

# Drivers Who Ran JFK Airport Taxi Line Hack Scam Get Prison

By **Pete Brush**

Law360, New York (February 12, 2024, 7:02 PM EST) -- A Manhattan federal judge sentenced two drivers from Queens, New York, to prison Monday after they admitted joining with Russian hackers to compromise JFK Airport's taxi dispatch system, charging other drivers \$10 each — \$323,000 in total — to cut the line.

U.S. District Judge Paul A. Crotty sentenced defendant Daniel Abayev, 47, to four years in prison and sentenced defendant Peter Leyman, 49, to two years.

"Hacking is just another way of stealing," Judge Crotty said. "This was done persistently over an extended period of time."

Abayev and Leyman each pled guilty last year to a count of conspiracy to commit computer intrusion after their **2022 arrests**. Two alleged hackers, Aleksandr Derebentc and Kirill Shipulin, are in Russia and are considered to be fugitives.

The defendants began to target the system in 2019, according to the Manhattan [U.S. Attorney's Office](#). After gaining access, they began charging drivers \$10 each to move to the front of the sometimes-long taxi line, according to the feds. Some taxi companies purchased skips in bulk, while other drivers were rewarded for recruiting others to pay up, according to prosecutors.

Abayev and Leyman, taxi drivers by trade, are not sophisticated with computers, their lawyers said. They contacted the hackers in Russia and worked with them to operate the scheme on the ground, splitting the proceeds, according to filings.

Abayev once messaged Derebentc, "I know that the Pentagon is being hacked. So, can't we hack the taxi industry," according to filings.

Both defendants agreed to forfeit their cut from the scheme, which totaled about \$161,000.

They were additionally put on the hook for more than \$3.4 million in restitution, money that will go to remediating the losses the Port Authority New York and New Jersey, which operates JFK Airport, incurred to improve its antiquated system.

An emotional Abayev asked the court for mercy, citing the fact that he has six children and a seventh on the way.

"I'm here to apologize for all the troubles that I caused," he said. "I tried to find an easy way to make the money to support my family but obviously this was not the way to go about it."

Judge Crotty granted a request by Abayev to surrender to custody on June 21, after the expected birth of his next child.

Leyman, who according to the feds had a substantially lesser role in the lawbreaking — chiefly collecting fees — apologized to the court and his family.

"I accept full responsibility for my foolish actions," Leyman said. "My poor judgment is something that I regret every day."

Leyman was directed to surrender to custody on May 2.

Both men faced sentencing guidelines that called for a punishment in the range of five years. Their lawyers asked for no-prison sentences to include home confinement.

But for a five-year cap on the conspiracy count to which Abayev pled guilty, his guidelines would have been in the range of eight years, prosecutor Kevin Mead told the court.

In a statement after the hearing, Manhattan U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said the pair created chaos for honest drivers.

"Their actions enabled up to 1,000 fraudulent taxi trips daily, underscoring the serious threat cyber hacking poses to critical infrastructure," Williams said.

In an email to Law360, Abayev's lawyer Matthew Myers said his client was driven to lawbreaking because he had been financially overextended in part because he overpaid for a taxi medallion that lost value as the rideshare industry grew.

"In Mr. Abayev's quest to assist and support his family he made a costly mistake which will likely not be repeated," Myers said.

Leyman, meanwhile, looks forward to rejoining his family as soon as possible, his lawyer Robert Stahl told Law360 via email.

"My client is extremely remorseful and appreciates that the court took into account his minor role in the offense," Stahl said.

Abayev is represented by Matthew Myers of [Myers & Galiardo LLP](#).

Leyman is represented by Robert Stahl of [Stahl Gasiorowski PC](#).

The government is represented by Kevin Mead and Steven Kochevar of the [U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York](#).

The case is USA v. Abayev et al., case number [1:22-cr-00655](#), in the [U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York](#).

--Editing by Jeremy Abrams.

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