

Chechnya: Checkpoint Lottery

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The police's roadside presence looks intimidating – but anyone can get past by paying a bribe.

“Stop, driver! Turn off the engine, tell the passengers to get out, show your documents and prepare your car for examination.” But despite this stern message on a notice standing 10 metres from the checkpoint at Khankala outside the Chechen capital Grozny, the bus driver does not even think of stopping, still less discharging his passengers.

Akhmad waves a hand in greeting to a special forces policeman as he steers the bus up to the checkpoint, and in return the officer just nods him through – no need for a security check.

“This is my second run today,” explained Akhmed, who drives the route between Argun and Grozny. “I registered in the morning, so I can be sure of a free drive for today.”

How much does this unofficial “registration” cost? “Fifty roubles [less than two US dollars] and you can drive anywhere you want to.”

What if you choose not to pay? Akhmad grinned. “In the beginning I tried being a hero. So they'd search the whole bus, detain the passengers, and complain about tiny things - ‘why haven't you got this, why haven't you got that? - from a first-aid kit to a gas mask.

“In short, they let me know that if I wanted to make money, I'd need to share it”.

At present, there are 48 checkpoints in Chechnya. That follows a 20 per cent cut in the number of posts ordered by the senior Russian army commander there, Lieutenant-General Yevgeny Abrashin, who also said that traffic police and the local police force were taking greater responsibility for guarding the republic's roads.

But although ordinary people are pleased that there are fewer checkpoints to negotiate, the general's predictions of improvements have not come true. The posts are manned by men in camouflage fatigues and policemen's uniforms, whose allegiance no one is sure of.

Slowly Chechnya's checkpoints have turned into an extortion racket which has little to do with security or military strategy.

Money decides everything. As the recent bloody raid by 200 rebel fighters into Ingushetia demonstrates, armed men are able to move freely around Chechnya. Only the smaller fish are liable to be caught in the net if they cannot pay up.

Chechen driver Usman told IWPR about the time he discovered how you can even get a bomb past the security forces.

“People who have a defect in their passport - no military service stamp, for instance – usually slip 10 roubles inside when they're stopped at a checkpoint. The soldiers understand, take the money and give the passport back, no questions asked,” he explained.

Usman had passed through one checkpoint on the border with Ingushetia when he remembered he'd put 500 roubles inside his passport for safekeeping, and forgotten about it when he handed the document over. Now the money had disappeared, so he went back to the checkpoint and asked to get it back, explaining it was a mistake.

“They told me, ‘how were to know that you weren't carrying a bomb and that now you've unloaded it, you have come back?’” For Usman, that was pretty clear evidence that for 500 roubles – about 20 dollars – you can take even a bomb through this particular checkpoint at least.

Extortion is now so commonplace that it is organised and recorded like a form of taxation. At Khankala, a bus pays 50 roubles, a minibus just 10, and lorries between 50 and 500 roubles depending on what freight they are carrying. In Grozny, vehicles pay 10 roubles to the checkpoints that control the district they are in at the time.

A black “registration” board with the number-plates of cars written down in chalk records who has paid and who hasn't.

The record money-earner is the checkpoint known as Kavkaz-1, because it sits on the border with Ingushetia, controlling the main route that links Chechnya with the rest of the North Caucasus.

At Kavkaz-1, a minibus driver will have to pay a bribe of between 150 and 500 roubles. An ordinary bus has to pay 50 roubles, with each male passenger costing an additional 10 roubles.

By the most conservative estimates, the Kavkaz-1 post alone pulls in 150,000 dollars a month.

Ruslan, who drives a minibus in Grozny, has not seen much improvement since pro-Moscow Chechen police took over from the Russian forces.

“Every day I pay 50 roubles to the office controller and ten roubles to the checkpoint for each drive. There used to be Russians there, now it's local policemen. The fact that some checkpoints in the city have gone hasn't changed anything. One group has left and others have come in.”

The Russian military command knows about the widespread corruption associated with checkpoints, but says there is nothing it can do about it.

“This kind of extortion exists everywhere, not just Chechnya. It's useless fighting it," said Oleg Guskov, military garrison commander for Grozny Region. "One of the most widespread forms of bribery is corruption by low-level officials. And it's not that easy to catch them at it. I think the only way out of this situation is to just not pay the bribes.”

The message is evidently not getting across. An unofficial sign at a checkpoint in Grozny advises, “Driver, 10 roubles is not a bribe.”

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