

Independent environmental examination of the Moscow-St.Petersburg motorway project, section 15-58 kilometres

Summary

Since its inception, the idea to build a motorway through the Khimki forest near Moscow met opposition from the local community and experts. In summer 2010, attempts to commence construction of the toll highway from Moscow to St. Petersburg across the Khimki forest park triggered massive protests and revealed a number of issues.

On 26 August 2010 Russian president Dmitry Medvedev issued a decision to suspend construction works on the project in order to hold additional expert and public discussions (Assignment № Pr -2511). In October 2010, by Presidential assignment, the NGO coalition *For the Forests of Podmoscowye* - including the Movement to Defend the Khimki Forest, Greenpeace Russia, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Russia, Wild Life Conservation Center, The Union for Birds' of Russia Defense, Socio-Ecological Union - decided to conduct an independent ecological expert examination of the motorway project. The main task of the 15-person commission was to assess the project as a whole and recommend resolutions to the conflict.

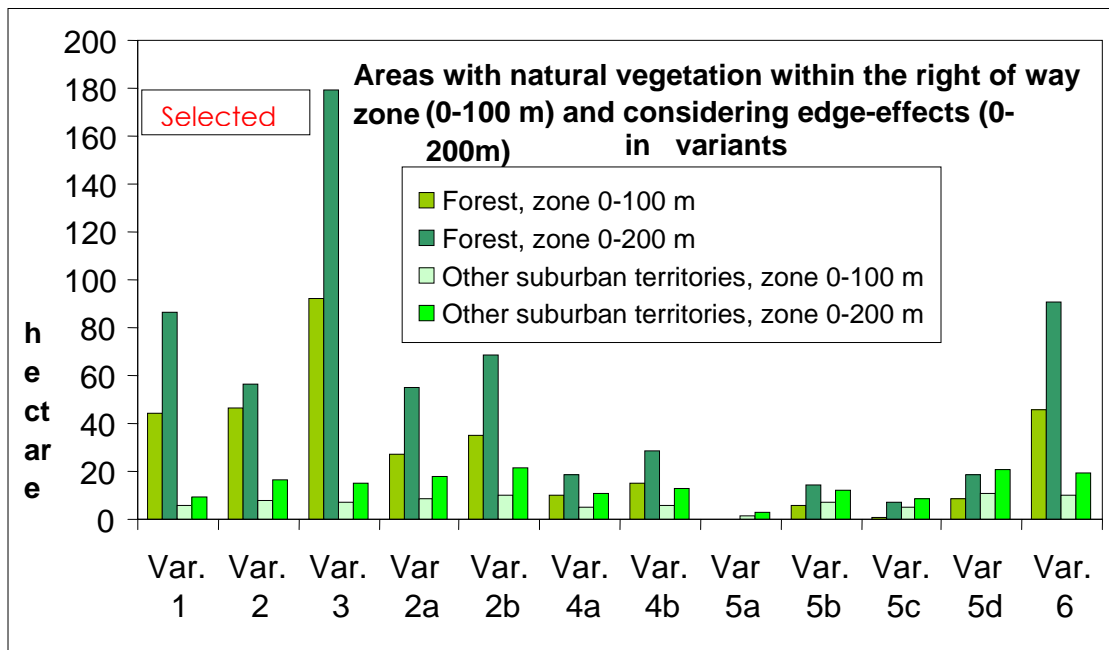
Transport issues

The ten-lane toll road with a planned speed limit of 150 km/h is not a suitable solution to solve transport problems in this particular section, because it is meant to serve interurban and international transportation. The primary source of traffic on section under consideration is local, for which a dense network of ordinary roads and public modes of transport are necessary. Using the toll road for local traffic would lead to a transport collapse near the few exits from the road. The only option for the motorway's effective usage would be through the commercial development of the adjacent forested lands after the motorway is built.

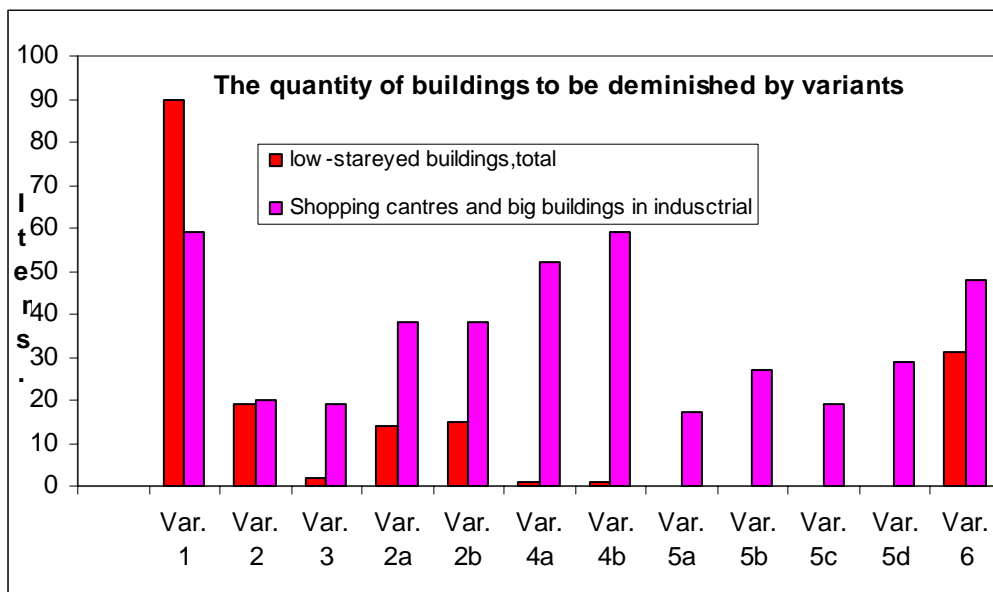
There is no urgent need to construct the motorway from the region to the Businovskaya interchange and Moscow ring road (MRAR). The Moscow city roads within the limits of MRAR have low traffic capacity and cannot let through traffic from the newly planned motorway. MRAR is already congested, and the "Severnaya Rokada" motorway construction terms haven't yet been determined (eg it could serve as the continuation of the new toll road in Moscow). The problem would be solved by an exit to the expanded Leningrad highway in Moscow, but the project in its current design makes no provisions for such an exit.

There is no identifiable need for the motorway routing through the center of the Khimki Forest. The expert commission considered 11 alternative variants for the proposed routing, including expanding the existing M10 highway in Khimki and building additional traffic ways parallel to it, as well as building the bypass road

outside Khimki. These alternatives are possible without causing irreversible damage to nature and private property.



Damage from construction to vegetation for different variants of the motorway



Damage to private property for different variants of the motorway

Social issues

The Khimki forest is an important recreation destination for about one million people. According to a survey more than two-thirds of Moscow and Khimki residents, and Russians in general, do not approve of the selected motorway routing.

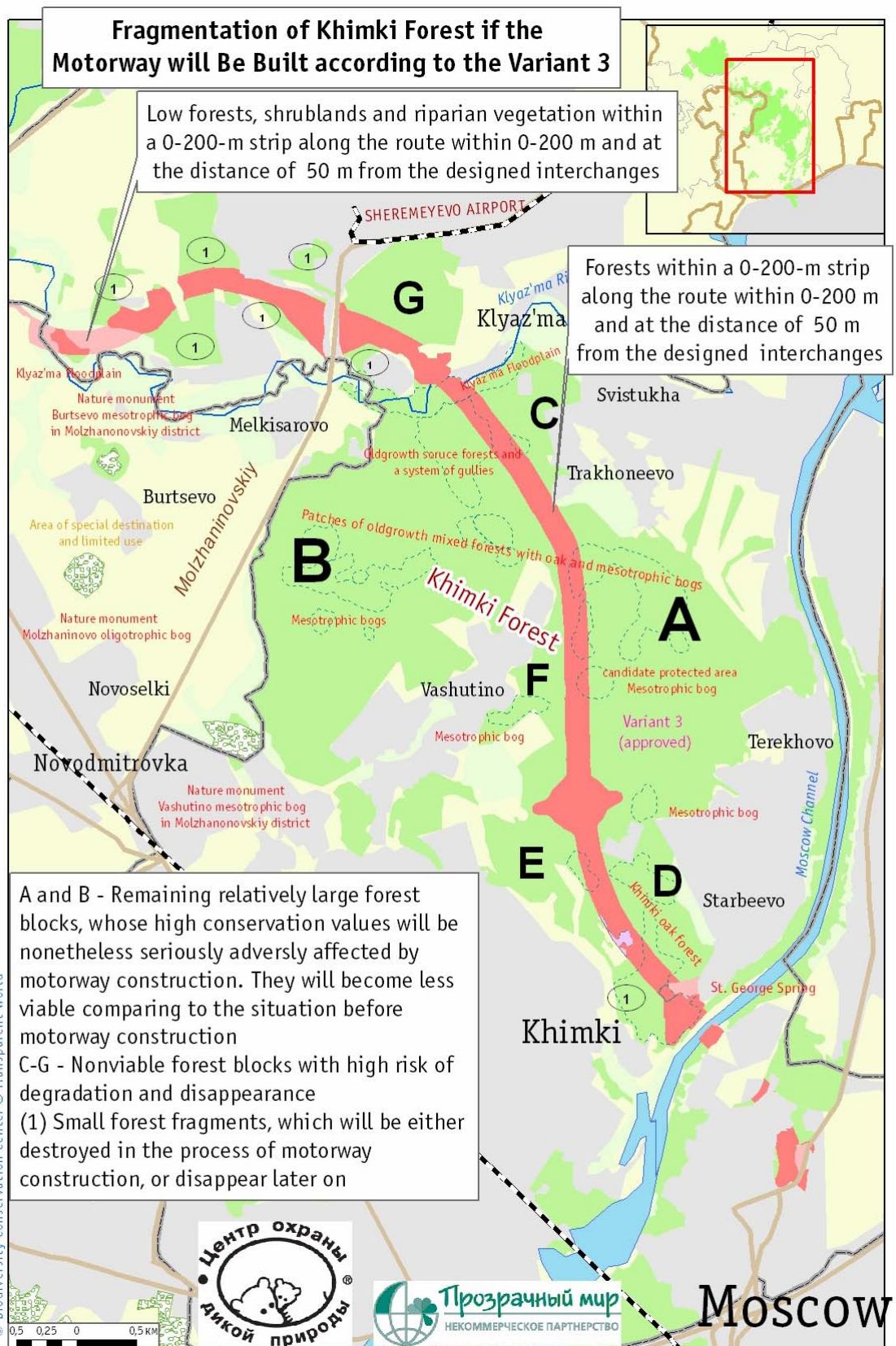
Realising most of the existing alternative variants would not result in much opposition, because minimal damage to nature objects would result and residential buildings would not be destroyed.

According to a Transparency International - Russia investigation, the most probable cause for the motorway's routing through the center of the woodland is corruption connected to the Minister of Transport Igor Levitin.

Environmental and nature conservation issues

The Khimki forest is a unique ecosystem for Moscow and comparable to the Losiny Island for its levels of biodiversity and preservation. It is a natural habitat for more than 30 species of plants and animals, registered in Moscow and the Moscow Region 'Red Books' as disappearing.

The construction of the motorway in its current form means the destruction of the Khimki forest ecosystem. The cause is not so much cutting down trees as much as the fragmentation of the ecosystem and thus the removal of important animal migration paths between Khimki and other Moscow area forests.



Khimki forest fragmentation - the continuous Khimki forest will be divided into several isolated sections, and elk, boar, badger, fox and weasel living there would disappear completely.

When there is no road construction, the forest suffers little damage that is repaired through natural processes.

The Khimki forest is surrounded on one side by developed lands and as such no compensatory measures would mitigate the consequences of ecosystem fragmentation and the breach of natural animal migration ways. Successfully replanting old oaks from the Khimki forest oak grove is also impossible.

Legal issues

Several legal violations during project preparation have inhibited public participation during project hearings. Substitutions to the Moscow – St. Petersburg project records took place, and records of quite a different project were provided instead.

During project preparation not only were public demands and warnings ignored but also some provisions of the Forest Code and the Land Code, which since 2007 have prohibited any alienation of forest park zones.

In 2009 strict measures were removed from this legislation, raising concerns about the integrity of this decision (eg amendments were significantly watered down and the system of suburban forest parks defense were introduced in the bill on terms specified before a second reading).

In 2008 FSB "Roads of Russia" signed a contract with OJSC "Teplotechnick" to clear forests in spite of the explicit prohibition of investing in projects that do not comply with current legislation.

The Russian government's decision to transfer forest park lands for the motorway construction violated a law on converting lands from one category to another. Russia's Supreme Court rejected a claim to invalidate this decision, and it highlights how the government should have taken into account different alternatives for the motorway's routing.

Systemic issues

The decision to construct the highway in this particular section cannot be considered a separate private project without consideration for other transport problems in Moscow and the adjoining regions. It is vitally important to develop a clear strategy to solve transport issues in the European region of the country with consideration for environmental and social issues as well.

When addressing transport problems for urban areas, a preference should be given for optimising existing communication lines, electric transport development, carrying transit traffic lines beyond the boundaries of residential and recreation areas and bringing all land development plans in balance with real possibilities for transport services.

The new motorway's construction policy needs a fundamental revision in order to prioritise the development of a road network outside the limits of the Moscow and St. Petersburg urban areas.

Over the last decade, the Architecture, Forest and Land Codes were amended in the way that puts construction interests above environmental and public rights. Removing the public from participation in environmentally and socially important decisions is ongoing and has escalated conflict. State legal institutions and public ecological expertise has also been removed in the last decade.

It is also environmentally inefficient to apply a speed limit of 150 km/h on the motorway. Such limits cause unjustified increases in specific fuel consumption, leading to pollution and as well raising the severity of road accidents.

Recommendations

The implementation of the Moscow-St. Petersburg toll road project in its present condition should be rejected because it is ecologically damaging and economically unfounded, without providing sustainable transport solutions and exacerbating sources of social tension.

It is necessary to design and implement a series of priority arrangements for the improvement of transportation services in this region. This can be achieved by modernising existing lanes through road widening, additional roadway construction, eliminating one-level intersections with other roads and crosswalks, shortening traffic intervals between suburban electric trains and the development of the "aero expresses".

It is necessary to continue the development of electric transport e.g. to extend the Zamoskvoretskaya and Tagansko-Krasnopresnenskaya subway branches outside the limits of MRAR.

The status of the Khimki forest park lands confiscated for motorway construction should be reinstated.

All parts of the Forest Park Protective Belt around Moscow should be given the rank of Protected Natural Territory of federal importance to prohibit site development and leasing of these lands.

It is necessary to correct these dangerous imbalances that benefit construction company priorities over the constitutional rights of Russian citizens.