes and no cycle helmet.

"When it snows, I just wear warmer gloves," she says, adding that she gets in the saddle even when it is minus 27 degrees C (minus 16 F).

To encourage other Muscovites to do the same, she has created an Instagram page —@luizinbike2.0—that gets viewed more than 5,400 times per day. She often gets interviewed by Russian media and has become a kind of "ambassador" for cycling.

"My dream is for cycling to become the norm and for people not to see me as 'brave' any more," she said.

"There are more and more people, who would like to ride bikes but they are very scared of cars here and so drivers don't learn to share the road with cyclists."

"Moscow is a city made for cars."

Going backwards?

In a bid to change that negative image, Moscow city hall has invested in developing cycling over the last couple of years.

In 2013 the city launched its own bike sharing system, Velobike, copying the "Boris Bikes" and "Velib" networks in London and Paris.

Last year, some 196,000 people got bikes from the now 380 stations around the city. The authorities spend some 150 million rubles (\$2.5 million, 2.2 million euros) annually on the scheme.

At the same time, Moscow's modest number of cycle lanes has also expanded. But, still, it remains just a fraction of the amount in established bike-friendly capitals in Western Europe.

"Moscow will never become a cycling city like Amsterdam but we hope that it will become more and more pleasant to cycle here," Alexei Mityayev, the city official in charge of cycling, told AFP.

Despite the advances however, the authorities' focus appears to have slipped off cycling—to the chagrin of many, who had begun taking to pedal power.

For the second summer running, the centre of Moscow is a mass of roadworks as part of a mammoth reconstruction project ahead of the World Cup in 2018.

While pavements are being widened and thoroughfares repaved, cyclists have been quick to notice that the renovated streets lack one crucial element—bike lanes.

Data on the number of cyclists on Moscow's roads are unavailable but the figure remains relatively low. In June, a local Moscow deputy Vladimir Baushev was killed by a car while riding his bike on a road.

'Freedom'

For Nadezhda Zherebina, who has launched a cycling lobby group called Let's Bike It with a group of friends, the city hall still needs to focus on providing cycle lanes—otherwise riders are forced to use pavements.

"That causes conflicts and situations that are dangerous and pointless," Zherebina said.

She also called on the authorities to "prioritise clearing snow off cycle lanes over roadways, in order to encourage Muscovites to cycle."

"Cities like Oslo and Montreal have winters just as cold as ours but they have a strong cycling culture, so why can't we?" she asks.

According to town planning consulting firm Urbica, snow and bad weather have little impact on Russian [cyclists](#).

"Before, we used our bikes to ride in the park, we didn't use them to get from A to B. It's very new for us to think of bikes as a form of transport," said Zherebina.

For Mityayev, Muscovites' recent enthusiasm for [cycling](#) is a sign of their "desire to reclaim their [city](#)."

"This is also a generational shift: our parents' generation put the car first," symbolising individualism after decades of Communism, he said.

"Our generation prefers to be free."

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